

Older Workers and Technology

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Many people seem to think that “older” workers are less technology-savvy and therefore less valuable as employees. Research has shown that in the distant past, this may have been true, but it is not now. If “older” refers to those who were born in the “Baby Boomer” generation (1946-64) or earlier (the generation sometimes called the Matures, the Silent Generation, or the Traditionalists), recent studies have shown that now these “older” workers are as technology savvy and overall even more valuable as employees than younger generations!

Few jobs are totally technology-free, especially the technology of computers. Mechanics often use computers to test engines or to look up schematics for various makes and models. They may also use billing or invoicing programs. Business correspondence is routinely handled with word processing software and email communication while many jobs use the Internet for research. Doctors, sales people, home builders, etc., often use various computer programs in their jobs. Even jobs that involve mainly listening and guidance such as counselors and psychiatrists, usually maintain computer records of some kind. Yes, there are a few jobs that do not require technology, but they are not in the majority.

Many older workers performed their jobs for years without the benefit of today’s technology. Some were resistant to change and did not want to learn. When time showed that computers were not a fad, older workers had to learn and adapt to stay current in their job or career field. Studies from 1998-2000 showed that:

In fact, the only area about which HR professionals expressed concern when it came to employing older adults was technology. “Sixty-six percent of the respondents agreed that older workers tend to be more fearful of technology than younger workers” (SHRM, 1998). Yet, is that a fair assessment, or the remnants of older worker mythology? Other studies report that older workers are trainable in “high technology skills” and are “comfortable” learning them (Hall and Mirvis, 1998). According to the American Society on Aging, “50+ Americans love technology.” They are the fastest growing group of Internet users and are well aware (75% agree) that computer skills are necessary to work in the 21st century (“A handbook to reaching the 50+ market”). If older workers are shying away from company technology, perhaps it is due to the lack of encouragement and opportunity. What message is sent to employees aged 55 or older if they are afforded the fewest opportunities for training in this technology driven world (Goldberg, 2000)? Mounting evidence actually shows that with proper training, older workers are undaunted by technology (Hall and Mirvis, 1998) and eager to update their skills.

(New York Times article --

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/23/business/23older.html?ex=1183176000&en=fc9cbc775cec5ae7&ei=5070>)

Also, from 1998:

We’ve all heard stories about elderly, stodgy characters who refuse to learn to use a computer, despise e-mail and hang up on answering machines.

And, yet, older people are not more likely to shun new technology than young people are, research finds. Rather, they aren't as quick to learn new skills, so may need specialized training to master a new program.

Indeed, despite declining cognitive abilities, with proper instruction older workers learn how to use new technology—in particular, computers—just as accurately as young people, research shows.

(APA Monitor -- <http://www.apa.org/monitor/jul98/tech.html>)

What do more current studies say about technology and older workers? Success Magazine reported on a very recent study:

The 2007 World of Work review finds that younger workers are the least likely to use communication tools in the workplace, including computers, faxes, personal digital assistants (PDAs), mobile and landline phones. Randstad's annual survey (formerly Employee Review) focuses on employee productivity, retention and morale.

The report reveals that the "power-users" are the Matures, the oldest generation, who were well into middle age when the personal computer was introduced, and the youngest of whom were 50 years of age when business discovered the Internet. The newest technologies designed for increased efficiency and convenience, such as video/Internet/telephone conferencing and PDAs with telephone and Internet capabilities, are used the least.

http://www.successmagazine.com/article.php?article_id=362)

Older workers now are not only competitive with younger workers but more satisfied with their work. Inc. Magazine reported on March 6, 2007 that:

In a survey of 5,000 U.S. households, more than half of all respondents said they dislike their current jobs, compared to less than 40 percent in a similar survey conducted 20 years ago.

These days, the lowest levels of [job satisfaction](#) are among younger workers, the survey found. Only 39 percent of respondents aged 25 and younger said they liked their current jobs -- the lowest level in the survey's 20-year history -- compared to 45 percent for workers between 45 and 54.

By contrast, job-satisfaction levels are highest among [older workers](#), with nearly half of all respondents between 55 and 64, and 65 and over, feeling satisfied by their employment situation.

(<http://www.inc.com/news/articles/200703/work.html>)

Companies are also finding more satisfaction with older workers. Quintcareers.com (http://www.quintcareers.com/older_worker_myths.html) published these findings by the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers-USA in an article titled "Myths About Older Workers":

Myth: *Older workers can't or won't learn new skills.*

Reality: *Those over 50 are proving their ability to learn new skills by becoming the fastest growing group of Internet users. And career-changers in their 40s and 50s are taking courses to enhance their skills.*

Myth: *Older workers don't stay on the job long.*

Reality: *Workers between 45 and 54 stayed on the job twice as long as those 25 to 34, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 1998.*

Myth: *Older workers take more sick days than younger workers.*

Reality: *Attendance records are actually better for older workers than for younger ones.*

Myth: *Older workers aren't flexible or adaptable.*

Reality: *Because they've seen many approaches fail in the workplace, they are more likely to question change. But they can accept new approaches as well as younger workers can as long as the rationale is explained.*

Myth: *Older workers are more expensive.*

Reality: *The costs of more vacation time and pensions are often outweighed by low turnover among older workers and the fact that higher turnover among other groups translates into recruiting, hiring, and training expenses.*

Many of these realities also existed in the 1990s, according to the New York Times article mentioned earlier:

Indeed, despite myths circulated when companies were trying to justify trimming older adults from their payrolls, employers affirmed that, in general, older workers:

*had low turnover rates
were flexible and open to change
possessed up-to-date skills
were interested in learning new tasks
did not experience transportation problems
were willing to take on challenging tasks
had low absentee rates
had few on-the-job accidents*

If you are an older worker and have used your age as an excuse not to embrace technology, you need to realize that you have bought into the old myths. It is time to take computer training! If you are a company who shies away from older workers because of old myths, it is time to realize how valuable many older workers can be and examine their overall and individual truths.