

Series Topics

- The changing face of workforce demographics
- Myths about older workers
- Multi-generational interaction at the workplace
- Elder care benefits
- Leveraging the changing demographics
- Marketing to the older consumer

All newsletter issues are available as PDFs at <http://www.uni.edu/iacagorg/business.htm>

Please contact us with comments, questions or suggestions...

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This information is part of a series of brief publications from the Iowa Consortium for Applied Gerontology (IaCAG) located at the University of Northern Iowa. It is designed to raise awareness about the aging population in Iowa and how these changes may impact businesses, employees, and consumers.

Myths about Older Workers

Demographic trends show that U.S. businesses will be increasingly faced with adjusting their work practices to a new dimension: The Aging Workforce. Traditionally U.S. organizations have not had to face the active and largely misunderstood issue of 'managing aging workers' on such a large scale. One important issue that needs to be addressed is our cultural stereotypes about aging workers. The prevailing myths have fueled skepticism about hiring, training, and retaining aging workers who are a vital part of the US workforce.

Most common myths about older workers

(As presented by Beverly Goldberg and Dr. Robert Ramsey)

Myth 1: Older workers cannot readily adopt new technology or new techniques.¹

The fastest growing group of internet users is people over age 50. Since a majority of the older workforce now consists of Baby Boomers, it would be unwise to overlook some of the key characteristics of this population segment, including their openness towards adopting newer technologies. Many of these older workers take the extra effort to effectively cope with the changing nature of business. Many take courses to augment their skills, and others pursue advanced degrees.

Myth 2: It isn't worth hiring older workers because they do not stay on the job for very long.¹

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, workers aged 45-54 had double the median years of job tenure compared to those aged 25-34. Additionally, workers between the ages 50-60 stay on job an average of 15 years (AARP).

Myth 3: Older workers are not as creative as younger workers.¹

While it may be true that younger workers present more creative ideas, older workers are more discriminating about what they communicate to their supervisors. Through experience, older workers have learned to self-censure and limit their suggestions to ones they think are most useful and therefore most likely to be accepted.

Most common myths about older workers

Myth 4: Older workers take off more days for illness than younger workers.¹

Older workers have better attendance records than younger workers. The chronic conditions that develop as people age tend to be manageable and usually do not affect attendance records. Senior workers seldom miss work for personal reasons other than legitimate illness.

Myth 5: Older workers are less flexible and adaptable than younger workers.¹

Older workers are as adaptable as younger workers once they understand the reason for changes. Due to their past practical experience, they may express a more skeptical attitude toward new ideas and may seek further explanation. This should not, however, be misunderstood as an unwillingness or inability to adapt to a changing work environment.

Myth Buster Statistics¹:

While 13.6% of the workforce is over the age of 55, they account for only 9.7% of on-job injuries.

Workers over 50 file fewer worker compensation claims than younger workers. The largest number of claims are filed by those between the ages 30 to 34.

Myth 6: Older workers find it hard to take orders from younger workers.¹

A study by the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that only 21% of human resource managers who were surveyed agreed that younger managers tend to be uncomfortable supervising older workers. Similarly, only 23% of older workers surveyed reported being uncomfortable working with younger supervisors.

Myth 7: Older workers cost more than younger workers.¹

Retaining experienced workers actually saves some costs associated with activities such as recruiting, hiring and training younger workers.

Myth 8: Older workers use more medical benefits than other groups.²

Senior workers often use medical benefits far less than some other age groups. Parents of younger children are the most frequent users of medical services and thus comprise the largest contributors to the medical insurance costs of businesses and organizations.

Sources:

1. Don't let myths keep older workers from retraining – by Beverly Goldberg: The Central New York Business Journal, May 26, 2000.
2. Tapping the strengths of older workers – Dr. Robert D. Ramsey: EBSCO Publishing, 2003.

IaCAG has been working actively with prominent regional businesses to create further awareness of this and other issues concerning management of an aging workforce and consumer base.

Visit our website at <http://www.iacag.org> for more information on other aging issues

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