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Elephant in the executive suite

LIKE AMERICAN VOTERS, EMPLOYERS FACE THE CONUNDRUM OF AGE AND EXPERIENCE VS. YOUTH AND NEW IDEAS

THE U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, just around the corner, promises to be a referendum on more than political issues. It also will reveal how voters feel about race and age. And while race has begun to receive a fair amount of media attention, the question of age currently lurks more in the background.

Yet, as the population in sizeable parts of the world grows older, age plays an increasingly dominant role in all sorts of public discussion – from health and welfare issues to what to do about an aging workforce. In many companies, age is the elephant in the executive suite: By 2016, a third of the U.S. labor force will be over 50 years old.

Business organizations today are in one of those rare periods where four distinct generations compete for attention. The oldest consists of those aged 63 and above, so-called Traditionalists born before the end of World War II. Then came Baby Boomers, the product of the population explosion following the war. Generation X emerged in the '60s and '70s, followed by Generation Y (*aka* Millennials or Nexters) who entered the workforce around the turn of the century. (A decade ago, it was believed that Traditionalists would have cleared out by now and Boomers would be well on their way toward retirement – but economic necessity has delayed that decision for many.)

The popular theory – which, of course, tars everyone with the same brush – is that Traditionalists and Baby Boomers tend to be hard-working, loyal employees who don't question authority, while those in Generation X are more interested in their professional and financial betterment and likely to change jobs. The Millennials, raised by helicopter parents, are technologically skilled and loyal – but seek constant attention and reassurance.

Employers may or may not feel the need to manage each of the four generations in different ways, and may or may not even agree that the four generations behave all that differently. But there is general buy-in to the premise that at least some kind of "generation gap" exists between younger workers on the one hand and older workers on the other. In many workplaces there certainly seems to be a problem in communications between the two, and the performance attributes that each brings to the table seem to be different. For instance, older workers may have greater institutional memory and real-world experience, while younger workers adapt more easily to change and grasp new technologies.

Anti-discrimination laws aside, do youth and new ideas trump age and experience – or is it *vice versa?* Should we hire the young upstart or the battle-tested veteran? Do both, perhaps, have a role?

Pros and Cons of Older Workers

IN A YOUTH-OBSESSED CULTURE, where virtually the entire output of summer movies is directed at teen-aged boys, almost everyone wants to be with-it and "cool."

The presidential candidate John McCain has made a virtue of being "older than dirt" and unaware of how to send an e-mail, but he is an exception. Most people of middle age or older prefer to subscribe to the maxim that "sixty is the new forty" and at least make a pretense of understanding how their smart-phone unlocks the secrets of the universe. They check their e-mail, download music, snap digital photos and every once in a while text their grandchildren. In a recent segment on the *Today Show* called "De-Aging Your Résumé," older job-seekers were urged to create a home page on one of the social-networking sites and include a young-looking photo.

In reality, however, most employers are not as youth-obsessed as the popular culture. Unless one works – or wants to work – for a software developer, Internet advertising firm, concert promoter or other business populated by the truly young, chances are that the company will be a mixture of all age groups. What concerns many employers is not age *per se,* but rather how age may influence performance – positively or negatively. For example, the older worker may be viewed as:

Positive	***Negative***
Experienced	Set in his (her) ways
Skilled	Over-qualified
Mature	Low energy level
Less likely to job-hop	Homesteader
Understands the past	Lacks fresh thinking
Strong work ethic	Inflexible

Whether middle manager or senior executive, individual employees play a major role in determining whether they fall into Column A or Column B. Open-mindedness and a willingness to pursue new training opportunities can go a long way to calming an employer's fears. Employers, for their part, need to be equally open-minded and willing to provide training as technology changes.

When Older Workers Report To a Younger Boss

HIGH-POTENTIAL EMPLOYEES often step into high-level jobs by their middle-forties, meaning that some older managers and professionals will report to them. That sometimes is awkward for both the younger boss and the older subordinate.

Whether promoted from within or recruited from the outside, the younger boss is well-advised to seek the older worker's counsel in such areas as institutional knowledge (*i.e.,* how things get done around here), customer insight, technical know-how and the like. While the boss has ultimate decision-making authority and responsibility, the accumulated knowledge of other workers can be invaluable in terms of landing on one's feet, getting the lay of the land and working smart as well as hard.

A new boss also has the golden opportunity of offering older employees a fresh start. Clearly the new manager will review performance appraisals and seek observations from the previous incumbent, but existing employees can be given the chance to show their stuff and build new relationships – unencumbered by the past.

Older workers, on the other hand, are well-advised to realize that a new day has dawned and that old traditions are likely to change. A younger boss, for instance, may prefer to do most communication by text messages and to think nothing of sending them 24/7. The recipient should not regard this as an invasion of privacy, but instead as increasingly standard operating procedure.

In the U.S. and many other countries, age discrimination laws prohibit employment decisions – from hiring to firing – that are age-based, which leads one back to the crucial issue of performance. Employers can't fire older workers to save on compensation and benefits, nor can they refuse to hire older workers because of their age. The issue is how well they can perform the critical aspects of their job. And in all likelihood, there will be A, B and C-level performers at all points along the age-distribution curve.

For at least the next 10 years or so, employers will see the workforce comprised more and more of people over fifty, both inside their own organizations and in the larger employment pool as well. As that demographic certainty accelerates, companies will need to develop and implement careful strategies for maximizing the contributions of their most senior employees in terms of age, while continuing to create opportunities for the young.