

# Finding Gold in Silver: The Surprising Benefits of an Older Workforce



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## Introduction

When it comes to hiring new employees, there is an overarching perception younger is better. Millennials (aka, Gen Y) are plugged in to many of the driving factors that influence and shape businesses of today and tomorrow, including mobile connectivity and the internet of things (IoT). For many businesses, especially those that cater to Gen Y consumers, having a younger workforce makes sense. For businesses with a broader market base, a younger workforce seems to promise a lot of benefits. For example, youth is associated with more energy and vigor, fresh ideas, and an ability to adapt to and implement new ideas at lightning speed. What's not to love?

Still, plenty of data show that becoming too enamored with younger workers is not always the best idea; in fact, older workers offer their own set of "plusses" even the most successful youth-oriented companies should not be without. There are studies showing the preconceived ideas that cling to an older workforce just aren't true, such as an inability to adapt to new technology. If you buy into those notions, your business could be missing out on some important benefits.

The number of older workers is growing, and in some markets, it's far outpacing the number

of younger workers entering the workforce. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), by 2024 about a quarter of the active workforce, roughly 41 million workers, will be 55 years of age and older, and of those, about 13 million will be over the age of 64. Eurostat, the statistical institute of the European Commission, finds, since 2001, the employment rate among persons aged 25-54 years has stayed the same, it has increased for older persons 55-64 years, and has decreased for persons 15-24 years. According to the United Nations, "virtually every country in the world is experiencing growth in the number and proportion of older persons in their population." The world's aging population will become one of the most important transformations of the 21st century and will impact nearly all sectors of society, including labor.

Interestingly, the average annual growth rate is projected to increase sharply among older workers at 1.8 percent. That's more than three times the growth rate of the entire workforce. At the same time, the number of Gen Y workers is shrinking worldwide, which means more companies will need to turn to older workers to fill positions. It's obvious the older workforce will represent a necessary pool of experienced labor.



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<sup>1</sup>United Nations, *World Population Ageing Report*, 2017

## The Diversity Factor

Of course, there is a big difference between quantity and quality, and if bigger numbers were all these older workers were offering, the story would end here. But this larger pool brings with it many other advantages, including a wealth of information and personal knowledge about a broad range of topics and markets. Older workers aren't entrenched in past trends; they've seen a host of products, services and marketing initiatives pass by, and they can provide a different (and often more well-informed) opinion than many of their younger colleagues. Several studies have explored the relative advantages and disadvantages of hiring older workers; here's a glimpse of what they have learned.

### Experience Counts

Perhaps the strongest argument in favor of older workers is their experience, and it can cover just about every facet of business. While older workers can still experience a learning curve for some skills, in other areas, they're able to jump in and hit the ground running, without the need for long hours of training and on-boarding. Their years in the trenches make them powerful problem-solvers, and they function well as leaders, team players and individual contributors.

### Top Communication Skills

Older workers began their careers before the preponderance of the internet, email and social media. As a result, they have strong communication skills, both verbal and written. In addition, they have good listening skills, which makes them equipped to provide thoughtful and valuable feedback.

### Tech gap? What tech gap?

One of the most common misperceptions about older workers is they will not be able

to keep pace with technology. But a recent study from [North Carolina State University](#) rebuts that argument. In the study, researchers found older technology professionals, computer programmers and software developers are just as adept as their younger counterparts when it comes to learning and using new technology, and in some cases, older workers' skills and understanding surpassed those of the younger workers. In addition, older workers might have a deeper understanding of the special needs of the ever-growing market of older technology users in terms of customer experience. They are more suitable to adapting user interfaces to the level of experience and understanding of that market.

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**Emerson Murphy-Hill**

“The data doesn't support the bias against older programmers, if anything, just the opposite,” study author Emerson Murphy-Hill noted. In an [interview with the AARP](#), Murphy-Hill stated “older workers’ experiences with a range of technology may give them an edge in learning new tech skills. We think that if you’re familiar with older technology, you’re better able to understand new technology.”

## Drama-Free Zone

Older workers have learned through years of experience how to work well with others, and they tend to shun drama while looking for ways to cooperate and focus on the business at hand. They emphasize both a respectful work attitude and a healthy work ethic. In fact, a survey from [Pew Research Center](#) found both Gen X'ers and Baby Boomers list respect and work ethic as top defining characteristics for their generations. In the case of millennials, neither respect nor work ethic made the list. That's not to imply millennials are lacking in either aspect, but it does suggest they may tend place more emphasis on other employee attributes.

## Bigger Networks

Because they've been in the workforce – and specifically, their fields – longer than younger workers, older employees tend to have stronger professional and personal networks, which can be a huge asset to many businesses. An employer survey conducted by [The Center on Aging & Work at Boston College](#) found about 50% of all employers felt their older employees had strong professional networks compared to only about 16 percent of young workers. Not only can a broader and more established network bring value and revenue, it can also help a business expand in new ways.

## Stability, Loyalty, Dependability

Older workers tend to know what their goals are and they are not constantly searching for the next great job. As a result, they tend to be more dependable, loyal, and stay in their jobs for longer stretches than their younger counterparts. In fact, the [BLS reports](#) the tenure

of an employee increases with age. Specifically, “the length of time a worker remains with an employer increased with the age at which the worker began the job.” [The Boston College employer survey](#) found employers recognize older employees as being more loyal and reliable as well; more than half of all employers surveyed associated older workers with these attributes, while less than 20-25 percent could say the same about their young employees.

What's more, older workers don't just stay with their employers because they need the money or hope to advance; they're there because they like their jobs. A survey from [Pew Research Center](#) found job satisfaction is highest among older employees, and more than half of workers over age 65 are still at work not because they need the income, rather because they love the work. The [Boston College survey](#) found similar results: More than 50% of employers surveyed associated older workers with a low turnover rate.

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### Bureau of Labor Statistics

Because they're less focused on career advancement, older workers might also tend to be more motivated by causes and workplace initiatives aimed at making the community or the world a better place to live, which can bring another dimension to your workplace and your brand's mission.

## Real-World Successes

To that end, many companies are seeking solutions that will allow them to retain older, more experienced workers on the job longer, postponing retirement while creating work opportunities that are enriching and focused on the unique skill set older workers can bring to the table. In fact, by “segmenting” workplace opportunities into age-specific roles, companies could reap tremendous benefits by capitalizing on a diverse group of

employees with different perspectives that can help drive growth and success in an increasingly varied global marketplace. For instance, while Gen Y workers may focus more on innovation and technological advancements, older workers could be placed in positions that benefit from their leadership and crisis-management experience, as well as their in-depth knowledge of consumer behavior and historic market trends.

## Summary

No matter what type of business you’re in or how large your company may be, one thing is for certain: Your business is only as good as your employees.

Hiring a mix of ages supports workplace diversity while also enabling your company to tap into the best talent available. Re-examining your own hiring needs and protocol can ensure your

company is positioned to take full advantage of these shifts in workplace demographics for improved performance and increased profits.

## About the Author



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Gert Herold is the Stanton Chase Regional Vice President for markets in Europe, the Middle East and Africa (VP EMEA) and the managing partner in the company’s Vienna office. With more than 20 years of experience in executive search and human resources consulting, he has successfully managed more than 500 assignments for clients in a broad array of industries. Mr. Herold holds a master’s degree in business administration and economics from Vienna’s University of Economics and Business Administration, and he is fluent in both English and German.

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