

Insights from the Stillpoint

Developing multigenerational workplaces

April 2023



We are living longer, and it is likely that most of us will work longer as well. That almost certainly means we will need to rethink how we move through a working life that may span five or even six decades.

The 20th-century pattern of entering the workforce in our teens or twenties, working till 60 or 65 and then living in a period of retirement, was designed for a shorter life expectancy. To retain our mental and physical vitality for a life that may well extend to 90 or 100 years, we will need to continually develop ourselves for the marathon that will be the working life of most of us. This is why authors Lynda Gratton and Andrew J Scott argue, in their thought-provoking book, *The 100-year Life*, that it is essential to “decouple ages and stages”.

Here are three things to consider:

1. As people remain in the workforce for longer, either by choice or necessity, they will contribute their accumulated knowledge, experience and wisdom as well as their productivity. People who enjoy their jobs are likely to want to stay in them longer (like the [world's oldest doctor](#), still practicing at the age of 100). How well does your organisation support all workers, including older ones, to remain actively engaged at work? How well does your organisation harness the talents of older workers?
2. A longer working life offers more opportunities for variety in employment. It is more common now that people in their 50s and 60s, who've been doing one thing for a while, feel it is time to do another. A number of higher education institutions are already developing courses to help people use their wisdom and experience in new ways. Harvard's [Advanced Leadership Initiative](#) and Stanford's [Distinguished Careers Institute](#) are two examples focussed on senior leaders, but there are other programs tailored to a greater cross-section of the working population, such as the Australian Government's [Skills Checkpoint for Older Workers](#). How well does your organisation welcome people who have already had one career and are now interested in pursuing another? How open is your organisation to employing people over 50? Over 60?
3. In our increasingly complex world, emotional intelligence and lateral thinking honed through long experience can help companies find new ways to address challenges. Chip Conley, who returned to the workforce in his mid-fifties as an executive at Airbnb, has referred to this role as the [Modern Elder](#). How well does your organisation foster “eldership” to grow the leaders of the future?

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The recently released report by the Australian Government's Interim Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee made only cursory mention of the workforce barriers faced by older people, but it did note the challenges posed by workforce shortages and labour underutilisation. Governments and businesses have an important part to play in promoting the benefits of a longer working life for the individual (eg life-long learning, ongoing social engagement, and continuing income generation) as well as for the state (eg increased economic productivity, higher labour utilisation, reduced demand on social welfare programs). A large number of older people will be contributing socially and economically to our world for decades to come; our workplace attitudes, systems and policies need to adapt to this reality.

In its report, Promoting an Age-inclusive Workforce, the OECD suggests that organisations focus on three actions to maximise the opportunities created by the new demographics:

1. **attract and retain talent at all ages:** ensure recruitment policies are age-neutral, that language and imagery represent age diversity, and that software algorithms do not discriminate according to age; develop pathways for older workers including training and development as well as phased retirement options
2. **ensure a good working environment and a healthy working life:** develop flexible workplace policies that allow for balance between employment and family or personal responsibilities; maintain an inclusive workplace and organisational culture that does not discriminate based on age
3. **develop and maintain skills throughout careers:** ensure that professional development is tailored to the needs of people at different stages of their careers, including opportunities for older workers to retrain, upskill and take on new responsibilities.

Our ageing global population is a reality, as is the demographic shift towards an older cohort of workers. Companies are uniquely placed to embrace this shift. Intergenerational collaboration (Conley's term) will be crucial to ensure that the value created through a long working life can be realised, for the benefit of the individual, the company, society and the economy.



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