

The 21st century multi-generational workplace

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THE 21ST CENTURY MULTI-GENERATIONAL WORKPLACE

by Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes, Ph.D. and Michael A. Smyer, Ph.D.

Introduction

Today's multi-generational workforce has become a topic of interest at workplaces across the country.

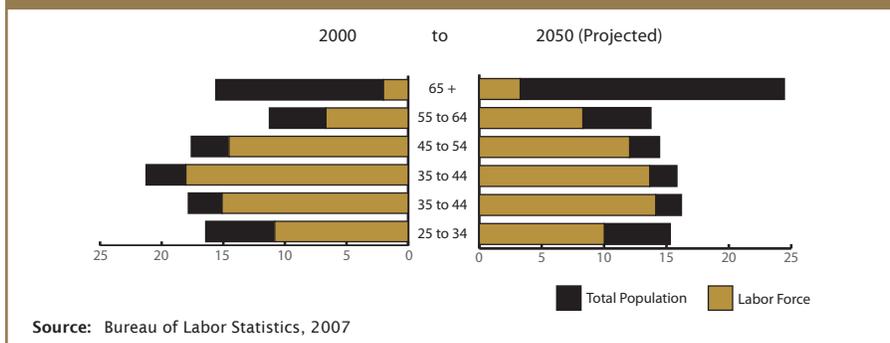
Why? Certainly, this is not the first time in history that people from different generations have worked "side-by-side." In agrarian societies, children, parents, and grandparents all contributed to productive work that was necessary for sustenance. Toward the end of the middle ages, guilds developed as a way to ensure the transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next. Many of the manufacturing sites established during the early years of industrialization structured their organizations to recruit from within extended families, assuming that the elders in the families

would socialize and supervise the younger and less experienced workers.^{1,2}

So, why has the multi-generational workforce captured so much attention?

In part, interest in this topic reflects a widespread recognition that the age demographics of the workforce have shifted dramatically within a few decades. The Bureau of Labor Statistics anticipates that, by 2008, over half of the U.S. workforce will be 40 years of age or older.^{3,4} And, this aging trend is expected to continue for several decades (See Figure 1.)⁵

Figure 1: Population by Age Group



In this Issue Brief, we explore:

How does age "matter" at the workplace?

How are the following perspectives about age different?

- chronological age
- generation
- life stage
- career stage

What are the implications for managers who supervise young adult employees, employees at midlife, and older adult employees?

In response to the age demographics of the 21st century workforce, employers have started to consider how age diversity – like so many other diversity factors – can offer both opportunities as well as challenges to “getting the work done well.”

How Age Matters

“We want to get the right demographic age mix of employees so that our talent ‘pipeline’ is strong. We also recognize that workers of different ages can bring complementary experiences and skills to the workplace. CVS views age diversity as a competitive advantage.”

Stephen Wing, Director of Government Programs, CVS Caremark.”

Age can have an impact on employees. For example:

- Age can affect employees’ decisions about labor force participation, as well as the employment opportunities and options which are offered to them. It has been widely recognized, for instance, that the labor force participation rates of women in the United States have historically declined during the traditional child bearing and children rearing years.^{6,7}
- Employees’ work experiences, attitudes and behaviors can be shaped by age and age-related factors. As a result, age can impact employee engagement, performance and productivity. For example, feeling valued at the workplace is a key driver of engagement. According to the Institute for Employment Studies, workers aged 50 and older tend to feel less valued and less involved in their organizations than those under 30.⁸

In response to the changing age demographics of the workforce, some employers have started to assess how age might affect the effectiveness of their strategies for recruitment, on-boarding, training and development, and employee engagement.

- Employers may adopt HR policies and programs in an effort to be sure that employees (or potential employees) of different ages view the company as an employer of choice. A recent

study completed by the American Business Collaborative found, for instance, that the top 3 factors contributing to job satisfaction among exempt men in their 30s were salary, flexible work options, and job security whereas salary, job security and advancement were reported as being the most important for exempt men in their 40s.⁹

- Managers who are interested in harnessing the creativity and business effectiveness of multi-generational work groups and minimizing possible conflict may want to gain a better understanding of the effects of age at the workplace.

Age-old Ways to Think about Age: Age, Generation, Life Course and Career Stage

“Age” can mean more than just how old an employee is.

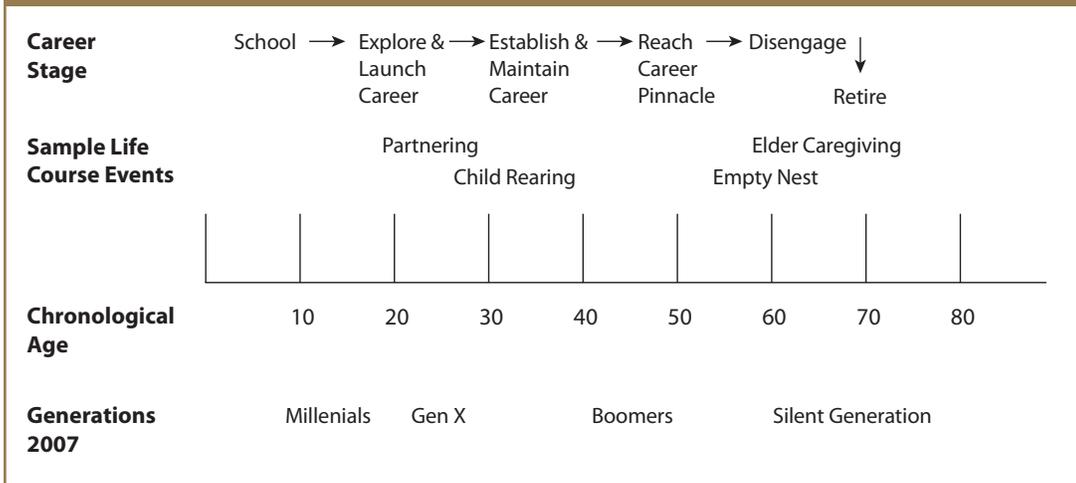
In fact, there are at least four ways to think about age as it is relevant to the workplace: chronological age; generation; life course; and career stage.

During the last century, there was more congruence between a person’s age (and, therefore, the generation to which they belonged), key life course events (such as the average age when mothers gave birth to their first child), and career stages (such as entry into the workforce).¹⁰ This “overlap” between age, generation, life course, and career stage is illustrated by Figure 2.

In the past, therefore, employers may have found that it was less important to make careful distinctions among these different perspectives of age. Today, however, the relationships among chronological age, generation, key life events, and career stage are less tightly coupled. For example, there is more variability in the age when people begin their careers – or beginning a second or third career – than was true in the past.

Employers can no longer assume that chronological age “predicts” employees’ life stage or career stage. And, the differences between meanings of chronological age, generation, life stage, and career stage can matter. Each of these different perspectives of age can help employers to get deeper insights about how age diversity might affect their employees and work processes.

Figure 2: Traditional Concepts of the Intersections of Age, Generation, Life Course, and Career Stage



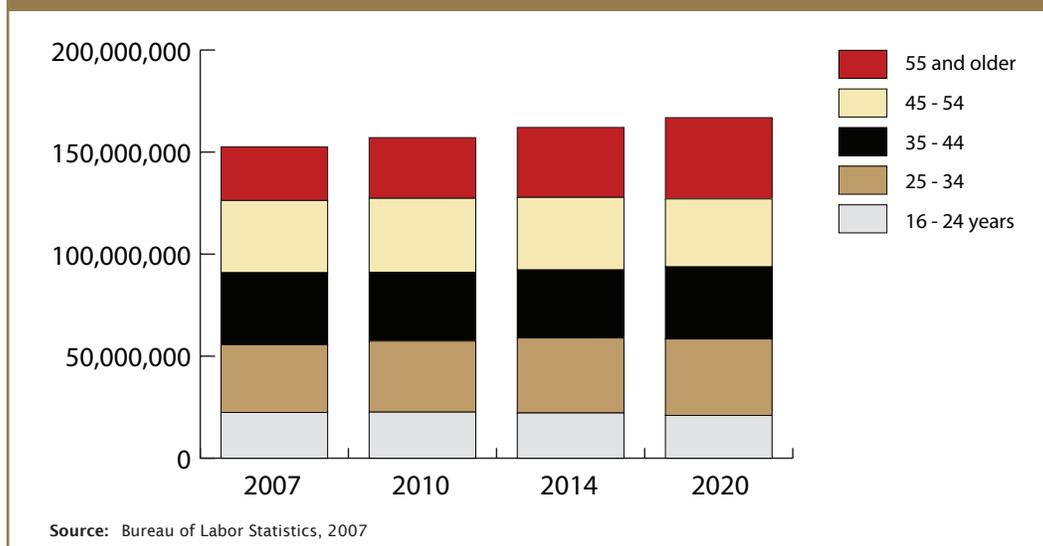
Chronological Age

As noted in Figure 3⁵ below, the Bureau of Labor Statistics anticipates that greater percentages of the workforce will be comprised by workers 55 years and older over the next 15 years. This trend is significant for employers because chronological age is an important marker of human development.

Using the perspective of chronological age helps employers to answer the questions, “How does typical adult development affect the performance of young adult employees, employees at mid-life, and older employees?”

There are many dimensions to human development, including: physical development, cognitive development, emotional development, and social development. Although workplaces across the country provide resources, such as Employee Assistance Programs, to their employees in an effort to support their emotional and social health, employers focus particular attention on employees’ cognitive and physical abilities. Employers may implement training programs and wellness initiatives in an effort to enhance their employees’ intellectual and physical competencies.

Figure 3: Labor Force Composition (by age group)



Research confirms that there are some relationships between age and changes in both physical and mental abilities and skills, particularly among the very young and the very old. As noted by Hedge, Borman, and Lammlein (2006), "Overall, research on aging suggests that physical and cognitive abilities do decline in older age. However...these declines may not always generalize to deficits in on-the-job performance....older workers generally seem to adapt well and to compensate for declining abilities by adjusting their approach to the job..." (p. 49). In part, many older workers are able to use their experience and accumulated knowledge as a strategy to successfully complete tasks. Indeed, many of these declines tend to occur after people withdraw from the labor force either because employees reach retirement age before there are noticeable declines in their abilities; or because the declines in employees' physical health precipitates withdrawal from the labor force. Some research has even found that certain types of cognitive abilities can improve with age.¹¹ It is important to underscore the observation that although some research confirms that age can be one factor that explains physical and cognitive changes over time, other factors are also important.

Several studies have explored possible differences in the productivity of employees of different ages. Recent investigations have demonstrated that variations in opportunities and barriers to career development that affect employee motivation explain performance outcomes as more than just age alone.¹²

Employers might also want to consider how employees' functioning might reflect the fit between characteristics of the work assigned to employees and their interests/abilities. There are indications that the complexity of tasks completed by workers can affect intellectual functioning.¹³ If the responsibilities of older workers are routine and no longer interesting or challenging, it is possible that any resultant decreased productivity might reflect both dis-engagement as well as some declines in ability that result from working on less challenging tasks.

Generation

There is, of course, a correspondence between chronological age and generation because generational labels designate population groups that were born within a specified time period.¹⁴ Generational terms are often used as "easy-to-remember" labels for particular cohorts.

There are some important differences, however, between the lens associated with chronological age and the generational perspective. Whereas the focus on chronological age makes it possible to ask the question, "How are individuals of a particular age alike?", the generational framework places the experiences of individuals and groups of individuals (that is, age cohorts) in the context of significant historical, social, or cultural events. Therefore, the compelling question for the generational framework is, "How are all individuals of a certain age during a certain historical period in a particular place alike?"

Historians and sociologists use the term "generation" to refer to groups of people who not only share their membership in a particular age cohort but who have also been exposed to significant events at a particular time, even though there is bound to be significant variation in the impact of these events on different individuals who belong to the same generation.¹⁵

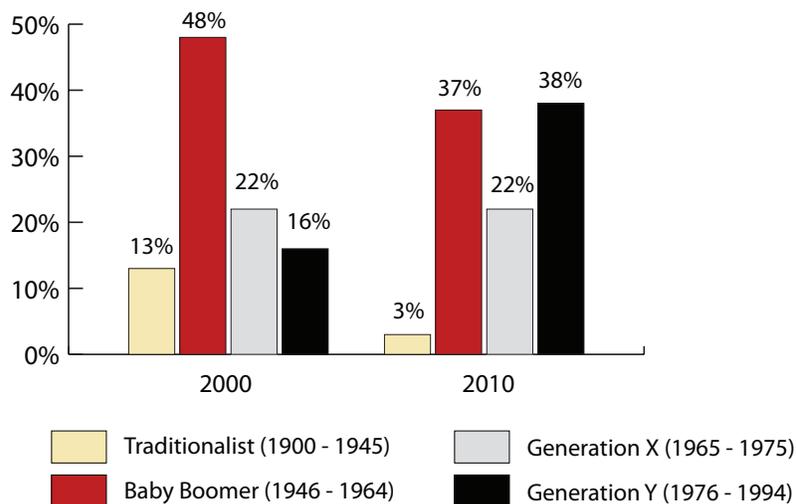
Although there is some controversy among demographers about how to establish the years which separate one generation from another, popular literature suggests that there are currently four generations in the labor force: Millennials/Gen Y, Gen X, Baby Boomers, and members of the Traditionalists/Silent Generation who have either not yet retired or have retired but have re-entered the labor force.

Who belongs to these different generations?

- Millennials/Generation Y: Includes those born approximately between 1981 to 1999 (making them 8-26 in 2007)
- Generation X: Includes those born approximately from 1965 to 1980, (making them 27-42 in 2007)
- Baby Boomers: Includes those born approximately from 1946-1964 (making them 43-61 in 2007)
- Traditionalists/Silent Generation: The Traditionalists include those born between 1930-1945 (making them 62-77 in 2007), and the Silent Generation includes those born between 1900-1929 (making them between 77 to 100+ years in 2007).^{16,17}

Looking at age from the perspective of generation can be a helpful, short-hand way to factor-in historical events or culture that may have a long-lasting impact on a specific age cohort. For example, observations about the technological competencies of many of the

Figure 4: Civilian Labor Force (by Generation)



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics in Gunderson et al., 2005

Millenials implicitly reflect the recognition that these young people were the first generation to grow up with computers and the internet as a natural part of their environments. The generational framework of age helps employers to consider questions such as, "How might the prevailing cultures or the historical experiences shared by many members of a particular generation affect how employees perceive their work experiences?"

The generational lens has been used for many workplace-based training sessions that explore age diversity.¹⁸ It should be noted, however, that there are some limitations associated with the generational lens of age.

1. It is sometimes easy to gloss over how specific types of events might affect individuals in profoundly different ways. For example, the Baby Boomers "came of age" during the era of the Vietnam War. However, some of their lives were shaped by direct participation in the war, others by the loss of loved ones killed during the war, and others by involvement in active protest against the war.
2. The key events shared by a generation tend to occur in a specific regional or national context. Therefore, the terms used to designate different generations may be meaningless in a global context. Because the term "Baby Boomer"

designates the increased fertility experienced in the U.S. right after World War II, this generational label is not appropriate to adults in the same age cohort who live in other countries that were affected in different ways by the end of that war.

3. It can be difficult to separate out whether the characteristics of a particular generation at a specific "moment in time" reflect the fact that they are members of a generation or whether most of the members of that generation are sharing an important life stage experience. For example, it is often noted that the Millenials want jobs that are socially impactful.^{16,19} But, isn't that an observation that was also made about the Baby Boomers in the 1960s and 1970s when they were in their 20s?
4. It is always tricky to accurately identify characteristics and values of younger generations because it is difficult to determine whether these characteristics will "stand the test of time."
5. Perhaps the most difficult challenge associated with using the lens of generation when thinking about age is that it is very easy to begin to over-generalize the characteristics of different age cohorts, focusing primarily on the differences, whether these differences are small or large. For example, although some research suggests that the extent and level of

intergenerational differences and conflict may not be widespread,^{20,21,22} there has been a lot of attention focused on “generation wars”.¹⁶

Life Course

The life course perspective focuses attention on individuals’ “personal histories” in the context of the wider social-historical-cultural context. In addition, this perspective considers how resources, demands, and events in the individual’s environment might affect the past, present and future course of personal histories.^{23,24,25}

“...the life course perspective focuses on biographical processes and how experiences and strategies develop over time..[and] pays particular attention to...significant social relations... [and] focuses on how human development occurs within historical, cultural, (and) social contexts.”²³

The life course perspective sharpens our focus on transitions, such as entrance into school (at different ages including during adulthood) or the formation and changes in family structures.

The life course perspective also explicitly acknowledges that not every individual will experience each life course event (such as marriage). Even though some life course events tend to happen in

certain age ranges, the life course perspective does not specify the timing of life events.

The life course perspective helps employers to address questions such as, “How might the life transitions experienced by employees and their families, such as the retirement of a spouse, affect our employees?”

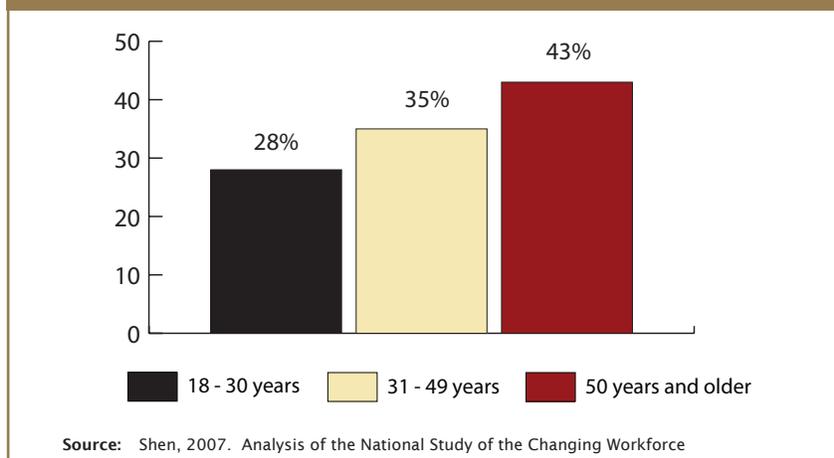
Many workplaces have integrated a life course perspective for their work/life policies and programs. For example, employers wanting to increase the retention rates among employees who are parents of young children have expanded dependent care resources and flexible work options.

Given today’s context of an aging workforce, a life course perspective can help employers consider the challenges that their older employees face (e.g., demands for parent care, etc.).

For instance, as indicated by Figure 5²⁶ below, older adult workers are much more likely than younger workers to report that they have provided some type of care to a relative 65 years or older at some point during the past year (with the type of care and duration of care not specified).

The Families and Work Institute has combined a generational lens with a life course perspective. Comparing Boomers and Gen-Xers who have dependent children (under the age of 18 years), Gen-Xers report being more “family-centric” (55% vs. 46%) and Boomers report being more “work-centric” (20%

Figure 5: Elder Caregiving during Past Year
% of employees by age group



vs. 13%). About one-third of those in both generations who have dependent children are “dual centric” (33% of the Gen-Xers and 35% of the Boomers).¹⁷

Career Stage

At IBM, I use the term “career stage” because this translates across the geographies around the world. It is also important to communicate that career stage is not always tied to age. You can have someone older in an early career stage and someone younger in a more experienced career stage.

Millie DesBiens, Global Diversity, IBM

The fourth way to think about employees’ age-related experiences is to adopt a special type of developmental perspective which focuses on career stages. Although the term career is sometimes used as a referent only for professional occupations, for the purposes of this discussion, we consider the word to refer to a sustained “line of work,” regardless of the occupational category.

Career trajectories reflect a combination of factors including education, experience, and opportunities as well as individual’s personal characteristics. Although some people assume that most employees experience careers as a steady upward progression, experts have observed that careers unfold in a variety of ways. In fact, the lock-step career has not been the norm for many people. For instance, the career patterns of most women and employees who have been more vulnerable to the vicissitudes of economic turbulence have never conformed to the “step climbing” metaphor.²⁷

The Bureau of Labor Statistics has reported that occupation mobility rates appear to have been relatively stable for the past 3 decades.²⁸ However, as many Baby Boomers get ready to extend their labor force participation, it is possible that some will want to change occupations or careers. In that case, it is entirely possible that an older worker who

has recently changed careers (perhaps after taking a “retirement job”) would be at an early career stage. Therefore, the framework for career stages has moved from a linear notion to a cyclical construct. That is, employees may have the experience of being in “early career” several times over their life course and might skip some career stages entirely.

Today, employees in an early career stage might have a sense of exploration when they “try on” a specific career option. If they continue on that career trajectory, they might become established in that career where they develop and expand sets of career-related competencies. If the person continues in the same or a similar career, they might have “maintenance” experiences when they deepen their expertise. This is also a stage when some employees want to use their competencies in a generative fashion to benefit the next generation of employees as well as the organization. The stage of disengagement refers to the transitions during which individuals cut back or leave the job, the organization, the career, and/or the labor force.²⁹

The career stage perspective helps employers to focus on questions such as, “What types of assignments are appropriate for specific employees, given the career-specific competencies they have? Which types of resources might enhance that employee’s performance?” Employers use a career development perspective when they engage employees in conversations about the next opportunities appropriate for their careers – regardless of the employee’s age.

How do employers think about employees who are in an early, mid or late career stage?

The National Study of Business Strategy and Workforce Development asked employers to describe employees in early career, mid career, and late career.²¹ Some of their responses are summarized in Table 1 on the following page.

Table 1: A Sampling of Employer Comments about Career Stages

Early-Career	Mid-Career	Late Career
<p>“Either right out of undergraduate/ graduate school, maximum of 1-3 years experience, worked for no more than 1 employer, seeking an entry level position.”</p> <p>“New in the business...”</p> <p>“Young. Just out of college.”</p> <p>“Still exploring interests and where they fit best. Using newly acquired skills in the workforce for the first time”</p> <p>“An employee just starting out in the workforce who seems likely to stay in their chosen career path for a significant period of time.”</p> <p>“Lack of experience and knowledge in this specific field.”</p>	<p>“Out of college for a while.”</p> <p>“Between 10 and 20 years in the career field.”</p> <p>“Been in the industry for a while.”</p> <p>“They have found their niche. They are successful and adding real value to the business.”</p> <p>“Decided what you want to do and are settled in that type of work.”</p> <p>“Still have a learning/development curve.”</p> <p>“Solid number of years experience. 1-2 employers. Functional expertise with movement towards general management or higher level ... responsibility.”</p> <p>Settled in life (family-wise).</p>	<p>“...more than 25 years with the company.”</p> <p>“Already has what it takes.”</p> <p>“At the very edge of retirement.”</p> <p>“Employees that are in some level of management.”</p> <p>“Have full training and qualifications.”</p> <p>“Knowledge, skills, and ability to teach their trade.”</p> <p>“Reached top or near top of chosen career path.”</p> <p>“Seniority and experience.”</p> <p>“Are getting ready to hand over the reins.”</p>
Average age range: 21-38 years	Average age range: 31-47 years	Average age range: 46-63 years

Source: Pitt-Catsouphe, M., Smyer, M., Matz-Costa, C., Kane, K., 2007

Employers acknowledge that there is diversity within each career stage, as well as across career stages. However, the National Study of Business Strategy and Workforce Development found that employers feel that, in general, employees at different career stages may bring diverse sets of attributes to the work, recognizing of course that there can be significant diversity within the different groups.²¹ For example, as noted in Figure 6,²⁶ employers were more likely to report that late career employees had higher levels of skills than needed for their jobs and that they are more likely to want to lead or supervise others when compared to younger colleagues.

Employers are less likely to report that their younger adult/early career employees are productive (28.5% of the employers saying “very true”) than their mid-life/mid career (42.1% of the employers saying “very true”) or older adult/late career employees (38.5% of

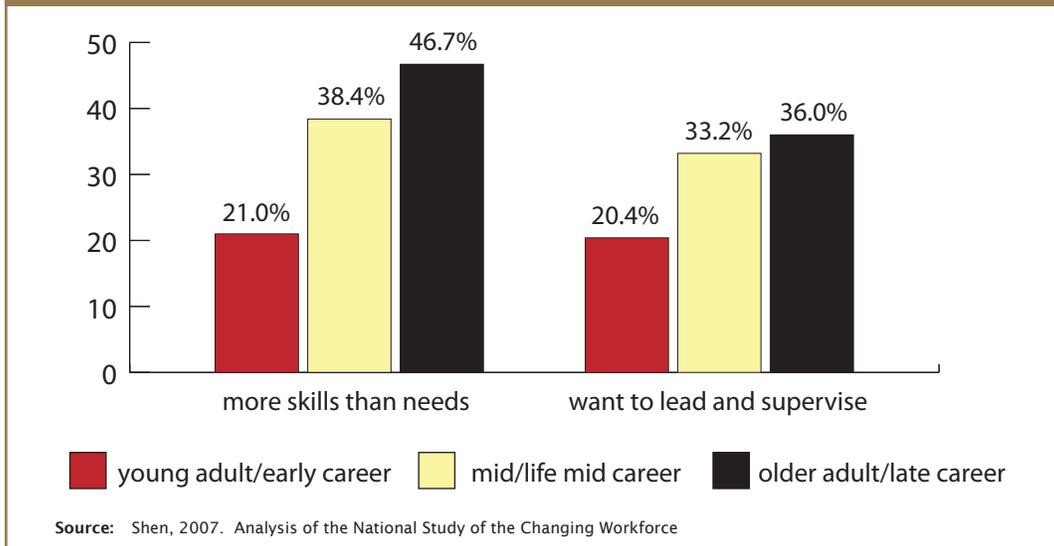
the employers saying “very true”).²¹

Implications for Employers

As noted in a report prepared by Ceridian, age can be related to “...differences in attitudes, values, workstyles and expectations... [and] can also cause miscommunication and misunderstandings, impact productivity and dampen the effect of teamwork and collaboration so critical to organizational effectiveness.”³⁰ Savvy managers will consider how each of the four perspectives of age might lead to different strategies for motivation and engagement, different approaches to supervision and career development, as well as adjustments in benefits and supports.

Organizations interested in helping their supervisors strengthen their multi-generational competencies

Figure 6: Employers' Perspectives of Selected Attributes of Employees by Career Stage



might find it useful to think about two different sets of competencies: supervising individual employees of different ages and supervising multi-generational work groups. The first set of competencies requires that supervisors can use the four perspectives of age to gain a better understanding of the experiences of individual employees. The second set of competencies demands that supervisors understand how age might affect the dynamics and interactions of group members, including the duration of the interactions, the status and power equality of employees engaged in the interaction, the closeness of the relationships within the groups, the complexity of the interactions, and the degree of cooperation/conflict that characterizes the interactions.³¹

Employers might consider how the language we use for age does matter.

- If we attribute differences among age groups to chronological age, there is an assumption that the differences observed are developmental. Therefore, policies and programs designed for today's 40 year olds should be more or less relevant to tomorrow's 40 year olds (allowing for other differences at the workplace).
- If policies and programs are developed for a certain generation which has some shared cultural experiences, it is possible that these policies and programs might not translate

well to the members of other generations (who have been affected by different cultural experiences). For instance, on-boarding programs designed specifically for the Millennials may not be as effective for recently hired GenXers and Baby Boomers.

- The life course perspective about age can be a very useful lens when employers are designing different programs and resources for employees. Rather than focusing on "age," per se, the life course perspective draws attention to key life factors that might affect employees' engagement at the workplace. By focusing on "triggers" (such as a prolonged illness of a family member) or "touch points" (such as beginning a graduate degree program), employers are more likely understand the needs of employees with common experiences and develop supports that are designed with those needs in mind.
- Recognizing that today's employees might change jobs and careers more often than was common in the past, employers may want to consider making some adjustments in their career development and leadership programs. For example, older adult employees who have many years in the labor force might, in fact, be interested in training programs geared to "early career" employees if they have recently transitioned to new careers.

Conclusion

The effective management of a multi-generational talent pool requires that employers are able to adjust their thinking so that they can make appropriate use of the four paradigms of age: age, generation, life stage, and career stage. Each of these helps employers to ask different questions and to think about different strategies for harnessing the experiences of all their employees.

The Center on Aging & Work/Workplace Flexibility at Boston College, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, is a unique research center established in 2005. The Center works in partnership with decision-makers at the workplace to design and implement rigorous investigations that will help the American business community prepare for the opportunities and challenges associated with the aging workforce. The Center focuses on Flexible work options because these are a particularly important element of innovative employer responses to the aging workforce. The studies conducted by the Center are examining employers' adoption of a range of flexible work options, the implementation of them at the workplace, their use by older workers, and their impact on business and older workers.

The Center's multi-disciplinary core research team is comprised of more than 20 social scientists from disciplines including economics, social work, psychology, and sociology. The investigators have strong expertise in the field of aging research. In addition, the Center has a workplace advisory group (SENIOR Advisors) to ensure that the priorities and perspectives of business leaders frame the Center's activities and a Research Advisory Committee that provides advice and consultation on the Center's individual research projects and strategic direction. The Center is directed by Marcie Pitt-Catsoupes, Ph.D., and Michael A. Smyer, Ph.D.

Marcie Pitt-Catsoupes, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor at the Boston College Graduate School of Social Work. She received her B.A. from Tufts University, M.S.P. from Boston College, and Ph.D. from Boston University. She is the Co-Principal Investigator of the Boston College National Study of Business Strategy and Workforce Development and Age and Generations Study. She is the founder of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network, which provides resources about working families to business leaders and state legislators, as well as to academics around the world.

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Issue Briefs

Issue Brief 1: Older Workers: What Keeps Them Working?

Issue Brief 2: Businesses: How Are They Preparing For the Aging Workforce?

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Issue Brief 6: Down Shifting: The Role Of Bridge Jobs After Career Employment

Issue Brief 7: Civic Engagement: Volunteering Dynamics and Flexible Work Options

Issue Brief 8: Does Health Insurance Affect The Employment of Older Workers?

Research Highlights

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Research Highlight 2: The Diverse Employment Experiences of Older Men and Women in the Workforce.

Research Highlight 3: The Benchmark Study, Phase I of The National Study of Business Strategy and Workforce Development

Research Highlight 4: The National Study, Phase II of The National Study of Business Strategy and Workforce Development.