

*Today European society is characterised by demographic evolutions that lead to an ageing population. As a result, one major challenge managers*

## The Best Broth in the Old

### About the author



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To prevent the explosion of social costs related to an ageing population, governments use diverse incentives to increase the participation rate of senior workers in the labor force. This increasing ageing workforce does not occur without demanding some necessary adjustments of HR practices.

#### Seniors on the labor market

Switzerland has a longstanding culture of working and has one of the OECD highest percentages of employment participation rate of people over 60 years old. Workers over 50 usually do not experience unemployment more frequently than those between 25 and 49 years old.

What is more disturbing is the share of long term unemployment among the 50+ workforce. In 2008, 24% of unemployed persons over 55 were undergoing this period for more than a year. In comparison to career starters, for whom experiencing unemployment is more common but usually rather short, people over 50 have good reasons once they are unemployed to build up concerns about the continuation of their career.

Several factors can explain this phenomenon, and discrimination at the selection stage is one of them. Research has shown that 25% of job applicants in Switzerland (all ages confounded) report being subject to age discrimination, and when considering applicants over 50 years old, this percentage increases up to almost 70%. After sending more than 6400 fictitious application forms to more than 1340 real job offers in France covering a wide variety of positions, a French institute has been able to estimate that a 48-50 years old applicant has three times less chance to be invited to an interview than a 28-30 years old applicant. This simply makes age the main reason of discrimination during the selection process.

#### Age stereotypes and norms

It seems that age stereotypes and norms are part of the story behind this phenomenon. Indeed, like anybody, recruiters develop subjective norms about the appropriate age associ-

ated to a job position and have age stereotypes automatically activated when they encounter an elderly applicant.

Ideas such as lack of flexibility, motivation and development potential, slowness in working or absenteeism, are associated to seniors. At the same time, older people are seen as loyal, conscientious and warm. These preconceptions are deeply rooted in the belief that performance decreases with age. Research has however accumulated a large body of evidence showing that age doesn't impede productivity. Job performance is a complex phenomenon and multiple factors impact the performance of one's technical activity or one's supportive behaviors, like helping others, more strongly. One reason why age discrimination is so widespread may reside in the fact that everybody

**«The ageing workforce is likely to play a role in future organizational success»**

will virtually one day become seniors. This threat may incite people to cognitively take distance with this group by developing strategies that are supposed to protect one's self-esteem. A bad performance is seen as related to factors internal to a senior, like his abilities, whereas it is seen as related to external circumstances when done by a younger worker. Norms such as older employees occupy higher hierarchical positions than younger employees may also be linked to age discrimination at work. They forge our expectations about seniors independent of the required job competencies. For instance, we tend to evaluate more positively somebody reaching some hierarchical position before its implicit age limit, but conversely evaluate him as more negatively if he reaches it "late", after the implicit age limit.

Selection decisions may result from a fit evaluation between characteristics of the job posi-

*will face next years is an ageing workforce. However, the situation of older employees on the labor market isn't that easy.*

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tion and the applicant. At least two evaluations occur then: one of the applicant's abilities and the other about job requirements. Age stereotypes may taint evaluation of applicants' qualifications, while norms associated to the organization (i.e. dynamic environment) or the position itself (i.e. pizza deliverer) make them more appropriate to some age groups.

## Attenuating age discrimination

Age stereotypes and norms may serve important psychological functions as well as help us make sense of our environment at low costs. Actions undertaken against age discrimination thus mainly aim to reduce the negative impact on some age groups. Broadly speaking, we distinguish between public institutions and organizational initiatives.

European public authorities have developed strong legislations on the basis of a comprehensive directive of the European commission for equality in treatment in work and employ-

ment. This directive considers age like race, gender, religion, handicap or sexual orientation as attributes on which discrimination is prohibited. It makes an important distinction between direct discrimination and more subtle indirect discriminations namely any disposition, criterion or practice seemingly neutral which would disadvantage persons of a minority group, unless it can legitimately be justified. In Switzerland, even though age discrimination is prohibited by the 1999 Swiss Constitution (art. 8), no concrete legislation against it exists for now.

At the organizational level, anti-discrimination actions are part of the HR activity. Some organizations choose to integrate age as a valued characteristic of their workforce, often in larger diversity management programs. They are composed of monitoring indicators for several HR practices (e.g. selection decisions, performance evaluations, promotions, education priorities) as well as

more elaborated initiatives as recruitments programs, diversity sensitization training, continuing education, career development plans, or mentoring. Slightly differently, age management programs focus on the challenges posed by the ageing workforce and develop related initiatives like career development plan, work hours flexibility, health promotion, as well as transition to retirement.

As a major upcoming challenge facing managers, the ageing workforce is likely to play a role in future organizational success. Successful organizational adjustments may depend on efficient selection and retention of senior employees as well as good integration into their unit.

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