

Mature Workers -- The New Valuable Asset

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Abstract

**If the package wrapped in paper
was wrinkled, grey and tried,
with some pieces even missing
would you still see what's inside?**

**“No,” said the brash young foreman,
but the wise one said she would.
She pushed back wrinkled wrappings
and there a diamond stood.**

---John H. Glawson

How many diamonds have you discarded in the last few years?

So many times people make assumptions:

Managers assume because a person is grey and wrinkled they are no longer of use to the company.

Older workers assume because they are grey and wrinkled they are no longer of use to the company.

Managers believe because a person is older they are no longer mentally or physically fit.

Older workers believe because they are older they cannot stay mentally and physically fit.

These myths have been proven wrong time and again and yet mature workers are often pushed aside in the work place. The older worker then either retires, thinking they can no longer meet the demands of a job, or they move off and seek new challenges.

A labour shortage is being created by a lack of replacement workers to fill the jobs being vacated by baby boomers is looming. Can you afford to think of mature workers as people who can no longer compete or fit in to the plans of your company?

It hadn't rained in almost two years and the grass hadn't grown. The hunting was poor. Soon the grumbling started amongst the hunters of the tribe. "It's Yellow Legs," they said, "He's old and constantly wanting to do things differently than the ways that have worked for us in the past. He has to rest when we go long distances in search of game. He's passed his usefulness." So they banned him from the hunt.

Yellow Legs, the only survivor of a Cree massacre that had killed his six companions, Yellow Legs, the hunter, who had found the buffalo five years before, Yellow Legs who had survived the long drought of his childhood.

Now, he was no longer as strong as the hunters of 18 to 20 summers. He could no longer shoot as straight as the most skilled of 25 to 30 summers. They said because Yellow Legs had lived 40 long cold winters he was old. They took from him the challenge of being a hunter.

But their luck didn't change. The animals were no longer there so again they blamed Yellow Legs. They said his very presence in the tribe had brought bad luck so they banished him and his oldest wife, who had lived 38 winters. They sent them off to die.

But still the hunters only brought in a few rabbits and ground squirrels. The store of food the women had put away was running low. The tribe was suffering.

Then one day as two hunters searched closer to the mountains they came upon Yellow Legs' tent. His wife gave them meat. As they ate they looked around. Their tent was in good repair and they seemed to have meat and berries to eat.

“What great hunter brings you food,” they asked?

“It's my old friend, Experience,” Yellow Legs told them.

The hunters hurried back to the chiefs and told them of a great hunter who was bringing Yellow Legs meat. “Experience, is his name,” they told them.

The chiefs came to Yellow Legs' tent and asked to meet this great hunter.

Yellow Legs said, “If you follow me and do exactly as I say, I'll show you experience.”

He took them to a small hidden valley in the mountains. There an underground stream bubbled to the top and around the pool were lush grass and berry bushes. Deer, wapiti, bear and sheep came to eat and drink. The chiefs took what meat they needed, but again demanded to meet this great hunter, Experience, who had guided him to this spot.

Yellow Legs said, “Experience is within me as it will be within you as time goes on.” He told them of the great drought of his childhood and how the older hunters had led them to this valley and other valleys close by so they could feed the tribe. This is what he had tried to show them, but they wouldn’t listen. They had pushed him out and sent him away. Experience, only comes from taking on the challenges of life and learning.

The chiefs saw they had weakened the tribe by looking at what Yellow Legs could not do instead of what he could contribute. They had used the number of winters he had lived to highlight his weaknesses instead of highlighting his strengths.

The leader stood and said, “A bow and arrow without string is just so many sticks, but a bow and arrow with its string is a fine hunting tool. We must put the string back on our bow.”

Old! What the hell is old anyway? I just turned 60 and I still haven’t figured out what I want to be when I grow up!

One of the things I have learned over my 60 years is that age sure as hell doesn’t make a person good or bad. It doesn’t make a person smarter or dumber. It doesn’t make a person strong or weak. I really can’t see how a chronological number being attached to your name makes you any better or worse in your job.

If a number that grows ever larger had anything to do with a persons ability to work, many of this countries farmers wouldn't be allowed to work because that profession is getting older.

Many of our nurses wouldn't be able to work for the same reason. Neither would Robert Eisenberg who is America's oldest worker. He retired at 60, went back to work at 70 and now at 102 he still works as a consultant at Zabin Industries.

When asked what he thought about being Americas oldest worker he said, "I only hope I can continue to be." He attributes his long career to being active, involved, looking to the future and having a sense of humour.

Mature workers biggest enemies are older workers who say things like, "I'm getting a little long in the tooth you know", "I can't take in information like I used to", "I've been here a long time, I think the company owes me a little cruising time now." And so on . . . And they come to work, don't participate, don't stay current, live in the past, give little thought to the future and they expect things to be handed to them on a silver platter.

These older workers make older workers look bad. These workers are the ones who help to perpetuate those myths about older workers. They can't learn, can't adapt, can't change and on and on.

And believe me there are those nay sayers who will grab onto these myths and use them against mature workers. They don't know how older workers feel or what they're capable of, or how they work. Yet they point their long, skinny finger at us and say, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks," "Older workers are stuck in the past and they are not capable of changing and adapting with the times."

Bull Tweety!!!

But many of these nay sayers are in positions of influence . . . They hurt older workers with the myths they believe.

I have no idea when I was supposed to have gotten old, but I know I'm being called old at work. More women are calling me dearie and sweetie and other such terms of endearment that they usually reserve for their five-year-old child or their infirmed grandfather. And I don't like it! It seems like just yesterday that I was looked upon as a sex symbol by desirable women . . . Now I'm just a sex symbol for women who don't gave a damn anymore!

And from inside here looking out I'm not old. I still look forward to the future the same as I did when I left school. I still dream dreams of meeting challenges and winning; dreams of being the 'go too guy', a respected member of my environment, and a success at what I choose to do.

In here I am 18, not 60. I can still learn, I can still teach, I can still participate and I can still contribute. I still have value!

But it seems some young people fight very hard to try to destroy my dreams, to burst my bubble and to demoralize me!

A young woman just a few years out of university told me I was over the hill. She said, “You’re bald, the hair you do have is white and you have wrinkles.” And she smiled to the small group of our co-workers who had gathered around as though she had won some victory.

I said, “And because of those reasons you call me old and useless and you don’t go any farther?”

She said, “I don’t have too. I can see you’re old and therefore you should step aside for a younger person,” again the smile to the group.

I said, “If you had a package come to you that was wrapped in wrinkled, white paper that had some worn spots would you throw it into the garbage without looking inside?”

She said, “No! There may be something valuable inside.”

I said, “Well!! Why don’t you try to find out about me before you start discarding me without looking!”

I wondered why she was taking great pains to let me know I was older and I asked, “Why does a pretty and intelligent young woman like you think like that?”

She said, “You’re not supposed to be looking at that!”

I said, “looking at what?”

She said, “You said I was pretty. You’re not supposed to be looking at younger women!!!”

“Who the hell made up that rule????”

She said, “My boyfriend said that older women and men who look at younger men and women are either cougars or dirty old men!”

What chance do mature workers have with warped thinking like that?

The worst part of this whole scenario is that though this woman has a perverted view of older people, she is very intelligent in her profession. She is going to climb high up the ladder of the business world and she is going to take these archaic thoughts towards older people with her.

Our perception of older workers has to change. It has to change for the future of the company; it has to change for the future of older workers.

Do you know that it used to be thought that if a person was older and not in management then they were a failure? It never dawned on us that maybe a person didn't want to go into management. It never dawned on us that people may have stayed in a job in order to feed their family and pay off their mortgage. It never dawned on us that they didn't want to be a boss.

But nowadays as many workers reach the age when they have some security they are setting out to fulfill their own dreams. Many companies think older people can no longer compete and they take away the challenges . . . Why would anybody think that because people hit some arbitrary age they don't want to compete anymore? So mature workers are leaving the company to look for challenges . . .

My older brother was a payroll clerk. He never went up the ladder. Being a payroll clerk was just a means to pay his bills. His dream was to be a politician.

So about the time his mortgage was paid off and his kids moved out, a by-election came along for the MLA's job.

There were three men running in this election. A Liberal, a Conservative and my brother running as an independent.

My brother went all over the county knocking on doors saying, "If you vote for those other two men Ralph Klein will think everything in this district is all right, but if you vote for me, he'll know things aren't alright. I'm a protest vote. All over the district he did this . . .

Well, my brother was elected on a protest vote . . . And the first day he was allowed to say anything in the legislature, he stood up and tried to pass a bill to move the month of June to between January and February . . . He said it is just a little old 30 day month. Usually warm and sunny, and I thought it might be great to be able to have a game of golf in the winter . . .

I didn't say older people had to have intelligent dreams, but they are leaving companies where they have worked for years. They are going to live their dreams. They are going to find new challenges. And if it hasn't already caused your company problems it will in the future.

Man, I see some of you people looking at me in disbelief because I talk like a country boy and I am not throwing out a bunch of statistics to substantiate what I say.

Well, here are some statistics that will impact the future. 50% of our work force is baby boomers or older. They are reaching that age when the mortgage has been paid off and the kids have moved on. They are now free to go into business; to live their dreams; to take risks; to seek the challenges that are missing in their lives. They are leaving the company.

When baby boomers were born five and six kids to a family was the norm. My mother and father had seven kids. The norm today is what? Two. The cold hard fact is that there are not enough replacement workers and coming along to replace the people who are leaving the company.

There is a labour shortage now and it is going to get worse peaking in the years 2020 - 2025. And yet we still have managers and Human Resource people discouraging older workers from participating fully in company activities. They are taking away challenges.

As people get older they do not stop loving the challenge. Why do you think they play golf, or compete in the seniors Olympics? Why do you think they play cards? But management think they are doing them a favour by pushing them aside and out of the race.

I can understand that when they let their skills lapse; they let their physical and mental conditioning deteriorated through neglect. I can understand it if people crawl off into a corner

and disassociated themselves from their co-workers. Yes, I agree they should be pushed aside, the same as younger people who do the same thing.

If we want to be treated equally we have to be in there working as a vital part of the machinery, part of the team. We have to demand that we be given the same chance to learn, to advance, to participate. We have to continue to overcome the hurdles placed in our way.

Management also has to take a good long look at their people needs for the future. They have to look at the world of reality, discard older people myths. They have to look to see how to accommodate young and old for the common good of the company. They have to stop grasping at the shortcomings of mature workers.

If managers would think for a moment they will realize that mature workers are not born old.

Mature workers earn their status by moving through the stages of childhood and younger worker.

When they hit their 40's they become known affectionately, by the younger crowd, as curmudgeons, cougars and dirty old men, but what they really are, are survivors. People who have learned to take on challenges and win. Believe me you do not become a survivor by being unable to change and adapt to new situations.

We have been adapting and learning all our lives. Yet because we learn differently than people just out of school, they say we cannot learn. The way mature workers learn is a much deeper because we have experience to attach our new learning onto.

We mature people should stop and think about ourselves for a moment. We should be proud to have reached the status of mature worker. That is like going from apprentice to journeyman. And yet, we have those who still try to paint themselves as the apprentice, to pretend they are younger workers . . . Sometimes this makes us look silly . . .

If we want to keep the respect of those at work we have to stop this silliness of pretending to be younger workers. We can't be coming to work one day as a grey haired man and the next day with spiked hair, red and green and blue trying to talk the talk of a high school kid. We're passed that. We look silly.

We cannot be a kindly upstanding lady who is sought out for her advice one day and the next day wearing a high energy cross your heart bra underneath a tank top. We are passed that. It makes us look silly.

We can't be a bald headed man before vacation and after a vacation have our hair parted an eighth of an inch from our right ear and piled over the top of our bald head pretending we've got a full head of hair . . . Geez, I tried that one time and I went out in a wind storm. That silly hank

of hair was flapping all over the place. A woman came up and started to beat on my head with an umbrella.

I yelled, “What the hell are you doing???”

And she yelled back, “I thought you were being attacked by a seagull!!!”

We have to show that we have reached mature workers status. We have to show them we have the experience, intelligence, common sense and the energy to help the company achieve its goals.

We are mature workers. We are the New Valuable Asset.

We know it! And for those hiring personnel who don't know it: the next time somebody comes to your office looking for work, look at their resume instead of their wrinkles. You may be surprised to find you have a diamond in your hand. A Mature Worker - The New Valuable Asset!