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Why Work? Why Not! Older Adults Tell It Like It Is: What Baby Boomers, Adult Educators, and Management Can Learn From Current Older Workers and the Role of Ageism in the Workforce

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Abstract: This roundtable seeks to look at the older adult worker and what they bring to the workforce. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that the older adult workers' numbers will be increasing to roughly 22% of the labor force through 2050. The older adult worker is definitely here to stay. How they feel about work and what they have to offer as older workers will surely impact the workforce. What we as educators and management can learn from them now will be essential to the older adult worker's successful employment.

In today's world, the workforce is continuing to shift. For example, we have information from the U.S. Bureau of Statistics to substantiate that older workers are growing in numbers in the workforce and the media and current economic advisors seem to agree that this is expected to continue. But what do we really know about the current older workers and their place in the workforce? My research study entitled, "A Phenomenological Study of the Meaning of Work for Older Workers Through Erik Erikson's Eighth Stage of Development," begins to take a look at the current older worker. My research sought to answer these two questions: How do adults who remain in the workforce beyond the age of 70 make meaning from their work experiences and how does the lived experiences of workers over the age of 70 affect the attitudes, beliefs, and events shaping the aging workforce today? The older adult workers that I interviewed were 70-95 years old and were either part-time or full-time paid employees or entrepreneurs. The experiences, interests, and examples they shared with me shed some light on what it's like to be an older adult worker in the workforce today. According to my co-researchers, after the age of 70 seems to be one of the best times in life to truly enjoy work. These older adult workers don't see themselves as a threat to any of the aspiring young workers because, to them, employment as an older worker is a time where they are not worrying about advancement, office politics or especially looking good to supervisors or peers. There are no pressures to be successful in the eyes of others or striving to become the president of the company in the next 10-20 years. It may in fact be the best time in life to work if one lives long enough to enjoy it. So what's not to love about the older adult worker?

Could it be that the number of older workers in the workplace is increasing faster than anticipated? As stated earlier, the number of older workers is indeed growing. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS: February 2011, <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat3.pdf>) reports that in 2010 older workers accounted for 17.4% of the entire U.S. labor force. The BLS indicates that between 1977 and 2007 the employment of workers aged 65 years and older increased by 101%. The number of employed men over 65 increased by 75% and the number of employed women rose by 147%. Even though the overall percentage of workers aged 75 years and older was small, 0.8% in 2007, it increased by a staggering 172% between 1977 and 2007. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Projections as of 2010 state that over the next 10 years, the number of individuals in the labor force who are at least 65 years old will grow by 75%. In contrast, the number of workers age 25-64 will grow only by 2%. The percentage

of the population age 65 and older in the labor force will grow over the next ten years from about 17% to 22%. Beginning in 2020, it is predicted that the percentage will level off and hold roughly at 22% of the labor force through 2050.

As it appears that the older worker is here to stay, what can we as educators and management learn from older workers currently in the workforce? The older adult workers that I interviewed were very eager to share their experiences and thoughts. First of all, they all seemed to agree that it was important to love what you do and know what makes you happy. That could be making the decision to change jobs when it turns out to be something that is not what you thought it would be and rekindling a previous interest into a paid position. They also clearly understood that it is important to find what they described as the best fit where an employer recognizes the value of experience, mentoring, and advisory abilities of the older worker. For those who were working out of economic necessity, they felt that there was no reason not to enjoy the job as well. In some cases, once they no longer needed to keep the job, they stayed because they truly enjoyed what they were doing.

These older adult workers also saw the importance of life-long learning and were quite clear that they needed to be proficient in technology to stay employed. Some wished that they had the technical capabilities early in their careers. Several of the older adults returned to school to acquire additional degrees where one received her Master's Degree in Adult Education at age 79 and another completed her GED at age 62 and is continuing to complete an undergraduate degree in mental health.

One myth or assumption about older adults is that they are adverse to change. This was not the case with the older adult workers that I interviewed. They saw the need to be flexible and no matter what the change, they believed that they could manage it. They said that they were able to role with the changes because over the years they have experienced many changes and had learned from them. They saw challenges as an opportunity to keep mentally alert and healthy while taking on more responsibilities. These older adults were still looking for opportunities and did not have any set goals for the future. Their one belief is that they will continue to work as long as they can contribute and produce and someone is still willing to pay them.

Social interactions and what they called just keeping in touch by being in the workplace was important to these older adult workers and contrary to the belief that older adults and the younger generation don't necessarily get along, these older workers enjoyed working with younger people. They felt that they had a lot to offer the younger workers and that the younger workers provided new ideas and insights for them. They expressed a sincere interest in respecting and valuing others which they saw as important for everyone.

Were these older adult workers interested in participating in volunteer work? Yes, they gave examples of the volunteer work they did along side of their paid employment, but all of them said that they saw that more respect and appreciation was illustrated through paid employment.

What does this information provide to the future of working with older adult workers? My co-researchers are just a few of the older adults workers that management and the business world currently see as examples of the older adult worker in the workforce. What the baby boomers will bring to this mix is yet to be seen. Management can best begin learning by paying attention to their current older adult workers.