

THE OLDER WORKER: EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING

*a new law
and a new emphasis*

Because of the recent Federal legislation prohibiting age discrimination in employment, companies will now be hiring and training more older workers. Are training directors aware of the serious employment problems confronting persons over 40, and cognizant of employers' experiences working with them? Also, do they know the most effective techniques for counseling, testing and training these mature workers?

The author recently visited large and small cities in 16 states, interviewing employers, older workers, union officials, school administrators and Chamber of Commerce officials to find the answers to these and related questions.

STATE LEGISLATION ON AGE DISCRIMINATION

Twenty-five states currently have laws of varying strength prohibiting discrimination in employment because of age. In those states where a firm position has been taken, the obvious forms of discrimination have diminished, and job opportunities for middle-aged and older workers have increased.

In only a few cases has it been necessary to prosecute and, therefore, an important benefit of the state laws is said to be the "moral effect that they have on employers."¹

FEDERAL LEGISLATION

On December 6, 1967, Congress sent to the White House a measure prohibiting discrimination against workers because of age. The new law became effective on June 12, 1968.²

The purpose of this law is officially described as being one to promote the hiring of people in the 40-65 age group. However, to avoid one of the obstacles against employing older workers, employers will not be required to open benefit plans to new employees in that age group.

In some cases employers may deny employment to applicants past the age of 40 if they have a bona fide reason for hiring younger people. But as a general rule, employers may not specify age

preferences in help-wanted ads. The law applies equally to labor unions and employment agencies. The Secretary of Labor is directed to carry out provisions of the act in cooperation with the States and to conduct a continuing program of education and information to stimulate retention or acquisition of jobs by older persons.

Enforcement action for willful violation can be brought under the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, by which a court may order payment of damages for unpaid wages, reinstatement, promotion, or other redress to an aggrieved employee.

It is too early to forecast the impact of this new Federal legislation, but it can be presumed that it will have the same effect nationally as it now has in those states with laws prohibiting age discrimination in employment.

PROBLEMS FACED BY THE OLDER WORKER

The problems faced by the unemployed older worker can best be illustrated by quoting from the President's message to Congress on Aid for the Aged, delivered on January 23, 1967. In it, President Johnson said: "Hundreds of thousands . . . find themselves jobless because of arbitrary age discrimination. Despite our present low rate of unemployment, there has been a persistent average of 850,000 people age 45 and over who are unemployed . . . They comprise 27 percent of all the unemployed — and 40 percent of the long-term unemployed. In 1965, approximately half of all private job openings were barred to applicants over 55; a quarter were closed to applicants over 45. In economic terms, this is a serious — and senseless — loss to a nation on the move. Opportunity must be opened to the many Americans over 45 who are qualified and willing to work."

Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz recently pointed out that:

* There are today 37 million men and women in this country between the ages of 45 and 64. These numbers are

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increasing rapidly and, by 1975, there will be 44 million between the ages of 45 and 64.

- * In 1967 there were about three-quarters of a million unemployed workers 45 years and over.
- * Over three-quarters of a billion dollars in unemployment insurance was paid out in 1964 to workers 45 and over.
- * Older workers bear a disproportionate share of long-term unemployment.

EMPLOYMENT OF OLDER WORKERS

There was, and is, a considerable body of evidence that age discrimination in employment has been substantial prior to the passage of the Federal law. The Department of Labor conducted studies in 1963 which indicated that nearly one half of the job orders filed at public employment offices in eight major cities specified upper age limitations. Often these upper age limitations in hiring are as low as age 35 or 40. Most frequently they begin at about age 45 and these studies showed that about one-third of the job openings stipulated this upper age limitation.

Why are older workers not being hired? The major reasons given by employers are: (a) concern that there is a significant physical decline which lowers older workers' productivity; (b) that they are more difficult to train; (c) that employers may suffer a penalty in terms of increased pension and insurance costs; (d) that the older worker is not as adaptable and flexible.

On the other hand, most employers who hired a reasonable number of older workers said, when interviewed, that as a whole their experience with them had been good, but in the last analysis no generalization could be made — it all depended upon the particular individual concerned.

There was some agreement by employers that older workers are more stable, dependable and do not require as much

supervision. With regard to learning ability, most employers expressed the opinion that older workers appeared to learn about as fast as younger ones, although some said older workers were slow to absorb training or that learning ability depended solely upon the individual.

It is true that as one gets older, physical capacities change and physical disabilities become a more important employment factor. But what employers tend to forget is that the technological breakthroughs in industry have been matched by phenomenal scientific progress in the health and medical fields. Today workers are healthier and living longer.³

Age does not appear to inhibit productivity. This is illustrated by a Department of Labor study related to the work performance and work consistency of 6,000 Post Office Department workers over an eight-week period in 12 cities. This study confirmed earlier findings that differences in output between workers at various age levels are largely insignificant and that capability for superior performance is not restricted at any particular age group.

Several generalizations can be drawn from these studies and from discussions with employers:

- * There is general agreement that older workers are stable, dependable, and do not require as much supervision.
- * Many workers over 40 have experienced difficulty in obtaining employment because of their age, so they are seldom "job jumpers" but are rather motivated to work harder to retain their current job.
- * Most older workers are physically capable of doing a good job but in some cases it is necessary to consider proper job placement carefully to get them into jobs suitable to their physical capacities.
- * Because finger dexterity is important in factory work, those who had been out of the labor market for some time usually are not able to make a successful adjustment to a production type job.

- * The "social climate" of the job bears consideration. However, employers disagreed in the survey as to whether older workers should or should not be placed in with a group of young employees.
- * Employers should experiment with hiring a mixture of all ages because this seems to result in a better balanced and more productive work force.

PROBLEMS REQUIRING COUNSELING

In considering counseling, a question that might well be asked is: "How many older workers actually need counseling?" The employers interviewed by the author agreed that almost all older workers could benefit from counseling both before and after obtaining employment. But it should be borne in mind that there is a significant difference between counseling youth and older workers. In counseling an older worker, one is dealing with a person who has had a long and more or less successful occupational past. Few people, regardless of the extent of their formal school education, can live and work for 20, 30, or 40 years without acquiring some knowledge, skill and maturity that has occupational significance.

Counseling older workers calls for the most careful use of interviewing techniques. Many older workers want to talk about their problems at home, why they lost their former job, etc. Effective control of interviews often requires careful discrimination between what may be relevant or irrelevant to the problem and its possible solution. Because an older worker has established interests, vocational patterns, career goals and tested abilities, a proper assessment of their abilities requires probing to some depth beyond the objective information available. The effort should be made to get at the "whys."⁴

A good technique to use during the counseling interview is to emphasize an older worker's personal assets. This benefits the employee because it:

1. Gives him understanding of what he

- has to offer an employer.
2. Helps him to gain self respect and confidence.
 3. Assists him to develop positive attitudes and feelings regarding work situations.

Group counseling techniques have been used successfully with older employees, perhaps because the disadvantaged are responsive to peer influence. This type of counseling is an informal arrangement where the group is encouraged to frankly discuss mutual problems, employment experiences, and individual achievements. The technique applies the principle of group dynamics discussion, which means that most of the suggestions, questions, advice and information comes from the counselees themselves. However, completely unstructured group counseling runs the danger of missing important subjects, and allows and encourages counselees to avoid facing and dealing with employment problems. While providing for flexibility of detail and content, there should be a structuring and organization of the problem situation before group counseling is attempted.

In summary, the advantages of using group counseling are:

- * It facilitates learning through the exchange of information, sharing experiences, and comparing of impressions and judgments in an atmosphere in which there is slight penalty for failing.
- * It helps the counselee to develop skills useful on the job. He learns to express himself and explain his problems, identify with others, observe the impact of his behavior on others, and gain self-confidence.
- * It also benefits the counselor because it provides him with valuable information about the person being counselled.⁵

In summary, it should be kept in mind that rapport with mature workers can only be obtained through a patient and understanding attitude. When counseling older workers, as with all employees, one should listen objectively and recep-

tively, be relaxed and tolerant, use understandable language, summarize frequently, but ultimately let the employee make his own decisions.

TESTING OLDER WORKERS

It is interesting to note that no subject presented at a recent National Conference on "Manpower Training and the Older Worker" evoked a more concerted negative response than the reliance on tests as a selection device for the employment and training of older workers.

Quoting from the conference report: "The fact that older workers are disadvantaged test-wise because they have less education and certainly less test taking experience was reemphasized. Conferees brought out that high motivation can more than compensate for low scores, that the quality of training is more relevant than selection tests, and that good performance at a very early stage in training is a better predictor of success.

And so it went. But when the chips were down, nobody wanted the use of tests as a selection device entirely discontinued. The call became — recognize the weakness of tests, act accordingly and get the highest possible degree of validation and cross-validation including predictability... There were strong suggestions for a person-oriented rather than a job-oriented approach."⁶

There is little question but that the effectiveness of a test depends on the skill of the person administering it. The major problem is to motivate the older worker so that he is willing to take the test and to do the best he can. Since group testing sessions are threatening to many disadvantaged individuals, there is need for some kind of orientation before testing.

A number of Department of Labor MDTA Experimental and Demonstration projects for older workers have attempted to use various tests but soon found that most were not suitable for older persons and therefore would not serve a useful purpose. In cases where local State Employment offices tried to

administer the General Aptitude Test Battery, many disadvantaged adults reacted with considerable fear. Others had inadequate education or a language barrier which made administration of the test battery next to impossible.

The E & D projects did have some success using the Wide Range Achievement Test (Part III - Reading) and the Gray Oral Reading Tests to measure literacy levels. The Kuder Preference Record was tried but did not seem to be suited to the culturally deprived. Unfortunately, no reports were made of the use of the Strong Vocational Interest Blank which is considered by some authorities to be the most versatile and best standardized non-intelligence test available. Perhaps the Strong was not used because it takes longer to give and to score than the Kuder.

Training directors wishing to experiment with tests for disadvantaged persons might consider use of the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale which was designed to be a broad sampling, wide range of ability, individual test of adult intelligence. Norms are provided for ages from 16 to 75 and for IQ's from 45 to 159. The Scale was tested on a large sample, and it is interesting to note that this included 475 persons age 60 and above. However, this is an individually administered test and might be too expensive to give routinely.⁷

Consideration might also be given to the use of the Adult Basic Learning Examination (ABLE) which is a recently developed battery designed to test the level of educational achievement for those who have not completed the 8th grade.

In summary, it can be said that psychological and vocational tests do not always do justice to older workers. People tend to slow down when they reach middle age, and this shows up particularly in speed tests. If an older worker meets the test norms for an occupation, it can be quite safely assumed that he has an aptitude for it. However, if he doesn't meet the test norms, he should not automatically be

ruled out but other factors should be considered. It may well be that he has other abilities or experience and this may offset any deficiencies in aptitude.

TRAINING OF OLDER WORKERS

In visiting the various States, it was found that the number of older workers interested in taking basic or vocational training was relatively low. Why are they not interested in using this useful channel to success in employment? The following reasons can be listed:

- * Older workers often have a low educational background and do not want to go back to a school situation;
- * They feel that they may not do well in the training and that younger employees may "show them up."
- * They do not want to take the basic or remedial training which frequently is tied in with skill training;
- * They feel that they don't have many years left to work and therefore it is too late to try to learn another occupation.

Unfortunately, with the current emphasis on economy, both private industry and Government programs such as MDTA, tend to invest educational and training services in the young rather than in the old, since work life expectancy is greater in the young, and consequently this is a more prudent investment. For example, during the first five years under the MDT act, only 11 percent of the institutional (classroom) persons being trained were 45 plus, but 39% were under 22 years of age. The percentages for MDTA on-the-job training were even less favorable for older workers.

Can older workers learn and can money be justifiably spent on their training? The answer is yes because although there may be some decline in the ability to learn a new job for those over 40, the loss can usually be compensated for by high motivation and effective training techniques. With older workers it has been found that training will be more successful if they are permitted to learn

the new task in their own way and at their own speed, if written instructions have been prepared and if the person being trained is active rather than passive. Programmed instruction is useful for older workers.

It also has been found that on-the-job training is particularly useful for the older worker who is:

- * Not severely handicapped;
- * Not suited or motivated toward classroom training;
- * Unfamiliar with the complexities of searching for a job.⁸

One of the questions raised by the author when talking with school administrators was, "Should separate training classes be organized for those over 40 or 45?" The unanimous answer was "no" because educators felt that this would result in no real advantage. In fact, there is probably an advantage in having a range of ages in a class, since younger students tend to challenge and stimulate the older ones.

In summary, the problem appears to be to learn how to motivate older workers to undertake classroom or OJT training and then to see that a larger number and variety of training opportunities are open for them.

EMPLOYERS' HIRING PRACTICES

In regard to the hiring of employees over 40, it was determined that employers are cooperating more now than they did previously because of the tight labor market. However, there is still some resistance to modifying hiring requirements or restructuring jobs to fit older workers. Most local companies seem to have more flexibility and are more receptive to hiring of older workers than are national companies, because almost all large corporations have nationwide policies setting forth age restrictions. In this situation, where there are uniform company-wide age limitations on hiring, obviously very little cooperation on modification can be obtained.

One of the challenges offered employers is to develop a method for designing jobs to fit older persons. This may

include mechanizing specific operations, adding auxiliary tools, or reallocating work duties. Generally speaking, many employers are willing to cooperate with regard to hiring and training an older worker who is a "saleable" commodity, but employers will not buy older workers as a group and will not downgrade general specifications.

In many cases employers set higher requirements than they need for a particular job, and higher than the employees they have doing the actual work. However, it was reported by Employment Service personnel that many employers will modify their hiring practices if it is felt the older person can actually do the job. This is particularly true of educational requirements — employers will usually relax their demands on these.

To summarize, many employers, especially small ones, will cooperate by modifying their hiring requirements and employing older workers. However, there are still employers such as the one who actually said to the author, "We have no problem — we hire to age 55!"

THE ROAD AHEAD

Some recent improvement in the number of older workers employed and trained can be seen. Employers are gradually becoming aware of the benefits of hiring those over 40 and the new Federal law prohibiting age discrimination in employment will be of assistance. Yet much remains to be done both in research and in the development of training programs for older workers. For example, we need to know more about:

- * The trainability of older workers. Research studies and our own practical experience have demonstrated that older workers can be retrained; but in many cases new approaches, new techniques, and new tools are required.
- * The individual motivation and the learning process of the older adult. And when we find answers, we must incorporate them into our on-going

training programs.

- * Techniques for improving vocational counseling and ways to expand training and educational opportunities for older workers. Also, how to minimize older workers' hardships when technological changes force whole plants or entire operations to close down or relocate.
- * How to get employers to recognize the major shifts that have taken place from the heavy, manual, and physically exhausting jobs to those that are machine assisted and physically light in comparison. Too many employers have failed to reflect these job changes in their own personnel hiring policies and in their physical requirements.
- * Ways to develop more effective coordination among the many agencies providing services for older persons. With recent inputs of new manpower and training programs and resources, there has been a tendency toward

dispersion, overlapping, and duplication. Here a new kind of coordinative effort is needed permitting new ideas and program innovations to take place under the most favorable conditions.

These are but a few of the challenges and opportunities that bear on the older person's problems of skill development and employment. As President Kennedy said in February 1965, what we need is "an imaginative and far reaching effort in both the public and private sectors of our society for the development of new approaches and new paths to the employment of older persons."

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FORD GRANTS \$130,000 TO MINORITY-CONTROLLED TRAINING FIRM

The Ford Foundation has approved a grant of \$130,000 to Skill Advancement, Inc. to enable it to expand its industrial upgrading programs for the low-skill, low-wage worker and entry level training programs for the hard-core unemployed. SAI, headquartered at 663 Fifth Avenue, New York, is a training firm whose administrative, professional and support personnel are predominantly minority group members.

SAI is sponsored by Cornell University, the New York Urban League, and the Puerto Rican Forum. This alliance between academia and community oriented organizations has enabled SAI to forcefully present its basic belief that low-skill, low-wage workers can be upgraded to jobs offering career ladders to occupational and financial mobility thus providing openings for the entry-level

hard core unemployed. SAI has been a forerunner in providing industry with training programs to meet the specific needs of specific jobs, as well as the specific human needs of both the worker and his supervisor.

In 1966, SAI designed, developed and implemented a totally new training concept called High Intensity Training. This concept is applicable to all levels of training, from Job Readiness and Basic Skills training, to Upgrading and Supervisory training; from training the hard core unemployed for the "World of Work" to training supervisors for the "World of the Worker." SAI has focused on the changing of traditional attitudes held by supervisors and management in order to create more positive participation in the total work environment.