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## 'Age friendly' workplaces on the rise

**Most baby boomers say they plan to stay in the workforce longer, and employment experts emphasize a need to create an environment free from age bias.**

By [Marilyn Gardner](#) | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

As Gary Burger was job-hunting several years ago after a 25-year career in accounting, he faced a challenge all too familiar to applicants like himself who are in their 50s and over.

"You start hearing things like, 'You're overqualified,' or 'You may need to reduce your expectations,' " he says, recalling conversations with potential employers.

To bridge the gap until he found a permanent position, Mr. Burger accepted an offer from Callaway Partners, a consulting firm in Atlanta, to work on a project for six weeks. During that time, as he observed the company's positive attitude toward older workers, Burger liked the atmosphere. He decided to stay, turning down other opportunities. Three years later, he is a project manager.

"That's what made Callaway so interesting," he says. "They were looking at me because I have this broad range of experience."

That approach puts companies like this in the vanguard of a new era in the workplace. With an estimated 70 percent of baby boomers saying they want or need to stay in the workforce longer, employment experts are emphasizing the need to create an "age friendly" workplace, free from age bias and welcoming to mature workers. Even if many baby boomers ultimately retire earlier than they currently plan to, enough will stay on – or reenter – to swell the ranks of graying workers.

Already, 10,000 baby boomers are turning 50 every day, a trend the US Census Bureau says will continue for the next decade. As the age for collecting full Social Security benefits climbs to 67, and as some pensions become less secure, more people will need to keep working. But many employers are still eager to see them leave in their 50s.

Marc Freedman, author of "Encore: Finding Work That Matters in the Second Half of Life," to be published in June, sees a fundamental societal shift under way, taking form in the emergence of a new life stage and a new stage of work.

"We're right in the middle of an enormous transformation from an ethic that was focused on leisure to one that is focused on work," he says. "The old dream was the freedom from work – the liberation from labor. The new dream is freedom to work, on new terms."

Yet some workplace specialists see a contradiction in hiring trends.

"There definitely is a talent crunch going on, and companies are struggling to find people with the right skills," says Melanie Holmes, a vice president of Manpower Inc. "But a huge population is being ignored when it comes to a recruiting strategy." Only 18 percent of companies responding to a Manpower survey have a strategy for recruiting older workers. The need for deliberate efforts is evident to Burger. Noting that he has observed many people's careers at this stage, he says, "They really start feeling the pressure to be pushed aside to let younger people rise within the corporation. With our youth-oriented society, lots of times we focus on a person's activity level rather than their thought process, which you tend to get with the more mature employee."

At Callaway Partners, cofounder Tony Rich cites the benefits of hiring those over 50. In addition to their broad experience, he says, "The work ethic they bring is just incredible. They come from a generation that grew up working hard and doing whatever it takes."

## A chance to rejuvenate career

Employees benefit, too, Mr. Rich says. "The types of assignments we offer allow them to rejuvenate their careers. There exist a lot of new learning opportunities for these folks."

What makes businesses age-friendly?

"Employers make sure that in their hiring practices they treat people who are beyond 50 as they would treat anybody," says Patrick Rafter of RetirementJobs.com. They offer part-time, seasonal, and contract jobs, and they allow healthcare benefits for part-time employees.

In addition, they realize that some people "want to do something different with the company, and want new challenges," says William Byham, author of "70: The New 50."

Employers also need to understand how older and younger workers "can support each other and come together for mutual benefit," says Mr. Freedman. "And they need to understand that older people may be extremely innovative."

Connie Lennick, a human resources director at Staples, the office-products chain, characterizes an age-friendly workplace as "a respectful environment, dynamic and engaging."

Last year, Staples began reaching out to attract workers 50 and above. Research shows that these employees are often more interested in customer interaction and enjoy it more than younger workers do, says Ms. Lennick. Having a higher percentage of older workers correlates strongly to higher customer satisfaction.

"We get a lot of great comments from our customers, saying they're getting great customer service," she says.

Some of that attentive service comes from Carol Demirdjian, who has worked in the copy center at a Staples store in Brighton, Mass., for seven years.

"I love the customers," says Ms. Demirdjian, who is in her early 60s. "I also love the challenge of learning new things. In the beginning, all we did was run a few copies from a copy machine. Now it's gotten a lot more involved. We have four or five bindings, and we copy digitally from a computer."

Next month, Staples will implement a program to help managers understand the differences between generations.

Other initiatives to encourage age-friendly workplaces include AARP's annual list of the Best Employers for Workers Over 50. In addition, RetirementJobs.com has just launched a program identifying companies whose policies and practices provide meaningful employment, opportunities for development, and competitive pay and benefits. Those already certified as "age-friendly" include Marriott, Staples, H&R Block, and REI.

## Companies adjust retirement plans

Some firms may have to alter their retirement plans so workers who stay on or return can do so without losing benefits, says Wally Bock, a consultant on leadership.

Many employers are concerned about roadblocks involving cost and productivity, says Ms. Holmes of Manpower.

"There is a perception that the older worker costs more," she says. "AARP research found that older workers do use more healthcare than younger workers, but that's a small part of total labor costs. The biggest cost is salary, which is usually based on performance, not age."

In addition, Holmes says, "There are stereotypes that we're resistant to change and that we need more training. Employers are afraid that people haven't kept up with the changes. There's an education that has to take place to make sure companies understand the great benefit and great positive impact older workers can have. They show up on time, they get the work done, and they're emotionally mature. Those far outweigh the marginal extra costs older workers might bring."

Mature workers have responsibilities, too, Holmes says. "We can't just point fingers at the employers. If we don't keep up with technology and the skills demanded by employers, they're not going to hire us. If we're currently employed, we need to seek training and develop opportunities so we can keep up with the changing world of work. If we're not employed, go to a community college."

Stefanie Smith, who heads an executive coaching firm in New York, tells about once having a woman over 50 assigned to work with her. Despite initial assumptions by some people that the woman "might not be up to snuff," Ms. Smith says, "It turned out that she had incredible experience, talent, and skills. She just lacked computer skills." Smith arranged for private training. "Then I had an assistant who was so good the CEO often 'borrowed' her from me."

"People stay fit longer in life," says Laura Stiller Rikleen, a Boston lawyer and executive director of the Bowditch Institute for Women's Success. "Life experiences are making them more valuable. The whole idea of forced retirement or prejudice against hiring someone 50 or older is not very sound, because of the value, wisdom, and experience members of the older workforce can bring."

Demirdjian agrees, saying, "Most of the people my age who are working don't want to leave at 66. They just want to keep working as long as they can."

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