

# HOW LONGEVITY IS SHAPING THE WORKFORCE OF THE FUTURE

*Jo Ann Jenkins*

When we think of the really big or “macro” issues that affect our world—like “climate change,” for example—a lot of the debate often centers around whether it really exists, or about how it is defined, or how various people believe it will or will not impact the world. But “population aging” is different. There are no aging “deniers,” or even skeptics. In a world where consensus on any issue is increasingly rare, there exists sweeping consensus on the simple, but powerful truth that the world is aging—fast and just about everywhere.

Our ability to live longer, healthier, more productive lives is one of mankind’s greatest accomplishments. We’ve added more years to average life expectancy since 1900 than in all of human history up to that time—combined. Consider these facts:

- Here in the United States, 10,000 people a day are turning 65—a trend that will continue for the next 10 years.
- Over the next two decades, the number of people age 65 and older will nearly double to more than 72 million—or one in five Americans. And most 65-year-olds today will live into their 90s.
- The fastest growing age group is people 85+; the second fastest is people 100+—and the majority are women.

And this isn’t happening just in the United States. The World Health Organization reported that life expectancy worldwide has increased by 5 years in less than two decades—the fastest rise since the 1960s.

Today, Japan is the only country in the world where those aged 60 and over comprise 30 percent or more of the population. By 2050, 62 countries—including China—will

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## *Global aging is about much more than demographics.*

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reach that milestone. Next year, people aged 60 and older will outnumber children age 5 and under for the first time in history. Demographers predict that in countries that are aging well, more than half of the children born today will live to 100—and some researchers believe that the first person who will ever live to 150 is alive today.

Think of it another way: Picture a 10-year-old child—maybe it's your son or daughter, or a grandchild, a sibling, a niece or a nephew, or a neighbor—that 10-year-old today has a 50 percent chance of living to 104. And the older he or she gets, the odds continue to rise.

### **Disrupting Aging**

Global aging is about much more than demographics. Yes, we are living longer and in better health, but it's much more than that: we haven't just added more years to the end of life, we've extended middle age. In essence, we've created a new life stage that has opened up a whole new world of possibilities for how we live and age. And we're just beginning to understand the full range and depth of those possibilities.

The traditional view of aging is that getting older is something to fear or dread ... that it is a period of decline filled with only challenges—a time for people to withdraw from life ... that older people are burdens on their families and society as well.

I wrote a book, *Disrupt Aging: A Bold New Path to Living Your Best Life at Every Age*, because I believe there is a bigger conversation to be had—focused not on just the historic burdens, but on the potential historic

benefits of living longer. Actually, *Disrupt Aging* is not really about aging—it's about living. And, make no mistake about it people are living and aging differently (and better) today than they did a generation, or even 5 or 10 years ago. Being 50 or 60 or 70-plus today is a very different experience than it was for previous generations. We're seeing people challenging outdated stereotypes and attitudes about aging and creating a new mind-set—a new way of thinking about solutions to help them live better as they age.

More and more, people are embracing age as something to look forward to; not something to fear. They see it as a period of continued growth instead of steady decline. They recognize the opportunities, not just the challenges; and, perhaps most importantly, we're beginning to see older people as contributors to society, not burdens. So, instead of seeing just dependent retirees, we're beginning to see a new type of experienced, accomplished workforce. Instead of seeing expensive costs, we're witnessing an exploding consumer market that is bolstering our economy. And, instead of seeing a growing pool of dependents, we're seeing the growth of intergenerational communities with new and different strengths.

Advances in research and technology are driving innovation in virtually every field that affects our ability to live well as we age. Science is making longer lives possible, and we're just now figuring out what we're going to do with them.

At the same time, we're also beginning to recognize that many of the products and services that support us as we age were designed for a 20th century lifestyle and don't adequately support the way we live today, nor do they reflect the advances in technology that allow us to live better as we grow older. And as a result, we're experiencing an explosion in the design and development of innovative new products and services that empower people to choose how they live as they age.

### **Longevity and Work**

All of this is having a disruptive influence in the workplace. With people living and working longer,

we're beginning to see the emergence of the five-generation workforce, driven largely by

1. More people living longer and in generally better health;
2. More nonphysically demanding jobs;
3. The need to continue earning—not just to survive, but to thrive; and
4. The desire to keep contributing to society, be engaged and make a difference.

As we think about the workforce of the future, we have to understand that older people today are focused on *living*, not just on *aging*—not just on what they need, but also on what they want. They no longer live to work—they work to live.

They're no longer planning for 10–15 years of traditional retirement, they're looking ahead to three, four, or more decades of engaging and rewarding life. Their goal is not just the absence of financial hardship; it's having the means to accomplish their life goals and purpose. It's not just about surviving their later years but thriving and being able to afford to live the life they want to live.

For many people, that also means continuing to work. A key part of the retirement model that most of us have grown up with is freedom *from* work. Today, a key part of extended middle age is the freedom *to* work. More and more, people want to keep working past traditional retirement age because they want to continue to contribute to society and find meaning in their own lives—and work does that for them.

For many employers, adapting to the five-generation workplace is a challenge, and they are seeking new ways to manage their intergenerational workforces effectively.

## Combating Ageism in the Workplace

One of the biggest challenges we face in shaping the workforce of the future is ageism. In 2017, we teamed with FP Analytics to release the AARP Aging Readiness and Competitiveness Report (the ARC

Report). We examined the preparedness levels of 12 large nations (Canada, USA, Mexico, Brazil, South Africa, the United Kingdom, Germany, Turkey, Israel, China, Korea, and Japan) in addressing the profound challenges their societies and economies face as their number of people aged 60 and over more than doubles over the next generation. Together, these countries represent 61 percent of the global GDP and nearly half of the world's population of people ages 65 and older.

One of the findings is that ageism and misperceptions of older adults among employers is the primary barrier faced by older people to remain in or reenter the workforce. It is prevalent across both high-income and middle-income countries.

We need to challenge these outdated stereotypes and misperceptions and create a new mind-set around growing older that recognizes the value and potential contributions of an aging population toward our broader economic and societal objectives. Older employees not only address their need for financial stability and continued engagement; they also they add economic and social value to all aspects of society and are a major asset to employers.

Combating ageism also means changing the outdated perception of older people as technophobes. AARP's latest research on technology adoption among people 50 and over shows 70% own a smartphone—they're big on social media—and they're texting.

One of the most difficult aspects of fighting ageism is recognizing and changing hidden biases that result in age discrimination in the workplace. These often show up in indirect ways. For example, some online job-search sites and applications require applicants to include dates of birth or graduation dates in fields that cannot be left blank. Or, they use drop-down boxes that only go back to, say, the 1980s—excluding older applicants whose relevant experience predates the earliest cutoff date. And some job postings say no one with *more than* 10 years of experience should apply.

One of the most difficult forms of age discrimination to detect—and it's often inadvertent—occurs in

the creation of algorithms. These biases are hard to spot because they're embedded in the algorithm. Increasingly, the information we receive and the decisions we make are shaped by algorithms created by a community of engineers and data scientists whose views or assumptions about aging can get built into the algorithms they create.

And, because algorithms are built to scale, they have the potential to accelerate and possibly surpass all other factors of discrimination. At AARP, we're just beginning to explore this new frontier of combatting ageism to discover why, when, and how algorithms reflect age biases in order to help these engineers and data scientists create more inclusive algorithms.

## Leading a Five-Generation Workforce

So, what can we do as leaders to get the most out of a workforce that may consist of up to five generations of workers—but most certainly has a larger proportion of older workers? Let me share some of the strategies we've learned and implemented at AARP.

Build on the strengths each generation brings to the workplace. Each generation—including older, experienced workers—has different ways of working and putting their skills to use. Mentoring and reverse mentoring boosts morale and productivity. Older workers bring institutional knowledge, perspective, social maturity, stability, and pass on critical knowledge and relationships to younger workers. Younger workers bring a collaborative mind-set and help older workers

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become more digitally literate. At AARP, for example, we developed a program called Mentor Up where younger employees mentor older employees on the use of new technologies.

Establish a process for knowledge transfer between generations. As older workers leave the workforce, they often take a lot of knowledge with them that is lost to the organization. But by putting processes in place to capture that knowledge, employers can avoid the brain drain that occurs when older workers retire.

Elicit experienced workers to solidify the organizational culture. Experienced workers know the norms and values of the organization and are able to pass them along to new hires.

Recognize that different generations respond to different incentives. For example, experienced workers may not be as interested in money or promotions as they are in flexibility, opportunities to contribute to the organization in different ways, and other benefits tailored to meet their needs. For example, at AARP we offer employees

- Flexible scheduling
- A phased-retirement program
- Caregiving leave—in addition to sick leave and vacation
- Time off to volunteer in their community through our Community Builders Program
- Training programs, and
- An Employee Assistance program.

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*Different generations respond to different incentives.*

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Find ways to expand workplace opportunities and work to identify and fight to remove any barriers that prevent older workers from keeping or finding employment. Equip older workers with the information, tools, and skills necessary to remain in the workforce for as long as they want or need to continue working.

In 2018, we issued a second ARC Report focusing on 10 smaller economies around the world that are leaders in responding to demographic change (Costa Rica, Chile, Norway, The Netherlands, Lebanon, Mauritius, Singapore, Taiwan, Australia, and New Zealand). We found that these countries—all of which have less than 25 million people—are finding innovative workforce solutions to address the realities of aging on a more systemic level.

- Australia, for example, is tackling ageism in the workplace systematically, offering a model for others to follow. Aging-related policy and social innovation in Australia are characterized by strong grassroots and state-level engagement, as well as a person-centered approach supported by a well-developed network of community organizations and nongovernmental organizations. In 2015, the government released the first report on the National Prevalence Survey of Age Discrimination in the Workplace. The report quantified the prevalence of workplace age discrimination of people age 50 and older and identified its nature and impact. The government is using the survey results as the benchmark against which to judge the effectiveness of antiageism programs.
- Norway has focused on building supportive and inclusive workforces with steps that include removing financial disincentives in the pension system, introducing a flexible retirement scheme, and promoting inclusive working environments. These combined efforts have contributed to a steady increase in older adults' participation in the workforce. Norway is now focusing on strengthening the employability of older workers and eliminating age discrimination. As a result of these efforts, older workers there report higher levels of enthusiasm than the general working population.

- The Netherlands, Norway, Singapore, and Taiwan have all included aging-related technology in their national competitiveness strategies.

## An Age-Diverse Workforce Is a Strength

We've learned at AARP that an age-diverse workforce is a strength. It provides a stronger pipeline of talent, protects business continuity, and taps into new resources to address labor shortages. It also retains organizational knowledge across generations, preventing brain drain, and keeping organizations competitive.

I would be remiss if didn't also point out that we can't shape the workforce of the future without recognizing the significant economic impact of people 50+ as consumers. In the United States, the 111 million people 50 and over comprise a Longevity Economy that accounts for over \$7.6 trillion in annual economic activity. By 2032 that number is expected to rise to over \$13.5 trillion. This Longevity Economy is now larger than that of any country except the United States and China.

But, just as myths and misperceptions about older workers hinder employers' efforts to retain, hire, and manage an age-diverse workforce, the myths and misperceptions about older consumers also hinder companies' ability to effectively market to and provide products and services to this growing and increasingly influential market. This ties in directly with the contributions of older workers in the workforce. After all, how can you reach and serve this market effectively if you don't have at least some people like them—who understand their wants, needs, and lifestyles—in your workforce?

There is a role for everyone in shaping the workforce of the future—what I call the 3Ps:

- Personal—Individuals have a responsibility to keep themselves employable.
- Private—Employers have a responsibility to provide opportunities for older workers to remain on the job, to learn and to grow, to not limit recruiting

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*The five-generation workforce is an emerging reality we cannot ignore.*

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only to younger workers, and to implement policies and procedures that are fair and address the needs of all employees, regardless of age.

- Public—Governments at all levels need to enforce policies against age discrimination and adopt age-inclusive policies. They also need to look at policies around unemployment, and job retraining to ensure that older workers who lose their jobs get the skills and help they need to find new ones.

## Conclusion

Increased longevity is shaping the workforce of the future. The five-generation workforce is an emerging reality we cannot ignore. We can't change the demographic trends, but we can change how we respond to them. By embracing the five-generation workforce, we can turn these disruptive demographics into productive possibilities for employers and employees alike.



*Jo Ann Jenkins as chief executive officer of AARP leads the world's largest nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization, serving 38 million members and their families. Her best-selling book, *Disrupt Aging: A Bold New Path to Living Your Best Life at Every Age*, has become a signature rallying cry for revolutionizing society's views on aging by driving a new social consciousness and sparking innovative solutions for all generations. She is recognized as a visionary and global thought leader and a catalyst for breakthrough results who fosters positive relationships. She was recently named by *Fortune* magazine as one of the World's 50 Greatest Leaders.*