

The Older Worker:  
*Tapping the Assets of Experience*

by  
Barry Dym, Ph.D.,  
Michael Sales, Ed.D.,  
and  
Elaine Millam, M.A.

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**T**here's a tempest brewing in the American workplace. The graying of the vast baby boomer generation, cultural misconceptions about aging, and an impoverished sense of how to improve the situation have created the prospect of a head-on collision between a group of people who want to work and organizations that have no satisfying place for them. Unless we act wisely now, these conditions will do serious damage to productivity and organizational effectiveness.

### **Boomer Demographics Collide with Workplace Practices**

Most businesses are unprepared for the flood of baby boomers who have entered their 40s and 50s, and equally important, for the shortage of skilled workers and managers that will follow them. In a 1998 AARP study of American corporations, 82 percent of respondents said they had taken no steps to prepare for a worker shortage. According to the US Census, the 76 million children born between 1946 and 1964 are now turning 50 at the rate of one person every eight seconds. The boomers now comprise 52 percent of the working population. Because of their sheer numbers, the average employee age is rapidly rising. Next year, in 2000, it is estimated to be 40. The workforce could lose substantial numbers of experienced workers from all walks of life as boomers begin reaching fifty-five in 2001 and start to retire. Since there were only 43 million births from 1965 to 1976, the exiting boomers will likely create a shortage of skilled people in the workforce.

Most boomers have neither the inclination nor, in their minds, the financial means for early retirement. According to a recent study, 80 percent of those born between 1948 and 1965 expect to work past age 65. Compare that with the roughly 10 percent of the over-65 generation who held jobs last year. And the declining value of Social Security and pensions lends concrete fuel to the boomers anxious decision to keep on working. The U. S. Social Security Administration estimates that only 2 percent of the population will be financially self-sufficient when it retires, making work a necessity for most. Also, Fortune magazine stated that Social Security will be paying out more than it brings in by 2013, and will be out of money by 2030 making employment mandatory for a large number of people.

Over the last couple of decades, business has often given up on older workers, letting them drift into boredom, marginalization, and other unproductive modes. In spite of legal efforts to the contrary (culminating in the Age Discrimination and Employment Act), to counter high salaries, medical costs, declining productivity, clogging of career pipelines, and morale problems created by their graying workforce, businesses are inclined to let as many older workers go as possible.<sup>1</sup> Training opportunities are frequently unavailable to older workers. In a 1993 study by Barth, McNaught and Rizzi, 34 percent of managers interviewed admitted that they spent little money training older workers as opposed to 21 percent who spent little money on workers under 35. Another study by Hall and Mirvis (1993) concluded that resources are being put into young workers while older workers do not have access to such opportunities.

The departures have taken place under the aegis of general downsizing and extensive buyouts. But the coffers for buyouts appear to be drying up and the threat of litigation if downsizing emphasizes older workers has begun to end the efficacy of this approach to older workers.

Management practices such as motivational pep talks, training in the use of new technologies and threat haven't worked. Incentive systems that reward seniority instead of performance, unchallenged cultural assumptions about declining mental abilities, career paths and programs that end their useful life at 40, have helped create self-fulfilling prophecies of decline. Many older workers in high tech firms, newspapers and insurance feel like dead wood and 'has beens. With time, they come to believe and then

to act out these scenarios of decline. But they must work: there are mortgages to pay, children in college, and many "quit and go to work" with a doggedness and a defensiveness towards those who say they want to improve their lot.

As one worker put it:

I've got kids in college and a lot of other debts. I feel like I'm working all the time and I'm sure not willing to take a lot of chances at this point in my career.

But this workplace crisis also presents exciting opportunities, not only for older but for all workers. Older workers, for example, want more flexibility in how and when they work and believe they are both skilled and mature enough to make flexible work arrangements productive for corporations. Much of the leading edge of career development theory and practice similarly leads towards unpacking the cluster of assumptions about what constitutes effective work; there are good reasons to think that flexible work arrangements for older workers can help define and lead this movement.

There is every reason in the world to develop programs to retain, revitalize, and retrain the most skilled, savvy workers in any workforce especially since the revitalization does not act as a drag on corporate progress but flows within the currents of the future.

### **The Mismeasure of Age**

Despite the widespread practice of requiring workers to retire at age 65, there is great potential in the aging workforce. Older workers frequently have a level of experience, business acumen and personal maturity that makes for conscientious effort, excellent service, and better decision making. Many opportunities to mobilize the productivity of mature employees are overlooked because of a pervasive set of myths that stop corporations from tapping into this potential.

Before continuing, however, let us offer one caveat. There are those who never performed effectively; we do not expect their transformation at 50 or 60. And there are those who consistently reinvent and reinvigorate themselves. They do not need organizations to attend to them, and they are also not part of our conversation.

Now let's identify some commonly held myths and compare them to realities.

### **Older Workers: Myths and Realities**

	<i>Myth</i>	<i>Reality</i>
As people age...	they grow less capable	<i>more is gained than lost</i>
Corporations...	save by getting rid of older workers	<i>gain by retaining, redeploying, retraining and revitalizing</i>
Older people...	don't want to work	<i>want to work differently</i>
Mature workers...	cost more because of higher absenteeism and accidents	<i>have better attendance and accident records than younger workers</i>

**Myth 1: As people age, they grow much less capable.**

**Reality: More is gained than lost.**

People commonly joke about their lapses in memory by saying that they have "early Alzheimer's" or that they have "creaky old bones", but it's no laughing matter when employers start to marginalize older workers because they are convinced that the post-50 crowd can't get the job done.

Research is beginning to demonstrate that mature workers are much more capable of all sorts of exertion than is commonly believed. For example, Healthy People 2000 found that 84 percent of Americans over 45 (including 78 percent of those between 69 and 74) indicated that they were not limited for health reasons in the activities they could perform. Those who work are the healthiest of all.

Another study tells us that workers between 55 and 65 are as healthy as those between 45 and 55. They don't get sick any more often than younger workers. They report to work as reliably and they perform virtually all but the most demanding physical tasks with comparable ability.

What about the idea that people slow down mentally? Longitudinal studies show that, unless a person has suffered a serious health problem such as a stroke or head injury, most of us sustain our intellectual functioning well into our 70s and beyond.

Additionally, phenomenal advances in medical and genetic technology are not only fostering a longevity that would have been almost unimaginable 30 years ago, but they are also promise to enhance the quality of life of many people who would have been forced into full retirement even a decade ago. Taking the desire to work and the ability to work together, many people well past 65 are more than completely qualified for continued employment of all sorts.

However, direct comparisons with younger people may be beside the point. Measuring older workers only by the standards of youth inevitably favors youth. The flaw in this form of measurement was dramatically pointed out by feminist researcher Carol Gilligan<sup>2</sup> when she challenged theories of human development. She contended that theories produced by Freud, Erikson, and Kohlberg, the gurus of developmental psychology, were not theories of human development at all. They were theories of male development. Men are different than women and mature differently. The ideal man is not the ideal woman.

Likewise, in the workplace, older people are generally measured by standards that make them look less adequate primarily by emphasizing mental quickness not depth and physical stamina. This bias appears to be reflected in the career development literature which falls off a cliff at about the age 40, as though people and their careers could not develop further, and all that is left for older workers is to continue on a plateau or decline

We need a theory that measures the capabilities and preferences of older people on the basis of their distinctive qualities, viewing them as different but hardly less than youth. Shouldn't measures include their experience, their personal and political savvy, their wisdom? What about their capacity to take the long view, to keep small setbacks and slights in perspective? What about their ability and inclination to nurture younger workers, so long as they aren't placed in positions to directly compete with their youthful colleagues? Or to take care in general? Isn't this inclination essential in a service-oriented economy that says that the customer is always right? What about many other capacities and mental attitudes we have not yet associated with corporate productivity?

**Myth 2: Corporations save money by getting rid of older workers.*****Much is lost this way; much gained by retaining, redeploying, retraining, and revitalizing.***

Demographics lend weight and urgency to this reality. In many, if not most, organizations that have more than a decade of history, older workers are often people who have learned how to get the job done. They know the customers. They know the suppliers. They know the internal operating systems. They know the influence networks. They know the strengths and weaknesses of the product line. They know the strategy. In short, they are repositories of "system knowledge". In an era where knowledge management is a buzzword in every MBA program, the older worker is a knowledge holder and a wisdom maker. In many instances, getting rid of older workers guarantees the loss of insight and a short cut to unproductive chaos. Institutional memory, how to move issues and material through a system, where to find resources, what the obstacles to success are--all of this can be lost only to be replaced by periods of extreme confusion. We know of many cases where this has happened. Letting older workers can be like throwing out your seed corn.

Here's an example derived from conversations with newspaper executives at the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Boston Globe*. In many news organizations, editors routinely favor younger reporters over more senior reporters, who are said to "lose their legs at 40," even when and this preference leads to a wasteful and demoralizing pattern. The more editors refer to younger reporters, the more older reporters drift into unproductive marginality or angry opposition. This behavior further confirms the editors' belief that the older reporters are over the hill. They refer even less. Thus a self fulfilling prophesy of angry, ineffectual older reporters and arrogant, misguided young editors grows. The caricatures seem so real that some editors refer stories to 23 year old reporters when a 55 year old, who has covered the field for 30 years, and may even be a Pulitzer Prize winner, is 10 feet away.<sup>3</sup> And the editor never even suggests that the younger person be oriented by the older. This is a waste of knowledge and talent.

Some of the findings from the domain of "small world" research are relevant here. Network analysis demonstrates that those with the widest exposure to differing types of assignments and situations are those who have the largest number of connections to other people. In other words, they are "connected" and they can connect their organizations into their web of relationships. This sort of "informal" organization can never be fully replicated. Losing it is organizationally expensive in every sense of the word. How much wiser organizations would be to take action that would keep the older worker, and all of his or her insight and skill, involved in work, maybe as a participant in a new sort of way, but still immersed in the systems that they know so thoroughly.

Mitre Corporation is an example of an organization which seems to appreciate the nodal position of seasoned workers. The company appreciates the unique ability of employees who have watched a technology develop over time to serve the evolving interest of long term customers.

On a related note, society at large has a huge stake in debunking this myth of the financial gains to be had from terminating the employment of older workers. As we keep reading in the press, there simply aren't enough workers coming up in the decades ahead to pay for the Baby Boomers draw down of Social Security. That key economic, let alone emotional, bulwark threatens to collapse unless an innovative solution can be found to this unsettling demographic situation. Clearly, postponing retirement in a way that also increases general productivity is an approach where everybody wins. In a few paragraphs we'll look at companies that are benefiting from this strategy.

**Myth 3: Older people don't want to work**

***They want to work differently, and all the trends in careers say that this is not only possible but advantageous to corporations.***

A 1992 Harris Poll found that 5.4 million retired people were willing and able to work but unable to find an appropriate job. A research review of 185 research papers found that older people may actually have higher motivation and job satisfaction than younger workers. Nevertheless, a 1995 AARP study of managers tended to rate older workers as weak on flexibility, acceptance of new technology, and the ability to learn new skills.

True, many in the post-50 age bracket may no longer want to work the same job that they have been working and they may not want to work as many hours, but there are many roles that would very much like to take on. Students of the life cycle like Professor Dan Levinson, an eminent authority in the field of adult psychological development, report that the 20s, 30s and 40s are focused on needs such as acting with autonomy, pursuing ambitions and demonstrating competence. The 50s, 60s and 70s reflect a different set of needs involving the desire to appreciate one's achievements, accept one's limitations, and leave one's mark on a family and community. To get the best out of mature workers, organizations need a human resource strategy that responds to their developmental conditions and needs.

**Myth 4: Older workers cost a company more because of higher absenteeism and accidents.**

***Reality: Research has shown that the accident and attendance records of older workers are better than those of younger workers. Older workers have proven themselves to be more dependable and responsible, and tend to shift from job to job far less than their younger counterparts.***

**A New Conception of Corporate Structure**

Within the traditional corporate structure, it is hard to think of what to do with older workers. Within its pyramidal form, each employee climbs a ladder, peaks, plateaus, then declines. At whatever point, employees are thought to decline, they present problems. Among journalists, dentists, and nurses, for example, that point is around 40. What to do with these declining professionals for the next 25 years.

Management theorist, Charles Handy's conception of the new corporation opens the way to rethinking the place of older workers, with their particular skills and developmental needs. Handy's framework identifies three types of organizational workers:

1. A core group of managers and skilled workers, who lead the organization and provide its stability and continuity. Without them the organization has no strategy or productive capability. Here one tends to find the very ambitious, the people whose whole lives are wrapped up in the organization and the very well paid.
2. Key external resources: individuals and organizations who relate to the organization on a contractual basis. For example, they might be providing outsourced accounting, legal, or accounting services.
3. A project-based employee pool. They are loosely connected to the organization on a job-by-job basis, allowing the organization to expand, contract, and change shape in other ways, according to the demands of the market and technology.

Both the second and third types of employment afford corporations much increased flexibility and cost

savings, while equally flexing the concept of careers for older workers" as well as young parents, children of aging parents and others.

It is easy to imagine some older workers in each of these three groups. The traditional core is generally filled with the most skilled, powerful older managers. Many of those who "retire" often return to their long-time employees as regular "consultants," and contractors, which represent the second category, and which provides older workers with greater control over their time. The project-based employee pool provides even greater control for both employees, who, later in their career, wish to work intensely, then take vacations, or to work from their home offices instead of being burdened by the demands of "face time".

### **Crisis and Opportunity: The Lessons of Best Practices**

It is in everyone's interest--corporate, governmental, and individual--to determine how to restructure the workplace to increase productivity and satisfaction for mature workers. A few organizations have begun this process. Many private sector companies and other organizations are already taking advantage of the tremendous talent and experience of aging workers. In this section, we'll set forward a few examples.

Flexibility is one of the keys to helping older workers stay motivated and productive. According to Kathy Fyock, author of *Unretirement*, for example, we are starting to hear more about sabbaticals. Organizations are realizing that as people work longer, they need time to recharge their batteries, to retool or revitalize their skills before they come back to work. Several companies are even encouraging interspersed periods of education and leisure throughout their employees' work lives.

Some companies are looking to their own retirees as a source of temporary help. Through its Retiree Job Bank, for example, Travelers Group, a large insurance company, allows retired employees to work up to 960 hours each year without cutting their pension checks. The program saves the company about \$1.5 million each year in agency fees. To Travelers this makes business sense because its retirees are reliable and experienced workers. IBM has followed suit by re-hiring many of the highly skilled and knowledgeable people who were eliminated in the early 90s restructuring efforts. The re-hired retirees are considered an elite corps of managers, operating a supplemental workforce to address specific business problems.

IBM is also in the process of designing a mentoring system in which savvy retirees are paired with newly hired college graduates. The mentors provide a general orientation for the young workers including an awareness of IBM's history and culture, as well as tips about how to succeed.

Polaroid has developed a flexible work alternative to assist senior employees make decisions about retirement and to help them ease into the process. One option they offer is the rehearsal retirement that allows employees to take a leave of absence for three to six months. They are entitled to come back to the same job, no questions asked, says Mike Muther, a former senior human resource administrator at the company who observed the effects of the program. Another option is 'tapering off,' which permits employees to reduce their work hours to as little as 20 hours a week. The programs are more than just altruistic. The bottom-line result is augmented morale and productivity, says Muther.

A recent study of 500 companies of all sizes by Watson Wyatt found eight percent offering phased retirement. In that arrangement, retirement-age employees continue in their old jobs but with scaled down hours, typically 20 to 29 hours per week. A variation on phased retirement is the so-called boomerang job, in which an employee retires for a few months or a year, then bounces back to the

company with limited hours. Monsanto Company's Retiree Resource Corps is typical. Participants have no set schedule, but are called as needed, with a central database tracking their skills and hours. Monsanto figures boomerangers cost 12-15 percent less than temporary workers and the primary benefit is their Monsanto experience. They know what needs to be done, says John Brugger, the program's business leader.

Finally, some organizations, such as Honeywell, American Express, and 3M, have developed internal task forces that listen to diverse employee groups to ascertain their needs and concerns. Honeywell's Older Worker League (OWL), furnishes a perspective for management that is valuable in redesigning programs, policies, and procedures with all employee groups in mind.

### **Focusing Human Resources Policies on the Older Worker**

These examples indicate the range of corporate initiatives designed to enhance the contribution of older workers to organizational productivity. But, there is much more that could be done to integrate a focus on older workers with some of the most insightful human resource policies.

For example, research from the Saratoga Institute lays out eight fundamental areas where an organization should focus to achieve long-term health. They are:

- ◆ values,
- ◆ commitment,
- ◆ culture,
- ◆ communication,
- ◆ partnering,
- ◆ collaboration,
- ◆ innovation and risk, and
- ◆ competitive passion.

Research reported in *Built to Last, In Search of Excellence* and other key management literature confirm the Saratoga findings. They all agree it is important to thoughtfully examine the core beliefs, functions and operations at the heart of a business first. Any redirection should be made to these key areas before launching new programs. When the time is right to initiate new actions and policies, they should fit into the organization's culture and complement positive management practices embedded in the company's operation.

Following are some selected best practices used by companies chosen as *Fortune Magazine's* 100 Best companies to Work For in America. *We have refashioned these policies slightly to show how they could be focused on the needs and wants of older workers to combat the barriers they are facing.* The additional case studies in this section illustrate the difference these policy revisions can make.

### ***Practice I: Training and Development***

For many years, it has been well documented that companies that achieve long-term success take training and development very seriously. GE, for example, spends \$1 billion per year in leadership training programs. Training is not considered an add-on, but a sound part of the business strategy offered with the expectation of a positive return. Funds spent on training are considered serious investments.

*In dealing with older workers, Training and Development means:*

- ◆ Making sure training opportunities are consistently available to older workers, offering opportunities to excel in subjects of their choice as long as they have an interest.
- ◆ Resisting any stereotypes about what older workers can and can't learn, especially regarding new technology such as computer literacy.
- ◆ Management training to make use of experience and know-how built over a long career

### ***Practice II: Career Development***

As the population ages and there are less high-level jobs to compete for, there has been an increased interest in giving employees alternative ways to refresh their careers. Current research about what employees value most cites the three top items as 1) being true to yourself/not selling out, 2) feeling in control of your life, and 3) making enough money to ensure comfort.

#### *In dealing with older workers, Career Development means:*

- ◆ Offering paid and unpaid sabbaticals to give employees the opportunity to learn new skills, to translate home-based skills into business-based skills, or simply to devise a refreshing adventure of their own making.
- ◆ Encouraging and facilitating older workers in sharing their wisdom as mentors and other roles that make use of their knowledge and experience.
- ◆ Making sample retirements available where individuals can try out retirement for a few months and return to their job with no questions asked if they want to.
- ◆ Redesigning jobs to focus on particular areas of interest, passion or expertise as a person gets older.

### ***Practice III: 9 to 5 No More***

Of all the options suggested for older workers, the interest and need for flexible working arrangements is probably the most popular. Eight-four percent of the older workers interviewed in a Harris Poll said they would take a part-time job for two to three days a week throughout the year. Another 68 percent mentioned that they would do seasonal work while 37 percent said they would be willing to work weekends. Such responses challenge the attitude that older people are less flexible. Other research has shown that older people like flexible work for several reasons. They can spend time with family, pursue other projects and get a better balance of leisure than they had in their full-time work. It can also give them some limited additional money, thus not endangering Social Security benefits.

#### *In dealing with the older workers, 9 to 5 No More means:*

- ◆ Offering reduced hour employment, whether it is seasonally or a few days a week.
- ◆ Making it possible to work through flextime by accommodating non-traditional hours. Older workers often do not have the scheduling constraints of younger people. Why not make use of this advantage?
- ◆ Encouraging employees to find arrangements to share jobs if an acceptable match can be found.
- ◆ Facilitating telecommuting as an option if it is more convenient for workers.

### **Practice IV: No Layoffs**

Some literature has questioned the wisdom of recent downsizing efforts, blaming it for the exodus of so many experienced workers from the workforce. Although only three of the 100 Bests have a no downsizing strategies, another 37 have informal policies on this subject, and 74 have never had significant layoffs.

*In dealing with the older worker, No Layoffs means:*

- ◆ Creating a climate where older workers know they are assured a place, thus building an atmosphere of commitment with a long-term investment of experience.

### **Practice V: Creative Staffing**

Although this practice is not mentioned in the Fortune article, having innovative ways to recruit and maintain the workforce is mentioned in other management literature that tracks persistently successful businesses. This practice goes to the heart of finding and retaining productive older workers.

*In dealing with older workers, Creative Staffing means:*

- ◆ Using innovative methods to track and keep older workers, such as job banks (see below).
- ◆ Hiring back retired workers for short-term or temporary time periods.
- ◆ Targeting older workers as a specific market and designing programs that match their lifestyle and interests.

#### **Three examples of successes illustrate the wisdom of employing older workers:**

- ◆ Travelers Group set up a job bank for its retirees at its Connecticut headquarters in 1981. The bank of over 700 employees matches 250 retirees and 150 other workers to vacancies on a weekly basis, including positions from unskilled data entry to professional. Cost comparisons found that the TravTemp program saved \$871,000 in 1989 in agency fees and sales taxes. This flexible, temporary workforce provides employees familiar with the company and with proven skills.
- ◆ Facing difficulties in recruiting employees, the Home Shopping Network office in St. Petersburg, FL targeted older workers to work part-time and take telephone orders. A 1994 program evaluation showed that the retention rate for senior employees was three times higher than the younger employees over a two-year period. Employees also successfully completed the necessary computer program, and a number moved into customer service positions needing more advanced software skills. In addition, the senior employees also exceeded expectations in talking to customers. The program's success has made the company expand the program to other locations.
- ◆ Faced with an annual turnover rate of almost 100 percent for their reservationists, Days Inn decided to target older workers as potential employees in 1986. They found that the employees easily completed the computer training in the same time period "one-half day" as other workers. Days Inn saved \$1,124 on each older worker in training and recruitment costs over younger ones because older workers stayed three years rather than one. They were also found to have superior sales performance, booking more reservations than the younger workers, although they took longer on calls.

## **The Basic Idea: Disaggregation of Work**

Using a phrase associated with Professor Lotte Balyg of MIT, a basic ingredient of almost all of these initiatives is the "disaggregation of work". Our assumptions of what constitutes "working" are largely based on a model constructed during the industrial era. According to this stereotypical view, work is:

- ◆ something that happens in a particular place (in an office or factory),
- ◆ during a certain time frame (usually 9 to 5)
- ◆ for a certain amount of time (8 hours)
- ◆ in the context of certain social relations (i.e., with a particular group of people)
- ◆ with the use of pre-identified technologies (i.e., the same technologies which are owned by and approved of by the organization)
- ◆ and focused on the same specialized function or goal

A wise approach to working with Aging Boomers (as well as the post-50 crowd already in the workplace) would "play" with each of these elements, or any combination of them. Flex time arrangements, telecommuting, intranet and Internet facilitated group work, attaching one's personal technology to an existing grid, rotating work assignments, temporary work groups, and so on are all being practiced in a wide number of organizations now. Insightful organizations are combining these sorts of tactics in an approach designed to meet the developmental needs of the burgeoning post-50 workforce.

## **Working Wisely with Older Workers**

The public at large has a real stake in the success of initiatives that keep older workers at a high level of capacity. Take the health services industry, for example. Even a **two tenths** percent rise in productivity in this field, which has a high percentage of post-50 year old workers, would result in nearly a billion dollar increase in revenues, efficiencies, and savings. This figure doesn't incorporate benefits in the form of innovation and quality initiatives of all sorts. Imagine productivity increases across the array of industries that will have hundreds of thousands of aging boomers on the payrolls. The social benefits would be extraordinary!

How can organizational decision-makers determine the relevance of progressive policies toward older workers to their own companies? How can these successful experiments be elaborated on more of a society-wide basis?

We suggest the following:

### ***1. Identify warning signs***

- ◆ if a significant portion of the older workforce seems less than optimally productive
- ◆ if there is considerable misunderstanding, miscommunication, and conflict between generations
- ◆ if there is difficulty retaining skilled workers and experienced managers,
- ◆ if these problems are contributing to a generally low morale in your corporation.

## **2. Explore individual and organizational causes of the problem by:**

- ◆ Analyzing systemic constraints on productivity and job satisfaction
- ◆ Determining which formal and informal systems, cultural values, and organization dynamics constrain and which enhance productivity and job satisfaction" for mature workers and for workers in general.

This analysis should derive from a combination of key informant interviews, conducted with a diagonal slice of the organization, focus groups, and a broad-based questionnaire.

## **3. Engage older employees in in-depth interviews regarding their situation.**

These interviews should focus neither on chronic poor performers or entrepreneurial self-starters. Rather, the interviews should focus on the middle group that can be helped by organizational improvements. Explore present and past interests, contemporary experience of being under-utilized, pressured, ignored, and marginalized, disappointments that eat away at their insides and ambitions that might be renewed. Explore the intersection of work and family, work capacity and the capacity of the immediate organizational climate to bring it out or dampen it.

## **4. Compare the present situation with the type of "best practices" we identified above**

- ◆ Align best practices from other organizations with the situation of the individual firm being studied. Also, look for "examples of excellence" within the firm itself, e.g. particular work units using methods that might be brought into service elsewhere in the company.
- ◆ Develop recommendations and organization change strategies to implement the recommended programs.

## **5. Career Counseling: changing individuals**

- ◆ Provide counseling for once-valued or still-valued older employees, in an effort to determine how to redeploy, retrain, and revitalize their careers.

## **6. Observe if the corporate culture can support these individuals changes**

- ◆ Determine if organization and individual efforts have significantly increased the productivity and job satisfaction of older workers, as well as the productivity and morale of the entire corporation.

The graphic on the next page summarizes this process.

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## **Aging Boomers: Worth the Effort**

We are all prone to think that what we see is true, not relatively true but absolutely true. Yet everyone knows that we each change according to the context we are in: home and work; friendly and unfriendly; familiar and unfamiliar; supportive and unsupportive; challenging and accepting. There is little question that older workers, like anyone else, are more or less productive in different environments. The very same people who look bored, uncommitted, or incompetent in contexts not geared to bring out the best in them can look excited, committed, and extraordinarily competent in contexts that expect, require, and facilitate the best.

There is a well-known research project conducted by Robert Rosenthal that is relevant here. It was published as *Pygmalion in the Classroom*. Two class groups of equal ability were presented to two teachers. One was told of her class that it was very special, very intelligent and talented. The other teacher was told that her class was mediocre at best. We hardly have to say what happened during the course of the year: the group from whom much was expected did wonderfully; the other did badly. Expectations exerted an effect almost eerie in its power.

So it is with older workers. Raise expectations, disaggregate working conditions, manage them according to their experience, skills, inclinations—and wisdom—and they will produce far, far more than their stereotyped brethren who parade so carelessly in the popular and management imaginations.

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## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Note: In spite of legal efforts to the contrary (culminating in the Age Discrimination and Employment Act), to counter high salaries, medical costs, declining productivity, clogging of career pipelines, and morale problems created by their graying workforce, businesses are inclined to let as many older workers go as possible

<sup>2</sup> Gilligan, C. (198?). *In a Different Voice: XXX*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Note: older reporters are over the hill. They refer even less. Thus a self-fulfilling prophecy of angry, ineffectual older reporters and arrogant, misguided young editors grows. The caricatures seem so real that some editors refer stories to 23-year-old reporters when a 55-year-old, who has covered the field for 30 years, and may even be a Pulitzer Prize winner, is 10 feet away.