



CHALLENGES FACED by OLDER JOB SEEKERS in a TECHNOLOGY DRIVEN AGE

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The immense impact of technology on our society is seen all around us. New, more advanced tools, such as smartphones, tablets, and other devices, seem to appear almost daily with a profound increase in people’s communication capabilities and access to knowledge, but with an accompanying complexity not see before. People who choose to take advantage of technology in their daily lives are at a distinct advantage over those who minimize or avoid its use. This is particularly true for people looking for new or better employment, with social media, job boards, web searches, electronic career materials, and Skype interviews quickly replacing newspaper ads, hardcopy resumes and cover letters, and face-to-face interviews.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, people aged 65+ still in the labor force reached 22.1 percent for men and 13.8 percent for women at the end of 2010 compared to 17.7 percent and 9.4 percent, respectively in 2000 (West et.al., 2014). Because the number of aging baby boomers who choose to work will continue to increase, it is important to closely examine this age group and determine the special challenges they face in finding and maintaining employment.

The Impact of Technology on Job Search Campaigns

There has been a significant transition in the way people search for new employment over the past decade, with the use of the internet gaining prominence. A recent survey released by the Pew Research Center shows that 54 percent of U.S. adults have used web-based sources to access job information with 45 percent applying online for work (Smith, 2014). It appears that the internet is taking the place of more traditional approaches, such as personal and professional networks, employment agencies, and job fairs. In addition, data show that 28 percent of Americans have used a smartphone to look for employment opportunities and approximately 66 percent of Americans access social media platforms with 35 percent using the medium to conduct employment research.

It is interesting to note that the use of technology has not been restricted to people looking for work, but also includes recruiters and employers looking to find talented employees. According to the annual Recruiter Nation Survey conducted by Jobvite in 2015, only 4% of recruiters are not using social media to some extent in their recruitment efforts (Jobvite 2015). In addition, 19% of recruiters find quality hires through use of mobile career sites with 37% of companies using these sites to support their recruitment activities. LinkedIn was the most common mobile platform cited with 87 percent of respondents indicating its use; 55 percent indicated using Facebook and 47 percent using Twitter. It is interesting to note that recruiters are also using social media

platforms to gather additional data on viable employment candidates, looking at issues such as length of average job tenure, mutual connections, and commitment to professional organizations.

With the dramatic increase in use of online resources as an important job search tool for workers and recruitment approach for employers, it is clear that comfort in using technology is critical for success. People who avoid the use of technology run the risk of being left behind and possibly delaying the achievement of new or better employment.

Challenges Faced by Older Job Seekers in a Highly Competitive Market

The job market has been very tough since the 2008–2009 great recession for all age groups. Although unemployment figures have been dropping as the economy recovers, older workers who are unemployed or underemployed face unique challenges.

In December 2014, U.S. Department of Labor Statistics (BLS) showed that overall unemployment was 5.6 percent, compared to 3.9 percent for older workers (BLS, 2015). This seems to be a positive trend for older workers. However, data from the BLS Displaced Workers Survey in 2014 show that workers age 50+ took 5.8 weeks longer to find employment than those aged 30–49 and 10.6 weeks longer than those aged 20–29 (BLS, 2014). Researchers studying the survey data suggested that older workers have greater difficulty finding employment due to employer concerns about their suitability and a mismatch of their skills with the skills required in today's jobs (Brenoff, 2015).

According to data compiled from the BLS' Current Population Survey (CPS) in March 2015, 44.6 percent of unemployed workers 55 and older continued to lack employment after 27 weeks with the level being 22.2 percent for those under 25 and 36 percent for people aged 25–54 (Kosanovich & Sherman, 2015).

The extended period of time required for older workers to find employment increases the chances of these people facing significant life crises. An analysis of relevant datasets conducted by the General Accounting Office in 2012 found that extended unemployment for older workers often leads to diminished retirement savings, loss of homes, deferred medical care, accumulated debt, and need to claim social security benefits earlier which results in lower monthly payments (GAO, 2012).

There is also evidence that a large number of older workers leave the workforce before they intended to due to lack of employment opportunities. According to data presented by the AARP Public Policy Institute earlier in 2015, displaced workers aged 65+ are more likely to leave the workforce than their younger counterparts. In 2014, 54.7 percent of workers 65+ years of age and displaced for 3+ years left the workforce, while the figure was 22.7 percent for those aged 55–64, and 12.2 percent for those aged 25–54 (AARP Public Policy Institute, 2015). It was suggested that much of this trend can be attributed to the social security and other benefits people aged 65+ receive, reducing the need to stick with job searches over an extended period of time.

With older job seekers facing what seems like an uphill battle to find employment, it would seem critical that these people have access to and embrace available technology tools and techniques

to bolster their job searches. However, the evidence is mixed whether older people are taking full advantage of technology in their everyday lives, much less job search campaigns.

Older People and Use of Technology

Over time, older workers have been stereotyped as techno-phobic or at least more likely to avoid technology than actively pursue it. This is one of numerous tags that have been used to describe older workers in general. Six others cited by researchers in their examination of age-based biases include: lack of motivation, less willing to participate in training and career development, more resistant to change, less trusting of superiors and co-workers, less healthy, and more vulnerable to work-family imbalances (Thomas, et.al, 2012). Although it can be argued that all of these stereotypes are interrelated, the focus here is on technology and, indirectly, on lack of motivation to participate in training which is tied to technology use.

A meta-analysis of the literature that included 418 empirical studies regarding the six stereotypes of older workers cited above suggested that the unwillingness to participate in training and career development was the only stereotype that showed a negative (weak) correlation. All the others showed no correlation within the reviewed literature. The authors cited several possible reasons for older people to be less interested in training and career development, including less capacity to learn new material due to memory and recall issues, less focus on achievement than younger workers, and less incentive to learn unless the material addresses a specific purpose(s)—in other words, not wanting to learn for the sake of learning. It appears that older workers' lack of commitment to professional and career development is tied to the belief that it will not provide sufficient benefit to them.

Matteo Picchio from Marche Polytechnic University, Italy, studied the effectiveness of training programs in improving the employability of older workers. His research on learning in older adults indicates that they are able to acquire new skills (Picchio, 2015). The research found training can avoid skill obsolescence and respond to the growing importance of technology-based occupations and that subsidies for training of older workers might be a tool for increasing participation in training programs.

However, Picchio also found older adults are slower, less effective, and more heterogeneous than younger people in learning new skills and that training older adults might be ineffective if it does not meet their specific learning needs. Research indicated older workers are less likely to participate in training and might, thereby, lose the opportunity to boost their employability and that firms might fear low returns from training older workers because of age-related stereotypes and shorter time to retirement. Estimates of the relations between age and productivity, age and learning, and training and employability might be biased because they are based on non-experimental studies.

A review of the literature is not necessarily consistent regarding the belief that older people avoid technology more than other age groups. Study results published in 2009 provide evidence that suggests older people do not use information technology (that requiring a microprocessor) as much as younger people, but that there are reasons for this that can be addressed (Charness & Boot, 2009). Some of these include age-related factors, such as eyesight, hearing, motor control,

anxiety, and decreased memory capacity. The authors suggest that adaptations to various technologies be considered to make them more user-friendly to older people, along with the importance of using training approaches that take into consideration age-related factors.

A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2014 reported that people aged 65+ continue to lag behind younger people in the use of technology, but to a much less degree now (Smith, 2014). In fact, more than 50 percent of people 65+ years of age now use the internet with this figure increasing by 9 percent in just one year (2013–2014). However, a sizeable percentage of older people do not use technology considered basic such as internet and cell phones. It is useful to note that older people tend to use tablets and e-book readers more than smartphones and that many older people gravitate to websites, such as Facebook, as a way to connect with family and friends. A few barriers cited by the author preventing older people from embracing new technology included physical and health issues, skepticism felt by many that technology is important to their quality of life, and difficulties in learning.

A similar survey was conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2010 looking at social media usage by adults aged 50 and older (Madden, 2010). Social networking use among older internet users nearly doubled—from 22 percent to 42 percent from 2009–2010, with almost 50 percent of online adults ages 50–64 and one-quarter of those ages 65 and older using Facebook, LinkedIn, and other social media sites. Data suggested that having high-speed internet connectivity was a significant catalyst for increased usage by people aged 65 and older. In general, the research showed that older people tended to use the internet more to connect or reconnect with friends and loved ones, as well as to assess online health-related material.

Older Worker Training Trends

Agencies looking to assist older workers in finding and retaining employment are focusing more on the need to offer targeted training and support to address age specific issues. The GAO report cited earlier found that lack of required skills, discouragement, and difficulty in completing online applications as being barriers to employment which many agencies are now trying to address.

Research conducted by at the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, AARP Public Policy Institute, found that older workers are often not knowledgeable about the skills required to find gainful employment nor the best ways to obtain those skills (Van Horn, 2015). There are a vast array of programs and training courses available to older workers. However, many do not take into account issues related to learning nor do they focus on skills most needed by employers, such as computer and other technology skills. The authors point out that a marriage of community-based, employer, government, and other sources, such as unions could be the most optimal approach for best reaching older workers.

Importance of Bridge Employment and Career Change to Older Workers

Older workers have often had long-term careers in a particular career track. However, in order to remain actively employed, it is necessary to pursue other careers similar or even much different than their original work focus. This situation is referred as bridge employment and can be a critical factor in an older worker's ability to maintain an income, remain active, and is even tied

to self-worth and self-esteem. Successfully transitioning to a bridge job or career change often requires training and the ability to learn and use certain technologies.

The American Institute for Economic Research published results in 2015 from their Older Worker Survey that addressed issues of bridge employment and career change (American Institute for Economic Research, 2015). It is interesting to note that older people unsuccessful with a career change felt more anxiety about the transition process than those who were successful. In addition, older people who did not effectively identify the skill set required to make a change and who did not have a strong foundation of support from family and colleagues tended to be more unsuccessful than those who had these advantages.

Discussion

An examination of the data related to older workers and use of technology implies that the demographic group does lag behind in the use of technological tools to look for and secure employment, although this trend is gradually changing. Older workers appear more skeptical of the benefits of training and career development and often face difficulties in accessing and learning to use web-based and other technological tools. However, the outlook is not as bleak as it may seem because there is evidence that older workers can learn to accept technology if convinced that it will result in direct benefit to them and if given the training and tools needed to be successful in using it.

There is clear evidence that the workforce will continue to age as time passes and baby boomers who choose to continue working will reach their late 60's, 70's, and even 80's. Therefore, it is imperative that efforts be made to help these people remain competitive with their younger counterparts and keep pace with the quickly evolving needs of employers. It appears that older workers will accept the need to be techno-literate if they can be convinced that it will make the difference between gainful employment and no or limited employment. Data show older people are using social media much more now, but that it is often focused on accessing friends and loved ones and performing research on issues important to them. Therefore, the issue is, in most cases, not inability to use technology, but the motivation to do so.

Stereotypes of older workers, including resistance to change, lack of motivation and trust, less healthy, and incompatibility of work and family needs, often accepted by employers, recruiters, and others do not appear to be particularly valid. Researchers have found a weak correlation between older workers and lack of interest in professional and career development, but the case has also been made that this age group needs to be convinced that it will help them before accepting it.

The literature shows that older workers often feel discriminated against during the hiring process. This suggests the need to better educate employers to the unique talents and perspectives people 55+ in age can bring to the workplace and will require a shift in assumptions, recruitment practices, and training approaches to reach this age group.

Greater efforts need to be made by agencies and training organizations that help older workers find employment to target their assistance on motivating this population and meeting their specif-

ic needs. Training needs to be geared to particular skill sets required by employers and accounting for limitations that the population faces, such as reduced memory capacity and hearing and sight impairments.

For many older workers, employment, even part-time work, can make an important difference between struggling economically and being able to maintain independence. Helping them achieve their work goals is not a convenience, but will actually contribute to a healthier, more productive society in general.

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Steven Watson has been helping clients achieve their career and employment goals since 2004 through the creation of compelling resumes and other career documents. He remains current on the rapidly evolving nature of the résumé writing and job search arenas which enables his clients to compete successfully with people having similar backgrounds and experience. He demonstrates great skill in showcasing clients' talents, experience, and attributes, critical to effectively building their confidence and generating interviews from prospective employers. He earned the PhD in Public Administration at the University of Georgia and Master of Counseling at the University of Delaware. He is also a

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