TIPS FOR A MULTI-GENERATIONAL WORKFORCE

AGEING WORKFORCE READY

AWR PROJECT

The number of older people in Australia is increasing and this is reflected in our workforce. However, ageist beliefs and behaviours are prevalent in society, and this can have a real impact on the mental health and wellbeing of older people.

We know that when people interact with others across the age span it helps to reduce ageism. Moreover, as age diversity increases in the workforce, it is imperative to encourage understanding and teamwork across those generations.

A multi-generational workforce is one that employs people from some or all age groups, from teenagers to octogenarians and beyond.

While we know there are benefits to age-diversity in the workplace, there are also challenges to making it work effectively. This fact sheet presents the business case for a multi-generational workforce along with practical tips on how to make it work.

BUILDING AGE DIVERSITY IN WORKPLACES IS A TWO-FOR-ONE DEAL: EMPLOYERS ACCESS A LARGER PORTION OF THE LABOUR MARKET AT THE SAME TIME AS SUPPORTING PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING.

BENEFITS

The key benefit of a multi-generational workforce is expanding the diversity of experience, skills, thought and values employees bring.

A multi-generational workforce, by its very nature, brings diversity in perspectives, which if harnessed well can support improved customer experience, employee engagement, and innovation. Multi-generational teams are better able to connect with a wider range of customers, which can be translated into increased business performance.

In summary, benefits of multi-generational teams include:

Customer experience

Innovation and creativity

A positive organisational culture

Improved company reputation

Reduced turnover

Employee engagement

BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

Multi-generational workforces can be hard to create as well as sustain. Ageism is too often a barrier faced by older workers during the recruitment process. and can continue to cause challenges once an older person starts work.

In addition, the diversity of experience and perspectives that contributes to organisational benefits needs to be proactively managed to promote a healthy team dynamic.

RECRUITMENT

Barriers to recruiting older workers are reduced when managers challenge ageist stereotypes, utilise an age-diverse hiring panel, use age-inclusive language in recruitment documents and focus on the specific skills required for the job.

Hiring managers should also be aware of the benefits of recruiting older workers and regularly review and enhance their hiring practices.

EMPLOYMENT

Employees of any age can be negatively impacted by ageism and discrimination, not just older workers.

Ageism is described as generalisations and practices based solely on age which are typically negative and prejudicial. Ageism at work fosters negative working environments, which is linked to increased staff turnover and lower productivity, as well as eroding wellbeing and mental health.

Despite it being illegal, ageism is unfortunately normalised in many workplaces.

Between 2018 and 2019, 61% of employment complaints fell under the Age Discrimination Act. (Australian Human Rights Commission)

While people from varied backgrounds can, and do, work well together, there are some potential pitfalls for organisations promoting age diversity.

The first of these is when team cohesion is disrupted by the formation of cliques or groups within the team. Strong team identification can reduce the likelihood of this happening by building a strong connection between team members and the role they have in achieving the team's purpose.

Ageist attitudes need to be combated directly through awareness, education, and positive role modelling by senior leaders. When the expertise and experience of older people is advantageous to a team, this benefit should be formally recognised, along with the contribution that each individual makes to its successful performance.

In addition, the policies and processes of an organisation should be examined to understand how they indirectly endorse ageist beliefs and behaviours.

" 1 IN 5 AUSTRALIANS AGED 55 YEARS OR OVER CLAIM AGE IS A MAJOR BARRIER TO FINDING OR GETTING HOURS OF PAID WORK.

AUSTRALIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

MYTHS & STEREOTYPES

Ageist stereotypes and beliefs about generational differences are often fuelled by myths, and numerous negative stereotypes exist about the generations.

It is the belief that age makes us different that can get in the way of how we work together and collaborate.

Work ethic does not differ between generations.

ZABEL ET AL., 2017

Group differences depending on age or generation alone are not supported by data.

HBR, 2019

Technology adoption among older generations was **trending up** even before COVID-19.

MOBIQUITY, 2020

All generations prefer **human to human connection** over any other method of communication.

SAPIO RESEARCH, 2019

Overall work ability does not differ with age.

SAFE WORK AUSTRALIA, 2014

TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL MULTI-GENERATIONAL WORKPLACES

1. **Focus on the common ground amongst the generations.** Research into multi-generational workplaces suggests that people from across all the generations want meaningful work, opportunities to learn and develop, work-life balance, and to be treated fairly and with respect.

2. **Role-model multi-generational respect.** When team members are falling back on generational stereotypes, talk about this. Also consider the organisation's anti-discrimination policies and training to improve manager capability in relation to discrimination and working with older people.

3. **Use multiple channels of communication.** To improve communication reach across all employees (not just across generations) use digital channels such as Teams, Yammer, texts, social media, as well as meetings, toolboxes, newsletters and emails.

4. **Provide equal access to opportunities.** Take a consciously age-neutral approach to managing the career paths and life goals of team members. Provide equal access to training, promotion, work adjustments and flexible work.

5. **Create cross-generational interactions.** Leverage opportunities to deliberately mix things up. When structuring teams, forming a project or standing-up a special interest committee, think about how to introduce age diversity as well as the mix of skills, experience and background that would be most beneficial.

6. **Ask don't assume.** Assumptions come from stereotypes, and stereotypes are often inaccurate. Talk to people about where they are at, what their goals are, and what they need to be productive and to look after their wellbeing.

7. **Implement two-way mentoring.** Whether formal or informal, cross-generational mentoring has been shown to have a positive impact on engagement and mental health. Recognising and harnessing the strengths of the team members across all ages accelerates learning, builds confidence and supports knowledge retention within a business.

These tips can put an organisation on the path to reducing the negative mental health impacts of ageism at work, and reaping the many benefits associated with having multi-generational and diverse work teams.

CREATING MULTI-GENERATIONAL CHAMPIONS

Workplace Champions can play a key role in supporting an organisation's goal of intentionally leveraging a multi-generational workforce.

Champions can act as advocators, educators, and supporters of a multi-generational strategy. They can spread the message, create conversation and be part of a constructive feedback loop.

When nominating Champions it is important to be clear about the intent and scope of the role, integrate it with other initiatives (such as Employee Resource Groups), and ensuring they have endorsement from senior levels. Consider these tips:

- **Ask for nominations.** Select those who are interested in diversity and encouraging a multi-generational workforce. Consider an age-diverse group of Champions, depending on the specific purpose and scope of the role.
- **Formally induct Champions.** Ensure clarity around what they are there to achieve and how. Clearly communicate the 'why' and outline the expectations for their involvement.
- **Provide training.** Enhance their interest in this area with training in diversity and ageism. This will build their credibility as well as enabling them to better identify appropriate actions.

- **Appoint a sponsor.** Ensure someone is responsible for the Multi-generational Champions Program. Without a leader and links to other similar initiatives, these programs can lose momentum.
- **Allocate resources.** Support the program with a time and resources. Give the Champions capacity to take on this role, as well as the tools and resources to support their success.
- **Reward and recognise.** With clear role expectations and program objectives, the efforts of Champions can be appropriately recognised.
- **Start smaller and build.** Pilot the program in a particular area, seek feedback, monitor the impact, adapt and build from there.

What the Champions implement depends a lot on the maturity of an organisation and its ageing workforce goals. Feedback from employees can also influence the specific focus of the program. Ideas could include:

- Multi-generational catch ups or social gatherings.
- Diversity and ageism awareness events.
- Two-way cross generational mentoring.
- A central point to direct employees to relevant resources.
- Coordinating information sessions on relevant topics.

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