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No age barriers, please

Employers should bridge the gap between multi-generation teams to achieve corporate success

THE impact of multi-generational teams on productivity and team spirit is becoming an important consideration for employers in Singapore.

With an ageing population and imminent skill shortages, there are barriers created by the generation gap that can no longer be ignored.

Creating the right conditions for staff of all ages to work together and perform at their best potential can pose considerable challenges for many organisations.

Outdated stereotypes, along with wariness on the part of both older and younger generations, can easily hamper the best efforts.

Oldies but goodies

More people now say they plan to work beyond the traditional retirement age, some motivated by shortfalls in the value of pension schemes that seem to put retirement out of reach.

Others enjoy working and may prefer to cut their hours as they get older. However, knee-jerk reactions among younger people – including resentment at competition for work from people who are vastly more qualified – can get in the way.

Strategically, an ageing workforce should present more opportunities than threats.

Those who see the ageing workforce as advantageous, point to a number of benefits:

Knowledge cascade

Older workers have years, often decades, of experience. With these informal mentors to trainees and juniors, organisations can ensure that insights acquired through experience are passed down to

tomorrow's leaders.

Return on investment

Older workers typically job-hop far less often than younger workers. Allocating budget to training is, therefore, less of a risk.

Those past retirement age or who may choose to work part-time after retiring, may end up giving back more than younger colleagues who hot-foot it out the door once training is completed.

Enhanced employer branding

Organisations that encourage older workers to stay on and continue developing their skills can effectively build their reputation as an employer of choice and will also more likely attract talent of all ages.

The ethical dimension

Certain behaviours or outlooks of younger workers may put off older colleagues, but even if they no longer have direct line-manager authority, older workers often command the respect and admiration of juniors, guiding and discouraging them from unethical decisions.

Open to flexibility

Older workers who wish to cut down their hours are key protagonists in the emergence of a flexible workforce and may more readily accept reduced hours or seasonal work.

Expanded talent pool

Embracing older workers extends the pool of talent for selection. Organisations that specifically target older workers on grounds of current under-representation on their payroll also give themselves

more choice in candidates.

Interims: older and wiser

As the global market slows down and the outlook this year remains tepid, many employers have imposed headcount freezes, choosing not to replace leavers and expecting remaining employees to shoulder extra work.

However, when budgets permit, a number of organisations can turn to strategic use of interim managers.

Older but more experienced workers who are available for temporary work may frequently find themselves appointed to lead major business-critical projects, such as outsourcing support functions or bringing outsourced functions back in-house and in post-acquisition systems integrations.

The challenges of interim projects fit well with the aspirations of older workers who favour flexibility over binding permanent contracts. In fact, interim assignments can be good opportunities for older workers to stretch their potential and acquire new skills.

Bridging the generations

One common barrier to the young and old working effectively together is a perceived irreparable difference in communication and learning styles.

Older workers may be irritated by younger colleagues listening to music even as they are engrossed in their work.

Younger workers may lose patience with elders who play devil's advocate in situations where urgent action is required. Successfully bridging this generation gap will require a conscious shift in outlook.



Organisations that welcome talents of all ages and recognise the value that each employee contributes may be better equipped to unlock limitless potential. – AFPpic

The ageing population need not be gloomy news; nor should it suggest unwarranted competition for jobs.

Organisations that foster open-mindedness, welcoming all talent and recognising the value each employee brings to the table, may be better equipped to unlock limitless potential, sustain growth and

be the ones to seize opportunities when they arise. – Singapore Straits Times / Asia News Network

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