Challenges Faced by Older Adults in the Workplace
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Who are “Older Adults”

Vocational research defines “older adults” as those aged 50 years or more. This definition has been used for decades, and was typically thought to identify with the process of disengagement or the contemplation of disengagement from the workforce began to occur. The generation known as the “Baby Boomers” is in the middle of this demographic range, and is experiencing some unique challenges.

The Aging of America

The demographic make up the American society is rapidly shifting. A slowing birth rate and an increase in younger individuals choosing to delay having children have led to a dramatic change in the shape of the American population.

These graphs illustrate the aging of the American population, leading to a “top heavy” demographic.

Life Stage Choices

As individuals in American society age they are faced with the decision of when to exit the workforce. While some individuals are forced out of the workforce due to a variety of issues most will be forced when and how to leave employment. A variety of factors have been suggested to play a role in individuals decision to exit the workforce. Several of the most significant are monetary concerns, health care issues, and worries about how they would remain active in retirement.

Social Security retirement benefits are paid to individuals as a sort of safety net created in the aftermath of the Great Depression. These benefits were originally designed to be substantive enough to allow individuals to fully retire when they became eligible to receive them. Since the 1980’s the increase in the benefits received have not kept pace with the increased cost of living or rate of inflation.

The recent political climate has also led to an increased sense of insecurity among individuals who rely on Social Security benefits. Politicians have talked about lowering the benefits paid out, and have already increased the age at which individuals are eligible to begin receiving benefits from age 65 to 67 and 2 months. Similar changes have occurred to Medicare, with a decrease in reimbursements, and reductions in coverage.

Workplace Challenges

Older adults have less time to recover from job loss or wealth shock, and experience unique challenges in obtaining and maintaining gainful employment before they reached the age of their planned retirement than younger adults do. These combined micro and macro economic factors, challenges in the workplace, and increased cost of living have all contributed to older individuals staying engaged in the workplace longer.

Many of these individuals end up in “bridge jobs”, or work designed to bridge the gap between where they are currently at and the time that they are able to retire. This longer engagement in the work force has resulted in a change in workplace dynamic specifically and an increase in tension and comparison between younger and older workers. This has also led to an increase in reports of discrimination based on age.

This change in the timming of the transition or disengagement from the workplace into retirement has also illustrated some large gaps in the our understanding of individuals relationship to work from a theoretical standpoint. The process of disengagement from the workforce is an understudied area that is becoming increasingly important to our understanding of work.

For the foreseeable future the aging American population will play a considerable and vital role in the economy and workplace and our ability to support them is in need of expansion in a real way.

Challenges

Consequences

References