

Older workers battle stereotypes; are they 'an untapped resource'?

Older workers match or surpass younger employees in productivity, reliability, motivation and ability to master new skills.

But age stereotypes persist, University of Michigan researchers report. Older workers are often bypassed for promotion and training opportunities because they are viewed as slow, stodgy, and resistant to change.

"Older Workers: An Untapped Resource" is the subject of an invitational conference to be sponsored by the U-M Institute of Gerontology June 10 at the General Motors Training Center. Some 150 representatives of business, labor, education and government in Michigan will discuss the problems and potential of this rapidly growing population.

CONFERENCE SPEAKERS will include Alfred S. Warren, vice president in charge of the industrial relations staff at General Motors; Harold L. Sheppard, associate director of the National Council on Aging; Robert Zager, vice president of the Work In America Institute; and Irving Bluestone, professor in labor studies at Wayne State University and a retired United Auto Workers vice president.

Professor Lawrence Root of the U-M School of Social Work wrote the position paper for the conference and Larry C. Coppard, director of education at the Institute of Gerontology, is coordinating the event.

"As a society we are aging. Inflation is forcing more and more people to remain on the job longer, and recent changes in mandatory retirement laws are keeping opportunities open for them," Coppard explains. "The median age of 30 in 1980 is expected to be 35 by the year 2000. Americans over the age of 55, now numbering 46 million, will increase by 20 percent in these decades."

"In this conference we are defining 'older' to include anyone for whom age has become an important factor in their job status. While it includes workers in their 60s, it may also mean workers in their 40s who find opportunities closed to them."

"In our youth-oriented society, even older workers themselves often associate aging with a decline in productivity and learning skills," Coppard notes. "Research at the U-M and elsewhere shows conclusively that this is not so. Physical abilities do not decline in any important way until very late in an individual's life, and even then there is enormous variation among people."

"In fact, data reported this year from 28 states shows that younger workers are more likely than older to suffer a work-related injury, with the incidence decreasing steadily with age. A less recent survey asked employers to compare older and younger workers in terms of work performance, attendance, safety records and work attitudes. More than 93 percent considered older workers equal or superior in all four areas."

ONE OF THE MOST important things older workers bring to a job is experience, Coppard says. "They are able to tailor a task to their own skills and limitations. The combined factors of experience, loyalty and lack of absenteeism have a positive impact that is difficult to measure, yet fundamental to job performance."

"All older workers do not share in the negative effects of age," he adds. "For many, these are stable, satisfying years; reputations and relationships have been established. Even those who are somewhat discontented with career choices at least feel a measure of job security."

"But for those workers who do find themselves in a tenuous position or who are passed over for key training opportunities or promotions, the image of stability among others in their age group is even more demoralizing. And for older workers seeking employment,

seniority systems can form a barrier to access."

The conference will not focus on problems of the unemployed older worker, however, Coppard says, as those involve an equally complex but separate set of issues. "Instead, the conference will aim to promote better understanding of the assets of older workers, developing a climate in which employers are more inclined to hire them and even create jobs for them."

SOLUTIONS MUST come from many sides, Coppard believes. "Governments may create incentives or set

legal requirements. Educators can contribute resources for training and research. Companies can create more positive older worker policies and practices, and unions can be advocates for these concerns. Finally, older workers themselves can take a more positive view of their own capabilities and potential."

Persons interested in participating in the invitational conference may contact Judy Wilson-Powers, U-M Institute of Gerontology, 520 East Liberty St., Ann Arbor, Mich. 48109, or call (313) 763-4102 for further information.

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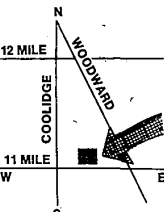
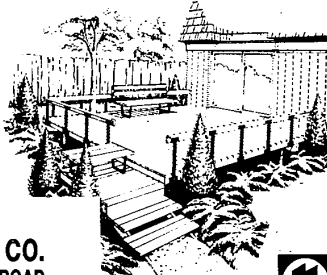
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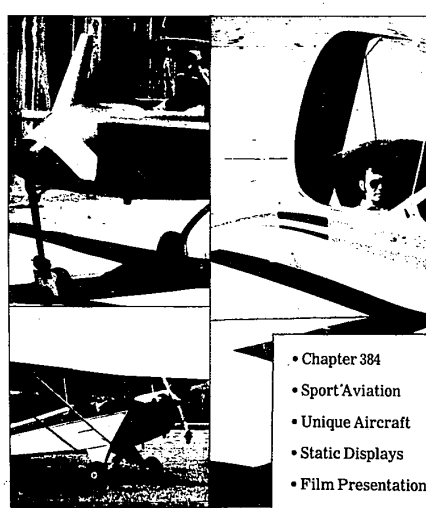


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