



Youth is a wonderful thing ... as is age

The value of age diversity is yet to be fully appreciated by South African businesses, as PENNY HAW discovers.

Young versus old

Frederic Chopin was seven years old when he composed Polonaise in G Minor. Winston Churchill was 84 when he ran for (and won) a seat in the House of Commons.

Mature workers are a vital age demographic

In recent studies conducted among major American businesses, research company Towers Perrin found that employees of 50-plus "have a winning combination of experience, maturity and positive attitudes" and that they "exceed job expectations and have the highest engagement levels of all workers".

Age diversity as a core business strategy

Age diversity programmes incorporate codes of practice in areas such as:

- Recruitment, selection and promotion, where decisions are based on skills, ability and potential of employees
- Training and development that encourages all employees
- Redundancy policies that are unbiased and structured according to employees' skills
- Retirement plans that consider individual and business needs.

THERE is, it seems, a growing sense in South Africa that younger is better. Some go as far as declaring that workplace ageism is the new sexism. And, while section 5 (1) of the Employment Equity Bill prohibits discrimination against employees on the grounds of 17 different concerns, including age, the allegation is that more and more people over the age of 40 face insurmountable hurdles to employment and promotion.

There are exceptions, says Gavin Sher, CEO of a Johannesburg-based human resource consulting company. These are particularly evident where industries and organisations, like Eskom, are experiencing skills shortages. In many of these cases, companies have been compelled to hire back the services of "people they previously considered to be dinosaurs".

"Generally though, it is our experience that increasingly more organisations – chiefly those in the private sector and most especially those involved in the service industry, IT, marketing and advertising – are reluctant to consider older applicants," he says. "And what's more, whereas five years ago, 50 was considered too old, nowadays people who are 40-plus are perceived as being incapable of change and innovation."

Young employees are applauded because they are allegedly "ambitious, and prepared to work long hours and to travel". And, whereas youngsters are said to bring with them new ideas, energy, drive, a "why not?" attitude, and the benefit of a recent education, the expectations of older workers are anything but encouraging.

Most worryingly, says Sher, an ever-growing number of employers seem to be buying in to persistent myths about mature workers. These are as proverbial as they are enduring, and maintain that older applicants are "not team

players", "tired", "inflexible", "technologically challenged", and "expensive to employ". These, he asserts, are gross generalisations.

"In fact, let's not be ridiculous – employees of 40-plus are in their prime," he says. "And, if you consider that, these days, many people in their 50s and 60s are as intellectually and physically adept as ever, it's clear that by excluding the experience and wisdom that comes with age, organisations are doing themselves a great disservice."

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Studies indicate that age diversity – i.e. the practice of employing people of all ages, and not discriminating against people because of how old they are – makes for a vibrant workplace. In fact, the business case for age diversity is based on plain old common sense. It helps organisations to adapt successfully to new markets, and keeps them abreast of evolving social trends and legislation. Age diversity also counters the threat of a shrinking, ageing workforce, which can combine with prejudice against older workers to generate skills vacuums.

Regrettably, says Sher, South African organisations are yet to acknowledge the huge benefits of building an effective workforce of different ages. Age diversity policies are all but non-existent: "The weight of achieving black economic empowerment means organisations have tended to neglect other important equity issues in recent years. Age diversity, along with all the other equity concerns, deserves more attention in this country – soon." □

... workplace ageism is the new sexism