



Debunking age-old myths

Look beyond myths and common misperceptions of older workers to enjoy benefits of a silver workforce

FEATURE ARTICLE

It is an undisputed fact that many economies are facing a rapidly aging workforce. According to data compiled by the United Nations' Population Division, the number of people aged 60 and above in the world is expected to triple by 2050 - Asia already makes up half of the world's older population. Longer life expectancies and falling birthrates mean countries are grappling with declining populations and talent shortages.

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NEWS FLASH

Huge wage growth speculated for 2011

Singapore - Despite an economic growth of 14.5 percent last year, data from the Ministry of Manpower showed nominal wages grew only 5.5%. Factoring the inflation rate of 2.8% last year, real wages dipped to just 2.7%. HR practitioners feel the situation will not alter much in 2011, but labour economists are optimistic that real wages will "go(ing) off the chart". Randolph Tan, SIM University's labour economist said the probable wage increase would be to make up for last year's discrepancy between real output growth and real wage growth. He added that with the economy heading towards a tighter labour market, real wages could be pushed up.



S'pore workers "world's unhappiest"

Singapore - The results of survey by talent management company, Lumesse, ranked Singapore workers last in workplace happiness and loyalty. Compared to the global average of 35%, only 17% of Singapore's workforce see themselves staying put with their present employer forever. Josh Goh, assistant director, corporate services for recruitment firm The GMP Group, advised employers not to focus on seeking long-term employment from all employees. Instead, they should focus on "building a strong employer brand by harnessing the best from employees during their employment." The poll included 4,000 employees from a range of industries in 14 countries.

Wage law benefits more than 100,000 workers

Hong Kong - According to the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (HKFTU), at least 101,443 workers are bringing home a bigger pay after a revision to the city's minimum wage. The pay increases ranged from 5% to more than 50%, with most of affected workers receiving a 20% raise or between HK\$2,000 to HK\$3,000. Among the workers who benefitted from the pay hike included 28,000 workers in the catering industry, 26,000 cleaners and 47,000 security guards. The salary increase helped grassroots to cope with inflation and broke the pay freeze that maintained low wages for years, said Mong Siu-tat, chief executive of the HKFTU.



50% of managers unfulfilled: poll

China - A recent survey suggests middle managers in Beijing are unhappy in their jobs due to lack of power given to them by their bosses and poor work-life balance. Professor Xing Wenxiang from Central University of Finance & Economics, who conducted the study, said that most employers are still unable to provide professional working environments for managers. And especially bosses in private enterprises cannot give enough power frontline and mid-level managers, thus limiting their capabilities. This leads to unhappiness, he added. Meanwhile, about 30% of workers polled said they are not healthy enough while more than half complained of stress. Most said they have problems balancing family with careers.

To cope with the scarcity of talent, companies must look to the mature workforce to plug talent gaps. Increased workforce participation of older workers and skills gap must be bridged for organisations to prosper.

TEARING DOWN THE MYTHS

Many employers recognise the strengths of older workers but prevailing stereotypes and negative perceptions often prevent them from enjoying the benefits a mature workforce brings to their organisation.

Here are some common myths about older workers:

Myth. Older employees are absent from work a lot because of their poor health.
Fact. The latest medical and pharmaceutical developments have facilitated longer life expectancies and promoted better health. There is also a more concrete correlative relationship between absenteeism and job satisfaction - age has little to do with absenteeism.

Myth. Older workers are less productive.
Fact. Older employees are actually more productive as they are more dependent, loyal and have better judgment. Many older staff desire to remain in employment, not just for economic reasons, but also to maintain physical health and mental agility.



Myth. Older workers resist change and are slow to learn new skills.

Fact. Resistance to change doesn't only affect older workers; younger employees can be as steadfast against change as well. While it is true that older employees face steeper learning curves, they are not unwilling to learn. The most effective ways to learn may be different for them than their younger colleagues - suitable methodologies, tools and a conducive environment can greatly assist older workers to pick up new skills.

Myth. It is expensive to hire and retain older staff, who are also less productive.

Fact. Compared to their younger colleagues in their 20s and 30s, mature employees are less likely to job hop, thus lowering continuing recruitment and training costs. Instead of penalising older staff, it is far wiser for companies to capitalise on the depth and expanse of knowledge they possess, gained only from their lifetime of work experience.

ATTRACTING, RETRAINING AND RETAINING MATURE-AGED EMPLOYEES

In Singapore, employers will be required to offer re-employment to their workers when they reach the age of 62 when the new employment law kicks in on 1 January 2012. They can then continue to work until they are 65 - this will eventually be raised to 67. As such, employers have taken steps to boost workforce participation of older workers such as re-engineering jobs to facilitate the latter's needs, and offering flexible working arrangements as well as flexible benefits.

Companies can increase their pool of mature employees by including them in mentorship programmes. Leveraging on their expertise and extensive experience, retired professionals can be offered consultancy or advisory roles. Companies can hire qualified mature employees on a contract or part-time basis as well. Not only will companies meet knowledge transfer needs, older workers will appreciate the work life balance the job offers too.

To enhance employability and engagement, companies should have a career development programme for their mature staff - being older does not mean there is no room for professional growth. Training their older employees and upgrading their skills ensures they are kept relevant in today's workforce.

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