Older Workers and COVID-19

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The coronavirus pandemic has created tremendous upheaval in the workforce, and many employers are struggling to keep their businesses running. AARP believes that employees of all ages bring strengths that organizations can leverage as they navigate the crisis, both now and in the long term.

In particular, older employees in age-inclusive organizations:

- Possess a wealth of uniquely human skills, which are particularly valuable in periods of uncertainty and upheaval. These soft skills include:
    - Critical thinking
    - Problem solving
    - Leadership
    - Communication
    - Calm under pressure

- Reduce turnover rates in both younger and older workers[1]

- Bring wisdom, experience and patience to the team. When asked the most significant attribute older colleagues had taught younger counterparts, 25% of younger employees cited wisdom and experience, and 12% cited patience[2]

- Retain institutional knowledge: the significant institutional, professional and experiential knowledge possessed by older employees often "spills over" to younger colleagues, providing perspective and balance

The impacts of COVID-19 on the workforce have been widespread and extremely challenging. To best support all your employees, stick to the facts. Use this guide to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic and uphold the pillars of safety, respect, equality and privacy.

Critical thinking

Problem solving

Leadership

Communication

Calm under pressure

8 Things to Keep In Mind for Older Employees During the COVID-19 Pandemic

01 **Make use of age diversity:** Research shows that mixed-age teams out-perform less age-diverse teams on creative and complex decision-making tasks — which are particularly important in times of crisis. Where possible, develop and preserve mixed-age teams and consider connecting younger workers with older mentors who have likely weathered storms in the past and can provide emotional support.

02 **Assess skills, not age:** If your organization is forced to make employment cuts as a result of COVID-19, remember to assess current employees by their skills, not age or perceived retirement timeframe. Don't accept outdated myths about older workers, including that they are "bad" at technology and unwilling to learn new skills. More than 8 in 10 employees ages 45 to 64 say that the opportunity to learn something new is an essential element of their ideal job.[3]

03 **Stay alert for unconscious bias:** In stressful times, our brains tend to rely on "accepted wisdom" or stereotypical thinking, but there is no such thing as a stereotypical employee. Be mindful not to make assumptions about employees' response to COVID-19 based on age or any other aspect of their identity.

04 **Consider life stages:** Don't assume anything about your employees based on age; life stage is a far more accurate predictor of employee needs than chronological age. Everyone has different things going on in their lives — for example, 25% of caregivers are actually millennials. Engage with each of your employees, ask them what they need and practice active listening — don't jump to conclusions based on ageist assumptions.

05 **Acknowledge impacts to retirement savings:** The economic downturn will likely reduce retirement savings significantly, and these losses tend to hit mid- and late-career workers harder than younger workers because they have less time to build them back up. Provide financial counseling and support where possible — to all workers — to help them navigate the best path forward.

06 **Support the caregivers in your workforce:** Over 60% of the nation's 40 million caregivers are employed full-time. In light of COVID-19, this number is bound to increase. Highlight your paid leave benefits and encourage employees to use these benefits during this time. Review our Caregiving, COVID-19, and the Workplace Tip Sheet for more guidance.

07 **Consider state resources to avoid layoffs:** Check your state's Department of Labor, Economic Development Council, Small Business Development Center and Chambers of Commerce for financial relief and unemployment resources.

08 **Gradual return to work:** While states and local governments may decide to reopen doors, many individuals may still be wary of possible exposure, including older workers. Consider staggering returns across the workforce to help protect everyone's health.

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Take Action

Steady communication with your workforce helps your employees to stay informed and connected. Consider supporting your employees with the following actions:

☐ **Update your work from home status every two weeks** and keep employees informed with a tentative date. Consult the official <u>CDC website</u> and safety standards to inform your decisions.

☐ **Send a quick employee impact survey.** Ask employees if they know about and are using the leave, remote work and/or flexible scheduling opportunities. Ask what else you can do to make these key supports easier to use.

☐ **Encourage caregivers in your workplace to use their paid leave benefits.** If affordable, consider extending these benefits to everyone. Encourage your outsourcing partners to do the same.

☐ **Commit to personal safety in the workplace** and follow safety guidelines as outlined by the CDC Mitigation Framework.

☐ **Require remote work for employees** until the safety situation improves. Coordinate with your people managers and IT department to facilitate remote work. Live documentation systems such as Google Docs, Slack and Microsoft Teams help employees stay connected in real time and streamline workflows.

☐ **File an unemployment claim** for employees if your organization is forced to make workforce cuts. Allowing your former employees to receive unemployment benefits can positively impact your brand in the long run when you reinstate hiring activities.

☐ **Host virtual meetings and socials** to keep your employees connected and spirits lifted.

☐ Use the **<u>Delayed Retirement</u>** and **<u>Budgeting Worksheet</u> tip sheets** and share with your multigenerational workforce to help employees navigate saving and budgeting during COVID-19 and beyond.

For more information on COVID-19 and its impact on the 50+ population, visit <u>aarp.org/coronavirus</u>.

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[1] *AARP, The Business Case for Workers 50+, 2015*

[2] https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/research/surveys_statistics/econ/2019/age-diversity-mentorship-generations-workers.doi.10.26419-2Fres.00270.001.pdf

[3] *Staying Ahead of the Curve 2013: The AARP Work and Career Study*

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