

Ageism: The Wounded Lions of Employment Winter

Ageism, or more precisely, age warfare, like class warfare, race warfare, and the "so called" battle between the sexes, do all unfortunately exist. Often the age issue gets the least press; particularly in the US, because there is hardly any economic and media support relating to those over age fifty. With the exception being marketing medications like Flomax, Viagra, antidepressants and anti-Alzheimer drugs, which are continually advertised in print and on television.

In the workplace, particularly in this millennial downturn, there is an irrefutable correlation between age and unemployment in certain industries like high technology. I estimate that more than 70% of the recent layoffs are for people in the age range of forty and over. This statistic is based on my reading of thousands of resumes from unemployed workers in the last year.

One approach to counteracting ageism in the workplace is to have indispensable skills. I have a close relative who was begged to work until he was seventy (the company, a Fortune 50 conglomerate, had a retirement requirement policy for employees at age sixty-five), so he was picked up by their international division. Now, he is eighty-five and still receives occasional calls to consult on his area of expertise internationally, which are steam turbine generators. Perhaps, another proactive method in circumventing ageism is self employment. But most people, no matter what their age, have neither the indispensable skills, nor entrepreneurial inclinations to be self employed.

Usually the catch-words that you hear about older American workers are that they are more loyal, reliable, friendly, and disciplined: kind of like a well behaved golden retriever. But when I, as a fifty-plus year old deal with non-Europeans or non-Americans in general, I receive more respect, which I don't ask for. Perhaps, they have more stable traditions, and are just more comfortable in who they are and where they are going. This is not to say that all Americans, or Europeans act in this manner, but the majority do. Many people themselves in this age group, through a kind of brainwashed self-fulfilling prophecy, buy into the notion of their vocational and socio-cultural inferiority based on age.

Fifteen years ago there was the public perception that people aged sixty-five or over, would be able to work in a high capacity, as long as they wanted to. It seems apparent today that this is not the case; unless you count being a greeter at Walmart or bagging groceries in a supermarket as a high level of employment. Perhaps, this expected trend was aborted by the recent, rapid onset of outsourcing and globalization. The case can also be made for the ease in subrogating cheap foreign labor to a developing country; meeting the bottom line for an American CEO who's only loyalty is to his stockholders and his net worth

I recall reading that you can evaluate the strength and value system of a culture in how well they treat, and accept as equals their older and sicker members. On that basis our American culture is sick indeed. What is paradoxical about ageism in the American economy is that many of the people, like IT workers, who are being "aged out" here have skills that are still in demand globally, which could be effectively utilized remotely to offer tremendous economic value to the developing world and elsewhere. Consequently, globalization could begin to improve, rather

than detract from the employment prospects of older American workers.

In my opinion, there are at least three plans of action that should be taken to speed up the globalization of underutilized American skills, especially for the older workers.

1. The American media, in particular, must portray a more positive image of people aged over forty; to make them more attractive to the global marketplace.
2. A clear and comprehensive vision of a “global village” needs to play a major role in the realm of employment, so that underutilized American technical and professional expertise can be remotely placed; just as the skills of Asian technology workers are remotely employed by companies from the United States.
3. The most idealistic plan is to get the policymakers and the citizenry to realize the obvious: globalization leads to the leveling out of global labor costs and a lowering of the quantitative standard of living in richer countries like the United States.

However, if there is a shift to a more qualitative standard of living that uses less resources and luxuries then we could begin the arduous process of combating the deleterious effects of ageism and poverty in America. And then most of the developed world in turn could provide meaningful employment to the skilled, semi-skilled, and chronically unemployed in the US and elsewhere.

Moreover, this movement to a more qualitative and frugal utilization of human and natural resources could go a long way in alleviating looming global eco-calamities such as global warming, and the myriad of severe socio-cultural, political, and economic upheavals that may follow.