

Leading Results The Value of Older Library Workers

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Abstract:

Purpose

This paper is about recognizing and reacting to an aging workforce and understanding the value that older workers can still represent to the organization.

Design/methodology/approach

This article references field literature to support the points addressed.

Findings

Librarians and library workers have knowledge and experience that can provide value, both to their organizations as they approach retirement and afterwards as retirees in a variety of ways.

Originality/value

This article represents the viewpoint of the author produced from his experiences and understandings.

Keywords: aging workforce | libraries | librarians

Article:

Baby boomers are turning that corner, taking their careers down the home stretch, or are they? Across the country, companies and organizations are seeing a shift in the demographic make-up of their staffs as the baby boomer age group peaks and reaches out toward retirement. Within the library and information science profession countless surveys and data sets are administered and reviewed to find a determining number of replacement needs. Surveys such as the one from Library Media Connection (Dickinson, 2012) provide some insight as to people's intentions based on financial ability or length of service. It also alludes to a trend of some librarians not wanting to retire or wanting to return to work after they retire. Are some being pushed out or if they wanted to return would they be welcomed? How valuable are our older librarians and library workers?

Valeria Long and Lynn Sheehan presented at the 2015 ACRL Conference in Portland (Long and Sheehan, 2015), on the graying of the profession and provided an extensive background to concerns over librarianship, as a profession, being older than most other professionals identified by professional associations. Their research focused on whether there was a need for older workers to move on or if other factors were in motion that influenced the make-up of the profession. They concluded that older workers can and do serve a useful purpose, alongside younger librarians who are developing their careers as well. Long and Sheehan discussed the need for success planning over succession planning.

What's the Value Added?

In many venues, there seems to be stereotypical beliefs that older workers do not add the value to an organization as they once did. Younger workers whose training and educational experiences are newer, and who seemly have more energy and initiative are sometimes preferred by organizations that undervalue older workers. This can be especially true if the primary job functions for older or longer term employees have changed over time, but adjustments to their needed competencies have not been altered.

Considering the concept of organizational knowledge, with the presumption that older workers are more capable (or motivated) of understanding and advocating for organizational values along with primary visionary aspirations, maintaining and managing how that knowledge sustains itself over time can add considerable value to how older workers are perceived. Studies have demonstrated that reinforcing the value of knowledge that younger workers have, as a responsible future, increases the value they have of their current peers who are older (Pejrova, 2014).

This involves separating knowledge management into human and technical considerations, whereas younger workers gravitate to technical knowledge motivations; older workers adjust to modify their human knowledge and set of values into current needs for the organization. This can be especially true in libraries that have moved toward a direction of enhanced technology, based on user needs and desires, but still need the enduring values to be carried forward for the sake of the profession. That makes the value of the older worker critical for the continuance of information accessibility and curation for a global society needing ethical gatekeepers going forward.

Another value consideration for older librarians relates to the digital divide from an age perspective. Digital literacy is an essential skill for adults to function in today's society and will continue to grow and be prevalent over time. Although the Internet has been around for a while and many older adults have some basic skills with online related technologies, continuing to be active with technology helps ensure continued social and economic success. In an Australian research project, the age related digital gap was a product of lack of confidence with the use of technology (Antonio and Tuffley, 2015). This is especially true as technology changes and the challenge is to keep up with the latest devices, upgrades or new concepts. Because librarians can be on the forward end of these changes or learning about "what's new", recognizing the need and working with groups who educate older adults can be particularly useful, as well as sharing common values.

Investing in the Older Worker

Just as older adults must keep up with societal changes, workers in general must keep up at the workplace as they age and new hires are typically younger and more digitally literate. In some cases older workers can avail themselves to their organizations to make the best use of their knowledge for continued employment satisfaction. In other cases, older workers move from their current positions and into other areas of interest with different competency requirements. Many companies who value the attributes of more mature and thoughtful workers have created intern programs for this age group in order to train and educate appropriately (Kadlec, 2015). Library organizations can consider similar programs to capture this useful knowledge and direct them in a productive way.

A report from the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM), published last year, provides a foundation of information for organizations that need to be preparing for an aging workforce (SHRM, 2015). Several concepts discussed in this report apply to library environments and should be under consideration for organizations with a large number of staff moving toward retirement age. This first concept is to assess organizational knowledge and where it is found within the existing staff attributes. Learning that only a few persons possessed certain knowledge, but now they are gone, does not support smooth and sustainable transitions into new staff members taking on those responsibilities.

Libraries should seek to have a way of moving organizational knowledge forward as part of long-term strategic planning initiatives. Academic libraries might have available to them a phased retirement program that provides the guidelines to phase librarians out gradually to allow the library to make changes and adjustments over time. Others organizations that do not have a policy or structure to make changes in that way, should be openly discussing how replacements will be brought up to speed when the time comes. Within the SHRM report is an example from a public library system, of how they create the succession opportunity among existing staff, which helps capture and sustain the organizational knowledge needed.

Mentorship

Other options to maintain value for older workers might be through mentorship in several different ways. Older workers as they approach retirement can find value in being used as a mentor to others. Being a mentor can be a very rewarding experience but preparing the mentor with emotional intelligence training, helps ensure the investment is viable (Crumpton, 2015). Approached correctly, upcoming retirees can stay productive right up to their retirement date if their skills and knowledge are valued and active up until the end of their employment. This might require altering or modifying their role within the organization and should be done in a positive, proactive manner to support their contributions thus far.

New librarians and staff brought into the organization can work with older workers to understand the workplace culture, embrace the organizational values and develop a foundation of knowledge as to explain the libraries' position on policy and ethics. In addition to training for mentoring, these positions should have guidelines with goals and objectives to achieve the desired outcome.

Mentoring opportunities can happen in reverse as well. New librarians or staff coming into the organization can contribute to a mentoring relationship through the socialization of their skills, in particular to older or long-term employees who demonstrate a desire to collaborate. This might usually be technical in nature, i.e. how the latest technology is incorporated into library services, but can also provide the opportunity to bond over shared knowledge.

The Bottom Line

The literature offers several examples of the value that retired library workers can offer if they want to keep working and utilize their skills. For example, working at a bookstore, museum, church, special libraries or even on a cruise ship library, can provide opportunities to continue contributing with the skill set and experiences achieved over the years (Marsales, 2012). Helping writers with their research can be a very valuable use of time and skills after formal retirement from a library (Wilson-Lingbloom, 2013). Staying involved in professional organizations and having the time to devote to needed projects and work activities can be a huge contribution after retirement (Imhoff, 2012). Consulting, mentoring and volunteering are also important activities in which retirees can contribute (Cavitt, 2011). And finally, being a thoughtful user, who stills provides helpful feedback and advice to their former organization, is also an added value to a long career of library service (Smith, 2012).

Other opportunities exist to bring older workers into the organization to satisfy manpower needs. This could typically take the form of hiring retirees to work part-time or hiring older workers as second career employees. Whether you are transitioning people close to retirement or fulfilling organizational needs with older workers, the approach taken should be a positive one. Ageing populations of workers should be seen as a natural growth or development of the organization and can be considered an asset, instead of being problematic or a liability (Warhurst and Black, 2015).

Look for ways to find value with and for older workers and don't let the organization side step them until they are gone. Japanese culture is famous for respecting their older citizens so a proverb here might be appropriate, "*Tigers die and leave their skins; people die and leave their names*". Librarians and library staff should be recognized for their past contributions by being respected as they move toward the end of their careers. The organizational challenge is to find ways to keep their contributions relevant, while influencing their successors to move the organization forward, successfully.

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