Teaching an Old Dog Some New Tricks,
The Issues of Training in an Aging Workforce

The great American Industrialist, Henry Ford once said, *"Anyone who stops learning is old, whether at twenty or eighty. Anyone who keeps learning stays young. The greatest thing in life is to keep your mind young."* No one is quite sure when Ford made this statement, but I wonder if he realized at the time how prophetic his words would be.

My generation and the generation of a majority of the world's working population, the Baby Boomers, has led to increases in median ages of the workforce and higher learning. With the population of most industrialized nations getting older, the recruitment, retention, and training strategies of an aging workforce is an emerging priority in organizational training strategies of maintaining a highly skilled workforce. It is no secret that learning is an important component of recruiting and retention. However, as technology evolves, how to apply technology as part of an organizational learning strategy must likewise evolve.

Older workers have become an important component in the skilled workplaces of many countries. Unfortunately, employers are reporting difficulty even in filling jobs that do not require skilled qualifications. Additionally, in high skilled and complex jobs, organizations are under pressure to develop strategies for retaining skilled workers that are well past the age at which decades before, they began to think of retiring. So, as the world's economy recovers and a demand for skilled labor increases it is becoming apparent that issues associated with the training and education of older workers are coming to the forefront of organizational training strategies.

One thing is for certain, we all learn differently, not only from an individual perspective, but also from a generational perspective. "You can't teach an old dog new tricks" is a saying we should all be familiar with. That is because there is a psychological and physiological ring of truth to it. Researchers have long established the existence of biological changes to the brain leading to age differences in the receptive processing of information effecting older workers' performances called fluid intelligence. As such, it is no secret that older workers such as Baby Boomers will have a propensity to take refuge in task that they are familiar with. This is in contrast to a millennial worker who will not hesitate striking out into the uncharted waters of new technologies. The implications of the aging effects on the learning capabilities to individual and organizational productivity create learning cycle considerations whereby job needs, preferences, and training will change with age.

On the other hand, older workers do possess a higher level of learned-life experience skills. Learned-life skills are very deeply rooted into the memory of an older work so much that science defines it as crystallized intelligence. The problem, however, in juxtaposing the training requirements to use the fluidity of emerging technologies with learned-life skilled workers is a conundrum created in redefining training needs and preferences that change with age.

In a Canadian study of adapting training strategies for older workers, three key issues were identified relating to training older workers. First, from an organizational perspective, is the need to create policies that provide older workers access to training. The study concluded that work-related training is limited and often non-existent for older employees. In addition, organizations are reticent to design and implement HR policies and practices that provide training opportunities for older employees and encourage them to participate in such programs training.

Second, even when training opportunities are available to older employees, there is a need to tailor the training design and methods to allow for the learning styles and experience of older employees. As discussed earlier, the appreciable differences in intelligence between older and younger workers are not in the level of intellect, but in how information is processed and retained. Even when training opportunities are available to older employees, there is a need to adapt training design and methods to allow for the differences in the learning styles and experience of older employees.

Lastly, is the importance of age awareness training for the managers of older workers. As the working population ages, there is a growing importance for age awareness. Managers and executives need training not only for the intricacies of age related issues, but also a level of education and understanding on the effective utilization of older employees. A so-called change in attitudes toward aging workers is required for not only the sustenance of the worker but for the organization as well.

Unfortunately there is a dearth in age awareness attitudes in many organizations. In a recent AARP study of 400 US organizations, only 25 percent reported that they were educating managers about the effective utilization of older employees. This is somewhat of a troubling sign as the issue of training, deployment, and utilization of older workers will grow as the working population precipitously ages. Organizations are also precipitously challenged to close the gaps that currently exist between the practices that are important in retaining older workers and the extent to which age awareness attitudes are inhibiting these practices.

The world's working population is biologically getting older and there is not much anyone can do about that. However, as Henry Ford remarked, getting older physically has no effective on the intellectual capacity of one's willingness and ability to learn. Staying young through learning is beneficial to not only the individual but also to organizations. It is possible to teach an old dog some new tricks, just sprinkle it with a little change in attitude.