

Aging workers face uphill battle

Bosses won't hire them; young people resent them

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After beating cancer, James Ford was eager to re-enter the workforce and resume an active business life. But the Alberta man's nearly four decades of experience in marketing and communications were consistently eclipsed by his age, with prospective employers seemingly more interested in his health than in his talent. "The attitude is: 'I want to hire someone who will be with me for five or 10 years; I don't want someone who's going to die on me next week, or get sick,'" says Ford, a 71-year-old who lives in Sherwood Park, just outside Edmonton. "Well, I'm healthy. I work 14/7. And there are lots of senior 14/7 people who would love to have a job."

The way Ford sees it, he ran up against one of the least acknowledged, most persistent prejudices in Canadian society: ageism. And while age discrimination isn't new, a tectonic shift in workplace demographics will soon make it a problem the country can't ignore.



James Ford

For the first time, census population data show there are more citizens aged 55 to 64 (4,393,305, to be precise) than there are people aged 15 to 24 (a mere 4,365,585). In other words, more Canadians are at the age when one customarily exists work life, than are of the age when one usually enters it.

Economists say if the country is to thrive, it must keep older workers on the job past traditional retirement.

"We have to take this very seriously," says Fred Vettese, chief actuary at human resources consulting firm Morneau Shepell. "The only question is whether we anticipate the problem and act in advance or simply react to it once it manifests."

The paradox is that this cohort is often pushed out or kept out of the workforce because of prejudices about age.

If current trends hold, Canada will be looking at a labour shortfall of two to three million people over the next 30 years, so organizations have to figure out if ageism is still something they can afford. Equally tricky, they must also understand clearly when there is a sound basis for rejecting older workers.

Vettese notes, for instance, that mature employees often price themselves out of jobs due to their expectations about vacation, benefits and compensation. It doesn't necessarily mean employers are "ageist" if they reject these expectations.

But Canadians do think ageist attitudes are everywhere. An exclusive poll for

Postmedia News found that three-quarters of those asked believed workplaces discriminate against older workers who are looking for jobs. The older the person, the more he or she thinks such discrimination is taking place, according to the Ipsos Reid online survey of 1,005 people, conducted July 10 to 13. Even a majority of young adults believe older job applicants are encountering age discrimination.

Don Schepens, who teaches human resource management at Grant MacEwan University in Edmonton, says overcoming stereotypes will be a challenge.

"Some of the big ones, of course, are that older workers won't work as hard or they'll have higher expenses for health (care) — and neither of those is really true," says Schepens.

"The baby boomers coming in right now are probably in better shape than any other group at that age has been in the last 100 years."

Indeed, research shows baby boomers are less prone to smoking, heavy drinking and inactivity than previous generations of Canadians their age, and have experienced significant decreases in arthritis, hypertension, heart disease and emphysema.

Their obesity rates, however, have more than doubled — likely due to larger portion sizes and varying food quality — and they show an increased prevalence of diabetes.

Doreen Copeland, a 54-year-old from Vancouver, got her walking papers after three decades of dedicated work in radio. She believes her seniority was her undoing.

"With longevity comes a higher salary. And there was always a source of young, eager people who were willing to work for next to nothing," says Copeland.

She has since reinvented herself as a freelance writer, public-relations expert and project manager. She says self-employment was more viable than trying to get hired at a "hip, young upstart" staffed by people two or three decades her junior.

"When I first lost my job, I thought, 'What area could I work in where age won't matter?'" recalls Copeland. "I don't think I ever came up with an answer."

Vettese believes a common perception among managers is that older workers are prone to coasting in their final years of employment, and that they don't contribute the same amount of energy or commitment as their younger counterparts.

Younger workers, meanwhile, can see them as out of touch and overstaying their welcome in coveted positions.

Sherwood Park's Ford, who completed a Master's degree while he was fighting cancer, eventually tired of "insidious discrimination" and took matters into his own hands, opening a newspaper.

"I had to quit asking permission to be hired and be my own agent," says Ford, who operates The Sherwood Park Independent Weekly.

"I love it. I love every minute of it."