ED334470 1991-00-00 Older Worker Training: An Overview. ERIC Digest No. 114.

ERIC Development Team

www.eric.ed.gov

Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

ERIC Identifier: ED334470
Publication Date: 1991-00-00
Author: Imel, Susan
Source: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult Career and Vocational Education Columbus OH.

Older Worker Training: An Overview. ERIC Digest No. 114.

A number of economic and demographic trends are focusing attention on older workers: individuals over age 55 will continue to constitute a larger proportion of the total

population; people are living longer, healthier lives and many see full- or part-time employment as a means of remaining productive in their later years; increased longevity coupled with higher inflation have created economic pressures for older people, causing them to remain in the work force; and low birth rates during the past two decades have decreased the number of younger entrants into the labor market (Johnston and Packer 1987).

There is widespread variation in how "older workers" are defined in the literature. Although most definitions are based on chronological age, some are associated with role status. Age-based definitions may include individuals as young as 40 years to as old as 75 years. For example, under the provisions of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, old age technically begins at 40, whereas anyone 60 and above qualifies as old under the Older Americans Act. However, age 55 is widely regarded as the age at which employment problems become discernible (Rix 1990). Individuals are sometimes categorized as "older workers" on the basis of their status as midlife career changers, retirees returning to the labor force full or part time, displaced/dislocated workers, or displaced homemakers (Moon and Hushbeck 1989). The diversity of the population must be kept in mind during any discussion of older workers.

The changes occurring in the composition of the labor force in tandem with the changing personal needs of older individuals are creating powerful incentives for them to remain in or reenter the work force. For many, this will mean engaging in job training or retraining. This ERIC DIGEST focuses on some of the issues and concerns related to training older workers.

PROGRAMS AND PROVIDERS

Training for older workers is provided through both private companies (i.e., employers) and publicly funded programs. The Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) and the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) (Title V of the Older Americans Act) are the major sources of public funds that can be used to prepare older workers for private sector employment (Rix 1990; Rothstein 1989). Although the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act of 1990 does not specifically mention "older workers," certain categories are covered in sections of the act that provide for displaced homemakers and dislocated workers. (See Rix [1990], Rothstein [1989], and Sheppard and Rix [1989] for further information about programs funded under the JTPA and the SCSEP.)

Some employers also provide training and retraining opportunities for their older workers for the following reasons: to avoid the expense and time of recruiting additional skilled personnel, to prevent skill obsolescence, to prevent workers from becoming outmoded, and to train new entrants into their workplaces (Hale 1990). However, information on company training programs tends to be dated and anecdotal. There is a lack of information related to costs, benefits, and the content of training programs for older workers (Rix 1990; Sheppard and Rix 1989). (Hale [ibid.], Rix [1990], and the

Commonwealth Foundation [1991] contain descriptions of some employer-sponsored older worker training programs.)

PARTICIPATION IN TRAINING

To what extent do older adults participate in training? Again, information about participation is sketchy. In reporting on worker participation in training in general, an Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) report (1990) states that "surveys of workers...show that older employees receive a smaller share of both on-the-job training and outside courses than younger workers, and that training declines with age within the older worker population" (p. 229). Although older workers can compensate by taking outside courses, older adults are also underrepresented in adult education courses (ibid.).

Because of the literature's anecdotal nature, there is almost no information related to participant numbers and characteristics in private sector training programs for older workers. Rix (1990) speculates that it is unlikely that many of the trainees are over age 65 because so few people that age remain in the labor force to be trained and that, with the exception of the fast-food industry, it is doubtful whether many are even aged 55 or older.

There is evidence that federal programs designed for older workers do not serve large numbers. Because of eligibility requirements severely restricting the type of person who may participate, relatively few midlife and older persons take part in SCSEP and JTPA programs. However, even though the SCSEP does not serve a large number of people, it is an important program because it serves those who often face formidable deterrents in the private sector, that is, women, minorities, the undereducated, and those over age 65 (Rix 1990).

ISSUES RELATED TO TRAINING OLDER WORKERS

Given the current economic and demographic trends as well as the desire of many older individuals to remain in or reenter the work force, the small number of older individuals participating in training programs is cause for concern. Two frequently mentioned issues--the extent of older workers' "trainability" as well as the economic payoffs to be derived from the training--have influenced decisions about whom and when to train as well as the participation of older individuals in training.

Although employers rate older workers highly in terms of their dependability, loyalty, and commitment, they are not so positive about their abilities to learn new skills. In a survey of 400 human resource specialists, only 17 percent of survey respondents rated older workers' ability to learn new skills as either "excellent" or "very good." Furthermore, only 10 percent believed that older workers were comfortable with new technologies (American Association of Retired Persons 1986). In another survey, personnel

administrators asserted that not only did older employees resist training, but they also experienced difficulty in mastering new concepts, ideas, and approaches (OTA 1990; Rix 1990).

Employers are also likely to invest less in training older workers because they question whether an investment in training or retraining older workers will "pay off." Will the individual stay on the job long enough for the company to be able to recoup its training costs (OTA 1990; Sheppard and Rix 1989)?

Unfortunately, older adults themselves have been influenced by these issues, causing both interest and participation in training to decrease with age (Sheppard and Rix 1989). Many have accepted the negative stereotypes about their ability to learn new things as well as the doubts about the return on investing time and effort in training.

RESPONSES FROM RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Fortunately, both research and practice refute some of the negative perceptions of older workers, especially in regard to their "trainability." Even though it has not been verified, the myth that adults lose their ability to learn as they age still influences how older workers are perceived. Although there is no clear-cut answer to the question "Does intelligence decline with age?" most researchers agree there is some decline in functioning after age 60. But just what the decline is and how it affects the ability to learn is unclear (Hale 1990; Merriam and Caffarella 1991). Cognitive processes, such as intelligence, logical thinking, memory, and creativity, may decline as a part of the aging process, but such deterioration is by no means universal (Hale 1990).
A number of examples from practice also support the ability of older adults to learn new things, especially as related to technological changes in the workplace. Although there is still little documentation describing the effect on older workers when technology is introduced into the workplace, there are a few age-specific studies that have looked at adult performance in computer training. The results of these studies indicate that older workers can adjust well to computerized word processing but that they may take longer to learn and need more assistance while learning (OTA 1990; Rix 1990). For example, one study comparing adults aged 20 to 39 with those aged 50 to 84 found that older adults took twice as long to learn but achieved nearly equal performance levels (OTA 1990).

However, this is not always true. Because it was having difficulty recruiting younger workers in sufficient numbers and turnover was nearly 100 percent, the Days Inn Corporation began hiring older adults (defined as those aged 50 and over) as reservations agents in 1986. Not only were these older workers trained to operate demanding software at computer terminals, but they also acquired the skills in the same time period as their younger counterparts (Commonwealth Fund 1991). According to the OTA (1990) report, "the attitudes of management are the greatest hurdle older workers face" in terms of training in new technologies (p. 252).

Although few companies have systematically analyzed the costs and benefits of training older workers, the limited research suggests that any added costs of training older workers may be offset by savings elsewhere (Rix 1990). For example, because older workers at the Days Inn Corporation stayed on the job longer than younger workers (3 years as compared to 1 year), the return on investment in their training was actually greater than that of younger workers. They were also better sales people than younger workers, generating additional revenue by booking more reservations (Commonwealth Fund 1991).

American Airlines acknowledges some monetary advantages in its plan to recruit individuals in the 40- to 65-year age range to be trained as flight attendants because a 55-year-old will not accrue as much in pension benefits as a 22-year-old recruit who spends 40 years with the company. In addition, the older recruits will not be compensated for any previous related experience but will receive the same salary and expense package as all first-year attendants ("Older Attendants Take Off at Airline" 1991).

Undoubtedly, as more older individuals continue to have successful experiences in both training programs and the work force, the issues of "trainability" and training payoff will dissipate. Already, many forward-looking businesses are looking beyond the negative stereotypes and developing programs to attract and retain older workers (Rothstein 1989).

REFERENCES

American Association of Retired Persons. Workers over 50: Old Myths, New Realities. Washington, DC: AARP, 1986. (ED 284 059).
Commonwealth Fund. Case Studies at Major Corporations. New York, NY: CF, May 1991.

Hale, N. The Older Worker. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1990.

Johnston, W. B., and Packer, A. H. Workforce 2000. Indianapolis, IN: Hudson Institute, 1987. (ED 290 887).

Merriam, S. B., and Caffarella, R. Learning in Adulthood. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1991.

Moon, M., and Hushbeck, J. "Options for Extending Work Life." Generations 8, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 27-30.

Office of Technology Assessment. Worker Training: Competing in the New International Economy. Washington, DC: OTA, September 1990. (ED 326 622).

"Older Attendants Take Off at Airline." The Columbus Dispatch, August 5, 1991, pp. 1-2E.

Rix, S. E. Older Workers. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1990.

Rothstein, F. B. Continuing to Work: JTPA and the Older Worker. Washington, DC: National Association of Counties, May 1989. (ED 309 259).

Sheppard, H., and Rix, S. Retooling the Older Worker: The Case of the United States. Tampa: International Exchange Center on Gerontology, University of South Florida, 1989. (ED 308 287).

Developed by Susan Imel with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under Contract No. RI88062005. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of OERI or the Department. Digests may be freely reproduced.

—

Title: Older Worker Training: An Overview. ERIC Digest No. 114.
Document Type: Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);
Descriptors: Adult Education, Aging (Individuals), Corporate Education, Older Adults, On the Job Training, Participation, Recruitment
Identifiers: ERIC Digests, Older Workers
###

—

[Return to ERIC Digest Search Page]