

There are two things you will never hear in an interview. First, “We don’t want you because you are too old” and second, “We don’t want you because you scare us.” The reason you won’t hear these excuses for not hiring an older worker is because the first is illegal, and, as for the second, no interviewer would ever admit to being scared or intimidated by a more mature worker. This, however, does not mean that your age is not on the prospective employer’s mind. The grand dame of the American theater, Helen Hayes, eloquently stated, “**Age only matters if you are a cheese**”. Unfortunately in the minds of some employers, older workers present a myriad of problems that make them less than desirable hires. Generally, there are at least ten myths that need to be comprehended and confronted. They deal primarily with beliefs that older employees are less productive, and more expensive to employ. The truth is that older workers are less expensive and more productive! By understanding these myths and the truths that render them invalid, you will improve your chances of succeeding in both finding and holding on to that next job.

Myth 1: Older workers are not energetic enough.

Truth:

Fast paced work environments have been around since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Prior to the convenience of instant communications and high technology, workers were required to stay productive though long days in manufacturing, construction, and agriculture. Employees in these demanding occupations often labored with the same frenzy and expectation of multitasking we see in industry today. In those early years, there was no expectation of retirement, people worked energetically until disability or death.

In today’s more sophisticated work environment, “older workers” can take advantage of their experience by better organizing and pacing their work to get more done in less time. They have long ago learned to effectively deal with most of the day-to-day problems that reduce productivity and worked out effective solutions. Experienced workers can quickly provide answers to challenges that may look like mountains to a less experienced employee. These solutions are then passed on to the younger employees without the need to be re-invented.

Myth 2: Older workers are less competent.

Truth:

If the job requires great physical strength and agility, the employer might be able to make a valid case for this point, but most jobs today require critical and conceptual thinking skills, and under these conditions, the more mature employee has a great advantage.

There is a huge body of evidence supporting the contention that “with age comes wisdom.” Experience has taught them what works and what does not. Also, more experienced employees have learned to polish their written and verbal communication skills and most importantly, have developed the leadership skills needed to get the job done more efficiently than their younger colleagues. A brief examination of top business and military leaders shows that, with rare exception, they are all over fifty years old. Why, because they have the experience to know what does and does not work. They have developed strong organizational skills that can only come from experience. They made their mistakes and learned how to correct them. As new hires, experienced, mature employees bring their experience with them and in most cases need little or no training.

Myth 3: Older workers have difficulty learning new skills.

TRUTH:

There have been many studies done concerning the relationship between age and intelligence, with results clearly supporting the fact that, if anything, older workers are more intelligent. The accumulated findings show that older workers are more perceptive, emotionally stable, motivated, possess a larger body of general knowledge gained from experience and longevity, are better able to connect cause and effect, and are better able to combine all of these skills to make sound judgments and solve complex problems. These truths are at the core of why experience is essential to successful leadership. We elect older people to the Presidency of the United States; we put them at the head of large corporations and the military. The late Senator Strom Thurmond served in the U.S. Senate until he was 100 years old. Senator Robert Byrd, still serving, is now 92 years old. While you may not agree with either of them politically, both have demonstrated high levels of intelligence. Similarly, only the brightest minds make it to the Supreme Court of the United States where the average age of the nine sitting justices is 68. The oldest and longest Justice is 89 year old, John Paul Stevens. The second woman and second oldest member of the Court is 76 year old, Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

In case you need more examples, the oldest manager in the history of Major League Baseball was Connie Mack who managed until he was 87 years old. The oldest current manager is 67 year old Joe Torre and his team is in first place. Casey Stengel managed the New York Mets well into his 70's. Just about everywhere you look, with a few exceptions; the top leaders demonstrate the skill and wisdom that comes with experience.

In the article “The twilight of Sen. Robert Byrd” published by the Associated Press on the occasion of his 90th birthday, Senator Robert Byrd said in a statement:

"It isn't a news flash that I'm getting older or that I walk with canes. . . . Age really is not the issue it may appear to be. When it comes to political office, what really matters are things like drive, determination and the desire to serve. The ability to look to the future with an eye toward the possibilities and how to make them reality is much more important than a number that denotes one's years on this earth."

Myth 4: Older workers are unable to grasp or accept new technology.

TRUTH:

Not only do mature employees learn as well or better than their younger colleagues, they are better listeners and know how to learn. Comparative studies measuring the differences between traditional students aged 17-25 and non-traditional students between 49 and 72 years of age, conducted at California State University, revealed that the older student population received the same grade spread as their younger classmates. They also found that older students were more likely to complete the course of study, were better equipped to question subjective course content, make judgments about relevancy, and weave their way through complex concepts and ideas. Studies have also shown that older students are more intuitive, better able to use theory and apply logic in their quest to solve real world problems.

Many people believe that older workers are uncomfortable with modern technology, but in most cases we invented it. It wasn't twenty somethings that put Neil Armstrong on the moon. Oh, by the way, fastest growing group of internet users are over 50 years old.

Myth 5: Older workers are overqualified for the positions to which they apply.

Truth:

When mature workers are approaching their retirement years, many are often seeking positions that may appear to be less challenging or monetarily rewarding than their previous position. These opportunities, however, may be exactly what they require. A job with less stress and perhaps an opportunity to pass on the wisdom acquired during throughout their career. An older worker under these circumstances will be an excellent team member without an agenda and focused on productivity instead of politics.

Myth 6: Older workers are more likely to quit.

Truth:

Younger workers are likely to change jobs every three or four years, at very high cost to the company. Their career goals often can be better served if they leave the Company that has trained them and offer their services to a competitor that is anxious to hire them. An older worker rarely has this type of agenda. He or she is contented to contribute to the prosperity of the Company with no expectations other than to enjoy their work experience. It is very expensive and disruptive to replace and train key members of any Company. A study published by 9to5.org reported that 88% of women over 45 are less likely to leave their jobs voluntarily than younger workers.

Myth 7: Older workers are resistant to change.

Truth:

The real secret here is that ideas leading to change are most often generated by older employees who have had a lot of experience and can more readily see ways to improve current processes and procedures. The reason for this is simple. They can see the big picture. ***“You got to like your work. You have got to like what you are doing, you have got to be doing something worthwhile so you can like it -- because it is worthwhile, that it makes a difference, don't you see?”*** **Colonel Harland Sanders . . .** At age 65 Colonel Sanders, using his first Social Security check to cover travel expenses, founded his Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise restaurant chain after over 1,000 rejections. The Colonel worked for the next twenty-five years until he passed away three months after his ninetieth birthday.

Myth 8: Older workers require higher compensation than young people.

Truth:

This is another one of those bogus ideas. If a mature worker is seeking a position with possibly less stress, and an opportunity to extend his or her career by mentoring younger employees and passing on the wisdom gained with years of experience, he or she usually has very reasonable compensation expectations that would provide far more productivity than your typical younger employee. In many cases the older employee that is approaching the end of a career is more interested in job description and the ability to contribute than maximizing income.

Myth 9: Older workers need more days off which is a big expense for the company.

Truth:

This is nonsense because that statement would only apply to workers with longer seniority. Only long term workers (old or young) accrue more paid time off. All new hires, regardless of age, are eligible for the same number of paid days for vacation, illness or holidays. For those who require numbers, the American Council of Life Insurance conducted a study which revealed that employees over 45 years old took an average 3.1 days of sick leave per year, while those ranging from 17 to 44 years old took an average of 3.8 days.

Myth 10: Older workers increase the company's health insurance costs.

Truth:

This does not always hold true. The reason is simply because employers may be only looking at part of the numbers and apparently guessing the rest. Many older applicants no longer have dependents at home that need to be insured via their plan, thus possibly saving the company premiums they would pay for dependent coverage. Some older workers, themselves, may choose to get their health benefits through a spouse or partner, who is also insured, possibly on a cheaper plan. Further, older applicants are much less likely to need maternity benefits, which can be the biggest draw on medical coverage coffers.

Myth 11: Older workers are, in general, a cost burden to the company.

Truth:

Merely considering the direct costs of employees, without also considering the costs of training and more frequently replacing employees is not a valid measure of cost. The increased likelihood of quality work resulting in higher customer satisfaction, the ability to solve costly complex problems and the reduced likelihood of costly mistakes, must also factor into your cost considerations. In the new global economy business organizations need all the talent and experience they can muster if they have any hope of being competitive. As you can see, by turning their backs on experienced talent, companies are practicing a false economy and end up, as the old cliché goes, shooting themselves in the foot. In many case, they spend two dollars to save one. Where is the profit in that?

Conclusion:

These eleven myths about older workers are all refuted by the truth, but that alone will not make them go away! The reality is older workers are more productive and less expensive to employ, have years of experience in the workforce to draw upon and have acquired many skills that they can pass on to younger workers. Mature, experienced workers are an asset to any company's bottom line and should be treated as such.