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# Food Service and the Older Worker: Opportunity and Challenge

## **Abstract**

While there has been frequent research into the area of older workers in other industries, the food service field has not been examined in detail. The author explores the potential role of older workers in food services and offers suggestions toward formulating policy for such individuals.

## **Keywords**

Robert H. Bosselman, Food Service and the Older Worker: Opportunity and Challenge, Atchley's, Older workers

# Food Service and The Older Worker: Opportunity and Challenge

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*While there has been frequent research into the area of older workers in other industries, the food service field has not been examined in detail. The author explores the potential role of older workers in food services and offers suggestions toward formulating policy for such individuals.*

According to Department of Labor statistics published in 1981, the food service industry will have tremendous potential for employment during the next decade. Among the fastest-growing occupations are three that are food service oriented: food service workers, service personnel, and kitchen helpers. A review of all positions related to the food service industry reveals ratings of faster than average growth when compared to other occupations.<sup>1</sup>

Food service is often characterized by the employment of numerous young workers. While the number of young persons has been plentiful in past years, the pendulum has now returned to pre-baby boom levels. It is predicted that there will be a decrease of seven million young workers between now and the year 2000.<sup>2</sup> This decrease in availability will likely affect the food service industry, as will the fact that the food service industry tends to lack appeal. Since today's society is better educated and skilled, people have higher job aspirations than the low-ranking food service industry.

The combination of an increased demand for workers and a decreased supply of available workers may create a significant void in the food service field. One possible solution to this problem is the older workers. As the number of young people decreases, the number of elderly in the society is increasing rapidly. It has been suggested that at least half of all working adults desire to continue working past the standard retirement age.<sup>3</sup> Further support for the utilization of older workers may come from the government and from society in general. The problems of the Social Security program are predicted to continue into the future. If current rates of retirement persist, it will take 2.5 workers to support each retiree by the year 2000.<sup>4</sup> The older worker can fill the approaching gap in the food service labor pool, and in doing so can provide options for these workers to con-

tinue satisfying lifestyles.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the economy of the nation may benefit.

### **Older Workers Bring Positive Factors**

There are numerous myths concerning older workers, but little research to substantiate the claims. Research indicates that the older worker is at least as productive as a younger one,<sup>6</sup> less likely to leave or be absent, and, perhaps most important, more loyal to the organization.<sup>7</sup> This last characteristic is similar to Atchley's finding that "being dependable and reliable" ranks first in the ranking of personal goals by persons age 50 and over.<sup>8</sup> These are important considerations to the food service industry where rates of low productivity, turnover, and absenteeism exceed that of other industries. Older workers are also mature, and this may be an overlooked obvious point. Because they are rich with experience, they can share with younger persons and are likely to relate well to them. The potential for older worker/younger worker cooperation is significant; witness the intergenerational success of the Foster Grandparent Program. In addition, the mature older worker can often serve as an effective manager or supervisor.

While older individuals desire work, many cannot and do not want to work a full shift. Food service employs more part-time workers than any other industry; this means that many options for older persons exist. Constant utilization of temporary, part-time employees can become a costly measure for many companies,<sup>9</sup> but a consistent part-time work force of elderly persons may help reduce overall costs. Denny's Restaurants now employs older persons as part-time managers if they have previous managerial experience. With food service operating 24 hours a day, older workers also enable operators to staff shifts during times then younger workers are in school or engaged in other activities.

Burger King, Wendy's International, and Ponderosa System, Inc. are other food service operators involved in active pursuit of older workers. A recent article in the National Restaurant Association (NRA) *News* featured personnel directors from each of these corporations. Along with the usual comments about less turnover and absenteeism, each director stated that older workers appreciated the job for the sake of the job; they were work-oriented, set ideal work habits as examples for younger workers, and broadened the appeal of the establishment to older age groups.<sup>10</sup> The rapid increase in the elderly population will mean more elderly customers, particularly for those companies with an acknowledged positive view of older persons.

As the service sector increases its share of the nation's business, it becomes apparent that experience and meticulous work more than make up for the physical strength required in industrial settings. The older worker seems well suited for the service sector, of which food service is one of the most important industries. Most patrons of food service establishments want quality food and quality service above all other factors. It can be observed that a reciprocal relationship exists between these criteria and the caring, dependable older worker. The

food service industry offers a unique opportunity for role continuity to positively intervene in what social gerontologists call "the atrophy of opportunity," which typically leads to disengagement or withdrawal from society.<sup>11</sup>

### **Aging Policy Can Be Molded**

The move to extend active working life is not without problems; however, most emanate from the customs and practices of society. Some statisticians predict a continuation of current retirement patterns well into the next century.<sup>12</sup> Another cultural force to overcome is the hesitation of many employers to hire older workers.<sup>13</sup> It is clear that with an aging work force, new revisions in human resource management are necessary.<sup>14</sup> Since most food service operations are in the early stages of human resource development,<sup>15</sup> an aging policy can be molded to complement an overall human resource policy.

It is within the corporation that commitment to such a policy must develop, and it must have the approval of top level officials. Although food service personnel practices have improved dramatically in recent years, the problems of dealing with employees still plague the industry. Many companies continue to focus only on short-term results, thus limiting their opportunities for success. Effective and productive management requires modern strategies<sup>16</sup> and an accepted timetable for implementation.

Overcoming cultural bias is a significant step toward a policy for aging workers. The orientation toward youth in our society remains strong, although many industries now recognize the increasing importance of the mature market. Older workers must still overcome the stigma of chronological age regardless of research which indicates their resourcefulness. While sometimes not as physically capable as young workers, older workers still perform their work at productive levels. In today's facilities with modern technology, the role of physical prowess is secondary to that of quality work.

Although some research has indicated that older workers are less likely to participate in training or skill improvement programs, this may reflect a prejudicial or discriminating social milieu rather than a lack of interest. It has been alleged that the older worker may be inflexible and resistant to change. However, this observation does not consider the superordinate variable of motivation,<sup>17</sup> which may eliminate attitudinal bent toward the status quo. Creative personnel policies for the older worker can incorporate these minor limiting factors and, at the same time, meet organizational and individual needs.

### **Age Structure Exists Everywhere**

Companies need to establish policies which accept older workers as integral components of the work force since every work force has an age structure. The focus should be on the abilities of older workers, not on their needs. As many authors have recently indicated, a great deal can be learned from observing Japan. The Japanese have established health management systems to enable older workers to maintain reflex and response time, muscle power, and dexterity. In

addition, job functions are realigned to give older workers tasks to which their aptitudes are better suited.<sup>18</sup> Sweden is another nation which cares deeply for its older population. There, the role of the government is quite strong in establishing protective policies for senior workers. While the United States has raised the mandatory retirement age to 70 for many occupations, the possibility of a national older worker policy appears dim. Federal law protects the older worker from discrimination, but it remains the responsibility of corporations to create an aging worker policy.

An effective work policy requires organizations to examine their structure and occupational designs. Initially, the need will be for more professional research.<sup>19</sup> A key to success will be the creation or modification of employment and remunerative policies to enhance their appeal to older workers. The possibilities are quite numerous: permanent part-time options, job redesign, job sharing, retraining programs, flextime, increased vacation time, phased retirement, delayed retirement credits, continued pension benefit accruals, job reassignment, age-neutral performance appraisals, expanded education programs, job rotation, and pre-retirement planning.

An aging worker policy requires the endorsement of top management to indicate corporate commitment and relation to corporate philosophy. Wording communicates clearly the commitment to, and compliance with, all legal requirements concerning hiring, compensation, benefits, promotion, termination, recruitment, and training. An asset for the organization would be to retain a recognized director of older worker affairs who serves as liaison between management and the work force, with the power and legitimization of an affirmative action director. Another element of the policy could state the organization's role with regard to retirement privileges, associations, activities, and continued liaison and inclusion with the formal planning of the organization.

The effective management of an older work force is dependent on a multi-dimensional program which includes job development, skill development, health promotion, and retirement education. Effective policies should emanate from top management and be clearly communicated to all levels of employees. These policies should be flexible enough to meet the abilities and needs of older workers while remaining consistent with organizational constraints. The key areas of older worker policies will be hiring and separation, pay and benefits, assessment and counseling, training and development, and options for extended working life.

The food service industry has the potential to give older workers the opportunity for continued life satisfaction. Industry should consider partnerships with government and academic institutions to develop the research base with regard to older workers. Some companies have recognized the issue and already are promoting its positive elements. It will take time, but perhaps the union of food service and the older worker will improve not only the two parties involved, but all of society.

## Footnotes

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