MULTIPLYING INVESTMENT, INSURANCE & RETIREMENT KNOWLEDGE

PROJECT M

DEMOGRAPHICS

Working with old age

Old age does not have the best of reputations in industrialized nations. Yet brain research shows that intellectual performance improves with age.

Older workers' ability to work productively is often questioned, particularly in economically difficult times. Yet this is an unjust conclusion, according to Beatrice Wagner, co-author of a guidebook to working productively in old age.

"Only a minority of people suffer from dementia, depression or the effects of a stroke in old age", says Wagner. "The majority remain more or less healthy. Intellectual capacity even improves in some areas because our brain needs time to mature."

While this may have gourmets thinking of whiskey, wine and cheese, mature thinking requires more than sitting idly for years. "The difference is one has to work hard to improve brain power. Like a muscle, it requires training," says Wagner, who published *Je älter, desto besser* (2010) in German.

Her co-author, psychologist Ernst Pöppel, lives the life he and Wagner describe in their popular science book. Having been forced to retire as a professor of medical psychology from Ludwig-Maximilians University Munich at age 68, Pöppel now spends much of his time working in Asia.

Less stigmatized than in the Western world, older workers' experience is often welcomed in Asian countries. Retirement is viewed as a transition in which responsibility and knowledge are passed on to the next generation as illustrated by Mayekawa, the Japanese manufacturer of cooling systems.

Mayekawa enables employees aged 60 and older to yield responsibility to younger colleagues, pass on knowledge and reduce output without leaving the company. Mayekawa employees are not hindered by a strict retirement age.

The value of experience is confirmed by studies such as *Productivity and age: Evidence from work teams at the assembly line*. Older workers may make more careless mistakes, but catastrophic errors are more likely to be committed by the young, according to the study. Experience seems to outweigh the deficits that may come with old age.

CATCHING ITS BREATH

Now in his mid-seventies, Pöppel spends several months a year as a visiting professor in Beijing, helping to build universities in Singapore and Taiwan in his area of expertise: the perception of time by the human brain.

When researching its physiology, Pöppel looked more deeply into how intellectual capacity develops as we age. He found that humans have a window of perception lasting approximately three seconds. With awareness peaking at the beginning and waning towards the end, Pöppel speaks of an "attention caesura". The three second window of perception is divided into shorter intervals of 30 to 40 milliseconds, in which sensory impressions are no longer differentiated but perceived as happening simultaneously. Following this rhythm, the brain closes out sensory input to avoid collapse under a barrage of impressions.

These intervals – Pöppel calls them "oscillations" – extend to 50 or 60 milliseconds with age, meaning the brain takes in more information per processing interval. While this obviously takes longer, causing older people to think more slowly, they also do so more thoroughly.

How does this affect the coexistence of young and old at work? “It is younger colleagues’ task to throw out multitudes of ideas, while older workers shape these ideas into maturity, carefully thinking them through and offering verification.”

It has long been held against older people that by working longer, they make it harder for the young to find a job. Yet in a mixed-age team, older members of staff not only share valuable knowledge, but the newcomers’ exuberance may also help motivate their more senior colleagues.

WHAT TO DO

A higher employment rate among older workers is desirable for two reasons, write Pöppel and Wagner. The fiscal burden on government finances is reduced due to lower numbers of retirees while employment can help to keep older workers mentally fit. If working is not an option, Pöppel and Wagner suggest defining goals and benchmarks before retiring. “This makes the transition into retirement more seamless and can help to avoid depression", says Wagner.

Rhythmic movement such as dancing may also support the brain’s performance. Physical activity in general strengthens concentration and coordination capabilities. This may be a short walk, but it also helps to lie on the beach: The sound of rolling waves supports the basic rhythm of the brain, according to Pöppel and Wagner.

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