Chapter 3

The Value of the Mature Worker: Knowledge Management/Transfer in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the literature that addresses the knowledge management (KM) of mature workers, namely Baby Boomers, in the workforce and how that KM helps employees and organizations achieve career goals. This chapter considers the time-sensitive nature of organizational implementation of effective KM practices as they pertain to this population. Additionally, two key themes are drawn out and discussed: frequent and active integration of KM and community as the vehicle for KM. This chapter concludes with suggestions for future research to addresses existing gaps in the literature.

INTRODUCTION

Mature workers have had a significant impact on the workforce during their tenure. They possess decades of institutional knowledge, competitive analysis, and industry experience which each represent a sizable financial asset to their respective organizations. However, the mass exodus of baby boomers into retirement poses an imminent problem (Ball & Gotsill, 2011; DeLong, 2004). Thus, workforce development practitioners are working against the clock to capture the valuable
knowledge and experience of mature workers and to transfer that knowledge and experience to their younger and less experienced counterparts (DeLong, 2004).

Bockman and Sirotnik (2008) contend that defining the mature worker is much less about one’s numerical age and more about chronology and knowledge currency. However, for the purpose of this chapter, the phrase ‘mature worker’ will be used synonymously with ‘baby boomer’ to describe individuals of a certain age who hold significant professional, historical, and personal experiences. It should also be noted that the proverbial brackets around the definition of a ‘mature worker,’ or ‘baby boomer,’ should be viewed somewhat loosely, leaving latitude to acknowledge that generational identifiers are generalizations which do not necessarily apply to every circumstance, case, or individual.

This chapter will explore the scholarship which addresses the value of mature workers and the time-sensitive nature of knowledge management as it pertains to this population. Additionally, emergent themes that pertain to knowledge management and transfer will be discussed, along with gaps in the current literature and implications for future research. The authors of this chapter seek to provide a comprehensive overview of the challenges and opportunities presented by the presence of mature individuals in the workplace, as well as a foundational introduction to some of the unique ways that managers and human resource development professionals are working to capture and transfer the knowledge of this group before they leave the workforce.

**BABY BOOMERS**

The term baby boomer is used to describe individuals who were born during the population boom that occurred immediately following World War II, between the years 1946–1964 (Wiedmer, 2015; Houck, 2011). They started their careers “during a period of unprecedented restructuring of American industry, with widespread workforce reductions, streamlining, and reorganizations, all aimed at generating greater output from fewer people” (Hall & Richter, 1990, p. 7). Additionally, baby boomers entered their professions in a time when the country was redefining itself politically and socially (Wiedmer, 2015). Thus, it is no surprise that these men and women have been disruptors in society and in business since their coming-of-age. With unique perspectives and values, baby boomers have reinvented the way the world views business, politics, and education.

Today, baby boomers are characterized as being extremely hard working and dedicated to their professional success (Wiedmer, 2015; Houck, 2011; Cennamo & Gardner, 2008). Though there are some researchers who describe baby boomers as being disinterested in professional advancement and leadership (Hall & Richter,
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