Chapter 8
How Millennial Mentors Can Help Upskill, Reskill, and Retain Mature Workers

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ABSTRACT

As the global workforce ages, organizations are seeking strategies to retain talent and encourage commitment and engagement from older employees while providing younger workers opportunities for professional development. Workplace mentoring, which has been an effective learning and development intervention for several decades, could help achieve this strategic objective. Although mentoring practice assumes that senior workers mentor junior ones, recent research has shown that mature workers may benefit from reverse mentoring where they are on the receiving end of a mentoring relationship. This chapter explores how millennial mentors may help with the retention, upskilling, and reskilling of mature employees and presents recommendations for optimal success when matching generationally different mentoring pairs. The author concludes by presenting theoretical and practical implications and suggestions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

“Mature workers will be a firm’s largest source of talent in the next two decades. There will not be enough younger workers for all the positions an organization needs to fill, particularly those requiring advanced manufacturing skills or advanced education in science, technology, engineering and math.” (SHRM Foundation, 2014, p. x)

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Within the next few years, millennial workers are projected to make up fifty percent of the U.S. workforce and up to seventy-five percent by 2025 (BLS, 2015; 2017). While much thought has been given to how business leaders can get the most from millennial workers, the true challenge is more complex: the workforce of the near future will be multigenerational and will include members from four generations, the oldest being the Baby Boomers (referred to as mature workers in this chapter). Per a recent report by the Society of Human Resource Management Foundation (SHRM Foundation, 2014, p. 1), hiring and retaining talented mature employees is good business for most organizations. Mature workers represent an untapped well of talents and will become even more valuable in the next few decades. They have experience and skills honed during decades of employment and possess industry knowledge that is vital to the sustainability of today’s economy. They are competent and committed collaborators who have mastered the art of communicating effectively, of optimizing revenue, results, and relationships (SHRM Foundation, 2014). While mature workers have been transitioning into retirement, organizations have been struggling to retain their skills, tacit, and explicit knowledge. Conversely, because they are not digital natives, a majority of mature workers lack confidence when using the latest technology in their work (Holian, 2015; SHRM Foundation, 2014). This does not mean that they are not interested in learning new things or are unable to keep up with technology (SHRM Foundation, 2014, p. 6). Yet, businesses are increasingly dependent on the use of technology to operate and compete domestically and globally. Mature workers in human resource departments, for instance, may struggle with how artificial intelligence is increasingly used in recruiting, training, and analytics to predict employee turnover and to design retention strategies. It is in any organization’s financial interest to find ways to train its employees for optimal performance. The fields of Human Resource Development (HRD) and workforce development are leading these efforts of developing mature workers for continuous technological change.

For several decades, HRD professionals have been considering workplace mentoring as a key strategy for employee attraction and retention, especially in organizations that have learning as one of their foundational attributes (Hezlett & Gibson, 2007). Mentoring offers an inexpensive method of engaging in continuous learning, reliance on informal learning, and on-the-job development (Bierema & Hill, 2005; Hezlett & Gibson, 2005, 2007). In fact, close to 70% of Fortune 500 companies offer traditional mentoring programs (Murphy, 2012, p.555). Pairing millennial workers who have technical skills with mature employees who know business strategy and have tacit and explicit knowledge could be mutually beneficial if the pairing meets the needs and expectations of both parties (Baily, 2007). It may also bridge the need of organizations to engage, train, and retain both generations of workers.
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