



# Best Practices for Recruiting and Retaining Older Workers

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Huntington Ingalls Industries employs five generations of workers. Let that sink in: Employees range from members of the Silent Generation in their 70s and 80s all the way to the Centennial Generation, or Generation Z, those born after 1995. The biggest group is the Baby Boomers, making up 40% of Huntington Ingalls' workforce.

Huntington Ingalls, the largest military shipbuilding company in the U.S., aims to attract older workers for their knowledge and expertise in the industry. But it has been able to retain those older workers—sometimes for decades—by building a leadership team and company culture that respect and value mature workers, says Bill Ermatinger, executive vice president and chief human resources officer of Huntington Ingalls Industries.

Navy ships take six to eight years to build and will have a lifecycle of about 50 years. “We have a workforce that has built [that ship], fixed it and decommissioned it,” Ermatinger says. “Having that experienced employee with that kind of knowledge is high value.”

Companies didn't always have the outlook that Huntington Ingalls has. In fact, in 1964, workers over 45 were barred from a quarter of all job openings in the private sector, while those over 55 were barred from half of the job openings, according to the American Bar Association. Those over 65 were barred from almost all of these jobs. The United States has improved substantially in its treatment of older workers since the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) was passed in 1967.

COMMEMORATING THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ADEA

**Fifty years ago, before ADEA**, it was legal for employers to vocally refuse to hire workers based on their age, to lay off or force older workers into retirement, or to run job ads indicating an age preference or cutoff, among other discriminatory practices. Such practices hit workers 65 and older the hardest, but affected workers even in their 40s.

**Fifty years after ADEA**, it's important that employers now develop or enhance programs aimed at recruiting and retaining older workers to stay competitive as the workforce continues to age and Baby Boomers retire in droves. Furthermore, with the growth of social media and the influx of Millennial workers—now the largest group in the U.S. workforce—employers and HR professionals must be mindful that they are not unwittingly focusing recruitment and retention practices solely on younger workers.

## Consider the following best practices to attract older workers and improve the age diversity of your workforce:

### 1 Don't list "maximum years" of experience in a job ad.

Although listing a required minimum number of years of experience is quite common, some ads now include a required maximum number of years of experience, which has a negative effect on older workers. "It's

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difficult to conceive of any legitimate employer objective that's served by having less-experienced people," says Debbie Chalfie, AARP's senior legislative representative for financial security and consumer affairs. If your concern is salary, simply state the salary range to find the right people. If you want to alert candidates that it is an entry-level job, simply state that, Chalfie says.

"Give an accurate description of the job and what the responsibilities are so that the person who is applying for it knows what they're applying for," says Laurie McCann, senior attorney at AARP Foundation Litigation. "They may have any number of reasons why they're interested in it despite having more years of experience."

### 2 Avoid language such as "digital natives" or "new or recent grads preferred."

These phrases are aimed at younger workers. Again, if the job is entry-level, state that. Employers may be

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using these terms because of stereotypes of older workers as not being tech-savvy. However, most older workers have been using computers their entire careers and learned not only continuous software upgrades over the years but also how to use social media on the job. Being a digital native

doesn't necessarily mean a person knows how to appropriately and strategically use digital products and social media in an employment setting.



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### If you are targeting a new group of candidates—such as older workers—you may need to reach beyond employee referral programs.

Employees recruit whom they know, which tends to be people their own age and often their own race and ethnicity. Referral programs tend to only promote diversity if your workforce is already diverse.

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### Broaden your recruiting beyond college campuses.

Don't require applicants to use e-mail addresses connected to a university. "It's one thing to recruit on a college campus among other places, but to only recruit on campus for a job or to require that your e-mail address be tied to a university obviously is going to highly favor current college students or recent graduates," Chalfie says.

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### Avoid telling applicants they are "overqualified."

Although employers are right to be concerned about how long a worker will stay at a job, tenure is difficult to predict for any age. Older workers may want to learn new skills the job provides, transition to a new career entirely, join a company they truly believe in or improve their commute. The reasons are endless.

"Unfortunately, older workers bear the brunt of that kind of stereotype, that if you're overqualified, you're just going to take it and jump ship the minute

something better comes along," McCann says. "The truth is workers of all ages leave for greener pastures." In fact, older workers are more likely to stay in jobs longer than younger workers, because of both generational differences and lifestyle demands. Older workers are more likely to have

responsibilities such as a mortgage and children's college fees and be tied to their communities.

Instead of assuming someone is overqualified, ask all applicants "where does this position fall along your career path?" This gives the applicants an opportunity to discuss how the job fits with their broader career plans, and gives the interviewer a better idea of the candidate's goals.



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### Don't make assumptions based on salary history.

Mature workers may be interested in an "encore career" in a different field and may be willing to accept lower

Mature workers may be willing to accept lower pay to try something new.

pay to try something new. In fact, in an effort to improve the persistent gender pay gap, some states such as Massachusetts have recently passed laws banning employers from asking for salary history during the employment screening and interviewing process.

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### Check your online recruiting sites to ensure mature workers are able to apply.

On some sites, job seekers trying to build a profile or resume can find it's impossible to complete some forms because drop-down menus needed to complete fields such as birth date or graduation date don't go back far enough to let older applicants fill them out.

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### Consider not asking for birth dates or graduation dates on initial applications.

Some online job applications require these dates and won't allow applicants to move on without filling them in. Knowing these dates allows hiring managers to easily determine a person's age even before they meet, which can lead to bias or assumptions. You do not need this information to interview someone. If the information is needed for background checks, collect it later in the process. That information can also be separated out so it goes only to the background check company, not to the hiring manager.

Ask all applicants 'where does this position fall along your career path?'



## Think about the message you're sending.

Job ads and websites that describe companies as fast-paced, energetic or innovative may seem targeted to younger candidates and could discourage older workers from applying. Recruiting ads focused on all the “fun” activities—happy hours and “take your dog to work day”—make companies sound more like extensions of college than professional work environments. Be sure your recruiting messages focus on the job responsibilities, requirements and goals of your organization. To attract an age-diverse candidate pool, your website photos should include both young and old employees.

As you consider your hiring practices, take time to evaluate your benefits and programs and reflect on whether your workplace is inviting to older workers.

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In 2014 SHRM research, 42% of respondents said the aging workforce had not yet prompted them to make changes in their recruiting or management practices. Of HR professionals who indicated it was difficult or very difficult for their organization to retain older workers, the three most challenging factors revolved around the inability to offer flexible work options: flexibility

in work location (such as telecommuting), career flexibility (reduced responsibilities or flexibility in shifts) or work-hour flexibility (reduced hours, job-sharing, phased retirement).

## Change Your Mindset

About 12 years ago, Bon Secours Virginia Health System was up against a chronic shortage of health care workers in the U.S. The company decided to reevaluate what it offered its employees, including older workers. “We methodically went through the benefits and policies and identified barriers to retaining older workers,” says Jim Godwin, Bon Secours vice president of human resources.

Bon Secours revamped its antiquated retirement plan, which penalized older workers who wanted to cut back on hours. The new “phased retirement” system allows employees to scale back their hours as they get older. Their retirement earnings are now based on their five highest years of earnings, not their last five years of employment. In addition, employees can work as few as two days a week and still receive health, dental and vision coverage. These benefits are particularly helpful for employees who need to bridge the gap until they qualify for Medicare, Godwin says.

Several programs recognized that many workers were taking on more responsibilities for their grandchildren, while some others were taking care of their elderly parents. Three of the system’s hospitals have onsite child care, which grandparents who have custody of their grandchildren can now use. Employees also have access to an elder care program—at a rate up to 50% off regular costs—that sends a licensed practical nurse, physician assistant or registered nurse to an employee’s home to take care of an elderly parent during the day.

Bon Secours also allows for flexibility in schedules. For example, employees can adjust their hours to allow them to drop off and pick up their elderly parents from adult day services. Schedules have been adjusted so workers who use public transit can coordinate work with the transit schedule.

Although these steps have improved worker programs and benefits, Godwin says it’s about more than implementing a few new policies. Employers have to shift their mindset. “We thought philosophically what we wanted to do to attract workers, especially older workers. Then we began to knock down barriers.”

## Benefits of Older Workers

Older workers tend to shine in many areas critical to an organization’s success.

Studies have shown that older workers are:

- Less resistant to change than younger workers.
- Less likely to leave the organization.
- Less likely to miss work.
- Are innovative and able to keep up with technology.

According to experts, older workers also tend to excel in the following areas:

- Engagement and motivation.
- Productivity.
- Professionalism.
- Reliability.
- Problem-solving and critical thinking.
- Experience and institutional knowledge.
- Customer service.

## Additional Resources

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## Capture Older Workers' Knowledge Now

As organizations work to recruit and retain mature workers, the reality is that Baby Boomers are retiring at record rates. It is critical you capture mature workers' institutional knowledge while you have them, says Bill Ermatinger, executive vice president and chief human resources officer of Huntington Ingalls Industries.

Huntington Ingalls recognizes its employees as "Master Ship Builders" when they reach 40 unbroken years of service. This is not a handful of people. There are 1,200 Master Ship Builders out of about 36,000 workers. When those experts retire, the informal processes that keep the company running will be lost if not captured now, Ermatinger says.

Hurricane Katrina sped up that process. At Ingalls Shipbuilding in Pascagoula, Miss., 24 percent of the workforce had 25 years of service or more the day before the hurricane hit. After Katrina, that

number plummeted to 4 percent as employees whose homes were destroyed and/or who didn't want to deal with future hurricanes retired and moved away. On-the-ground, informal processes passed along from employee to employee were lost.

Now, the company is working with near-retirees at all of its facilities to capture those informal processes into formal processes and manuals for future generations. Ermatinger recommends organizations "immediately look at their processes and procedures to see if all that informality is baked into them." In other words, he says, "While you have them here, you better tap them as a resource."



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