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THE POWER OF THE PEOPLE YOU OVERLOOK

The hidden value of tapping nontraditional talent pools (and how they can put your business over the top).

When we talk about aging employees, disabled workers, immigrants, the formerly incarcerated, or people with criminal records, where does your mind go? Do you see these folks as valued additions to your workplace or “mercy” hires? If it’s the latter, ask yourself, Am I caught up in the wrapping?

Changing your mindset means seeing the real opportunities. No question, this new work world is going to be filled with shifts and pivots after a massive stretch of unemployment. A crisis always reveals who took the difficult moments and workplace challenges and became the aggressive visionaries of industry—and who became paralyzed.

The winners and losers of our times will shake out, but fundamentally we are experiencing a population decline in the United States, and globally; and with the exception of a few countries, we’re aging. As a result, we are going to have fewer human resources available to achieve growth in business.

So, we have a numbers problem. A survey from McKinsey revealed that 87 percent of executives expressed concern about a skills gap and fewer than half knew what to do about it.¹ But you

don't need a divining rod to find talent; you need a plan to overcome both the math problem and the stigma issues.

This is not pro bono work. You are preparing your company for the next era. There are new pools of talent filled with workers who will add skills, innovation, positive morale, and a strong bottom line. Yet here we are, with so many leaders trapped in their own cul-de-sac.

What are the real reasons people have not looked beyond the same-old, same-old yet? Ignorance? Laziness? Complacency? Fear of the unknown? Fear of lower profits? Let's focus on the top executives for a minute. Do they like the status quo? Are they only comfortable with someone like them? What would happen if an HR executive brought you a CFO candidate in a wheelchair?

It's a gut check. As humans we're all flawed, but you have to ask yourself the hard questions. Can you see yourself across the desk from a disabled Black woman or an aging veteran from the Iraq War? As I've mentioned before, there is intersectionality in our society. A lot of people tick a ton of checkboxes, if you will, but they are not commonly considered.

Now you're seeing the belly of the beast, where fear of discomfort lives. But here is what's really uncomfortable—losing. Losing the competition for talent. Losing the edge in your industry. So, ignore pools of uncommon talent at your own risk, because these people can be transformative assets for your organization.

Where are these skilled workers? They are on various networks, they are companies of one, they are all ages, they are military veterans, and they are even former offenders. Smart leaders can learn to find the right talent, effectively develop them on the job, and keep them passionately engaged in a way that also creates a desirable culture of community, collaboration, and innovation. (See the resources section at the back of the book for more.)

This is a wake-up argument and appeal for leaders to acknowledge long-undisputed facts such as how having 50 percent or more women on your team increases innovation, or how hiring disabled workers increases both morale and retention rates, or how not all workers want to be permanent employees. The contemporary mindset isn't just about being ready for change; it's also about being fed up with the lack of change and having the determination to do something about it.

DO GOOD AND DO GOOD

When you discuss recruiting with HR professionals, 48 percent of them will tell you their biggest problem is finding a deep enough pool of talent to make good choices about hiring. When you ask managers what is their biggest frustration with HR? They can't source talent as effectively as they would like.² So, there's complete convergence.

It's about growing that talent pool to include untapped resources, increasing the pipeline, and closing the skills gap. We have to unlock the talent and tap the potential by valuing workers who have been overlooked, marginalized, and discarded. Morally, it's a move in line with diversity and inclusion (D&I). Morally, we can all have a warm feeling about it. But businesswise, it's a cold, hard necessity.

I like to say, *Do good and do good*. Because the upside is enormous: society gains, businesses thrive. We've talked a lot about valuing Black and Brown workers, about the obstacles to equal pay women face as they rise in the ranks, about racial and gender diversity. Now, let's also think about a few nontraditional, increasingly diverse groups that can help heal our skills gap.

Older Workers (The Silver Tsunami): We all get older and many of us recognize how the biggest workplace bias that exists is discrimination against individuals because of their age. Ageism never gets old. It's been fifty years since Congress made it illegal for employers to discriminate against workers age forty or older, and yet reports from the Urban Institute and ProPublica underscore the reality: more than half of older US workers say they've been pushed out of longtime jobs before they chose to retire.

America has a youth-obsessed culture, no question. But businesses that reflect this bias are only shining a mirror on their own shortcomings and insecurities. To hire so narrowly young means to overlook older talent with institutional knowledge, a history of key relationships, and a focused approach to accomplishing goals.

As we look around us, Americans are living longer and need to work more years. So, we need to bring them into the workplace and value their experience. Mature workers have honed skills over decades of employment. Many have pursued further education and expanded their skill sets during their careers and in periods of unemployment or underemployment. Retaining talented mature workers, and recruiting new ones, is simply smart for most organizations.

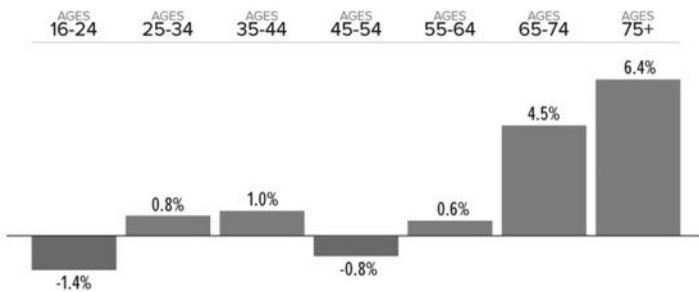
Workers with Disabilities (Able and Willing): During the Covid-19 crisis, there was one stunning headline we saw at SHRM: "A Million People with Disabilities Have Lost Jobs during the Pandemic." It was hard to wrap your head around, but beginning in March of 2020 and extending through the fall, when the coronavirus first began to spread in the United States, one in five disabled workers were dismissed by employers, in contrast to one in seven among the general population.³

While there will be an unemployment reckoning for everyone in our post-pandemic workplace, ultimately you'll face the shrinking talent pool and you'll need to find highly skilled, motivated

GROWTH RATE OF OLDER WORKERS

According to Bureau of Labor Statistics, the labor force growth rates of those sixty-five and older are projected to outpace all other age groups over the 2014–24 decade. Specifically, the sixty-five to seventy-four and seventy-five and older age groups are projected to have growth rates of 55 percent and 86 percent, respectively.

Annual Growth Rate in Labor Force by Age, 2014–2024 Predictions



Source: BLS

workers who will be an asset to your business. We have to embrace that fact and search out workers with disabilities to help grow our bottom lines.

Voya Financial is doing just that. They have been tearing down stereotypes by hiring disabled employees for several years. Making accommodations is not a burden; it's good business. In 2020, Voya's CEO joined companies like Walmart and Microsoft to write a letter to other CEOs. "We have experienced first-hand the potential for innovation, sustainability, and profit of disability inclusion," it stated. "Only 33% of working age people with disabilities are participating in the labor force—as compared to the 63% workforce participation rate for people without disabilities. We are failing to build sustainable futures that empower all."

THE ADVANTAGES OF HAVING DISABLED WORKERS IN THE WORKFORCE

A study from Accenture, in partnership with Disability:IN and the American Association of People with Disabilities, found that companies that make efforts to hire those with disabilities performed better and saw, on average, 23 percent higher revenue.

Success is part of the empowerment. Companies that incorporate candidates with disabilities have seen higher revenue, higher net income, reduced turnover, lower recruiting costs, increased productivity, and improved customer outreach.

In fact, a recent study from Accenture, in partnership with Disability:IN and the American Association of People with Disabilities, found that companies that make efforts to hire those with disabilities performed better and saw, on average, 23 percent higher revenue.

Veterans (Warriors around the World): There are so many misperceptions about veterans in the workplace that we hear about in HR: “Why bother? They’re going to get called up or relocate anyway.” . . . “I need someone who can lead, not just follow orders.” . . . “I’m concerned about bringing PTSD into the workplace.”

The arguments against hiring veterans are hollow, ignorant, and play into every Hollywood stereotype of soldiers unable to function in the civilian world. Let’s start with a basic fact: only 14 percent of the active duty military are combat specialists. Now, add other truths, such as the increasing diversity of the military and the additional education many of them have compared to civilian peers.

To overlook veterans is a disturbing failure of management. We know that employers who successfully attract and hire veterans in

VETERANS IN THE WORKFORCE DATA

- Sixty-five percent of veterans have some college education or higher, making them more educated than their civilian peers.
- Sixty-eight percent of employers report veterans perform “better than” or “much better than” their civilian peers.
- Fifty-seven percent of veterans stay at their jobs longer than the median tenure of 2.5 years (for subsequent roles after their first job following active duty).

their workplaces find that those with military backgrounds often not only outperform other employees, but also stay with the organization longer than the median length of employment.

There are so many companies recognizing this value: Coca-Cola, Home Depot, Johnson & Johnson, Intel, and, yes, SHRM. The list is growing longer because the need for skilled workers is expanding.

Formerly Incarcerated (Second-Chance Payoff): We are long past the Willie Horton stigma of the 1988 presidential campaign, back when a criminal on furlough went on a violent crime spree as America was discussing felon rehabilitation. The point is, one example blew up the entire cause for years. But what we’ve seen of late is how smart CEOs, such as Jamie Dimon at Chase, are making it a point (and a successful one) to expand their talent pool by hiring employees with criminal records. A couple of years ago, Chase reported hiring twenty thousand workers in the United States, and 10 percent of them had a criminal history. Phenomenal.

Chase went so far as to “ban the box” by removing the question of criminal records on its applications. As Dimon stated in a press release: “When someone cannot get their foot in the door to compete for a job, it’s bad for business and bad for communities

that need access to economic opportunity.”⁴ We simply need to be thoughtful about removing barriers for those who have made mistakes that led to periods of incarceration, while maintaining our own unique culture and cultural truths.

The numbers back this up. As the US government reports, for the formerly incarcerated, employment within a year after their release reduces the chance of recidivism from 32.4 percent to 19.6 percent. And yet 75 percent of those released from prison remain unemployed a year later, according to the American Civil Liberties Union.

We have to do better by them as we do better by business, too. There is no doubt the workplace is ready to give second chances to those who have served their time. SHRM helped produce a **study** revealing that while people with criminal records face additional scrutiny during the hiring process, many employees, managers, and HR professionals are open to working with and hiring people with criminal histories.

The American public is on board, too:

- Seventy-eight percent of Americans are comfortable shopping at businesses where a customer-facing employee has a nonviolent criminal record.
- Seventy-six percent are comfortable doing business with a company that offers second chances by hiring the formerly incarcerated.
- Seventy-four percent say they are comfortable being employed by a business at which some coworkers have nonviolent criminal records.⁵

The success stories back up the findings. At SHRM’s annual conference in 2019, I was fortunate to share the stage with Alice Marie Johnson, a criminal justice reform advocate. The theme of

the conference was “Creating Better Workplaces,” with an emphasis on how untapped talent pools can help close the skills gap. The story Alice told not only validated that concept—talent can be found in untraditional places—but it was life affirming, too.

Before the conference, I had met with Alice. We sat down in Colorado Springs, Colorado, at the Broadmoor hotel. I’m a lawyer—a law and order guy—and I’m a conservative in that regard. When it comes to criminal issues, my natural response is, If you commit a crime there are consequences. And those consequences might stay with you forever.

I am not a fan of people who don’t own their choices and show accountability for the decisions they make. So, when I first had a one-on-one with Alice in Colorado Springs, I didn’t exactly know what to expect.

But when she began by saying, “I did the crime.” I thought, Okay, this is accountability. I was ready to hear her story.

When she spoke at the conference she started with, “More than two decades ago, in desperation, I got involved with the wrong people and did the wrong things. I made the biggest mistake of my life. In 1996, I was convicted for a first-time, nonviolent drug offense. My sentence was life in prison.”

That’s a harsh conviction by many standards. What lead up to this horrible position she had put herself in? She grew up as one of nine children of sharecroppers. She got pregnant in high school and later found work as a secretary. By the early 1990s, she had lost a son in an accident, lost her job due to a gambling addiction, gone through a divorce, and was in bankruptcy.⁶

No career. No home. Then came the tragic decision to get involved with a Memphis organization that trafficked cocaine. In 1996, she was convicted on federal charges of money laundering and distribution. For two decades, she missed every moment of life outside prison. As she told us at the SHRM conference, “While

behind bars, I lost both of my parents. I lost the moments of watching my children grow up. I lost twenty-one years of my life.”

Alice was all but saved in 2017 by a viral video of her struggle. It caught the attention of reality-TV star Kim Kardashian. In a very public way, Kardashian personally lobbied President Trump at the White House in an effort to gain clemency for Alice, and it worked.⁷ In June of 2018, when Alice was sixty-three, President Trump commuted her sentence and later granted her a full pardon in August of 2020.

As Alice told our conference audience at SHRM, “My good fortune did not stop there. After my release, I was able to find a new career . . . a new purpose. But there are many more like me who are not so fortunate. After serving their debt to society, they are shut out, resentenced to joblessness and economic insecurity. Like me, they only want to find their purpose in the dignity of honest work.”

As I listened, I was struck by the powerful force of one woman’s story. But I was also impressed by her persistence, even when it looked as if the rest of her life would be spent behind bars. During her years in prison, she took career courses and read up on every unfolding paradigm shift, hoping against hope to get out one day. She told me that one of her lowest moments was seeing President Obama leave the White House without offering her clemency. If not then, when? That’s what she thought.

But she didn’t let up, didn’t give up. To me, Alice embodies all of what you want to see in your workforce. Yes, she’s a grandmother, but she is devoted to reinvention, steeped in a desire to learn, and willing to support those around her.

As leaders, we have to do our part to help these stories of the incarcerated end with good jobs and promising careers.

There is nothing to fear in providing second chances to skilled workers who have paid their dues and earned a position that pays. This isn’t charity. It’s good business.