

Introduction

It's Time to Fix Our Foundation: How Can We Best Address the Challenges and Opportunities Presented by an Aging Workforce?

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Stress can reveal underlying cracks in your foundation, and most people do not even look for these cracks or think about fixing them until it's too late, an engineer once told me as we peeled back the basement dry wall to find cracks that emerged after two weeks of rain put stress on my home's foundation. While it has been far more devastating to the health and well-being for older adults, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has placed an unprecedented amount of stress on our aging workforce. For many individuals who are over the age of 50, the loss of work and difficulty in returning to the workforce will likely end up fracturing the foundation they have created for their retirement. The loss of income and lack of access to employer benefits shall substantially alter their need to remain engaged in the workforce, and the loss of health insurance may negatively impact their health spans. Moreover, as more persons over 50 are displaced from the workforce and having difficulty returning, a number of social programs—such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid—may fall well short in meeting their changing needs.

Still, I remain hopeful. Older persons have endured several shocking and terrible events over their life course. I am hopeful the accumulations of such experiences and hard-earned knowledge will help with navigating the course ahead. I am also hopeful that the pandemic presents a window of opportunity to fix many of the long-standing cracks related to the employment of older workers. Indeed, as policy leaders and program administrators look toward a post-COVID-19 world, I am hopeful they make ample use of the existing evidence base that highlights the

best ways to address the continually growing number of workers over the age of 50.

The work presented in this issue identifies many of the existing cracks that underlie the successful engagement of experienced employees (defined here as persons over 50) and offers several viable suggestions for how they can be fixed. [Rudolph and colleagues \(2020\)](#) and [Cadiz and colleagues \(2020\)](#) each identify how stereotypes about generational differences and workplace ability differences between younger and older workers are largely misdirected. Yet, [Barrington and Enayati \(2020\)](#) and [Burn and colleagues \(2020\)](#) remind us that age-based discrimination persists and has become more insidious and difficult to prove. As we move into a post-COVID-19 world, policy makers and program administrators must seize the opportunity to expand the imagination of employers and encourage them to make a more deliberate effort to incorporate experienced employees into workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies and to assign a greater value to the recruitment and retention of experienced employees, especially those who have been recently displaced from their jobs and are likely to face greater challenges returning to work.

[Clark and Ritter \(2020\)](#) and [Wang and Fang \(2020\)](#) each consider how employers can effectively address the challenges and opportunities presented by the growing number of experienced employees and can identify those organizational policies and workplace programs that are best suited to meet the needs and preferences of older workers. [Cahill and Quinn \(2020\)](#), [Fideler \(2020\)](#), and [Moen \(2020\)](#) remind us about the longstanding preferences that experienced employees have about retiring from

and returning to work, and the benefits employers derive when offering such accommodations. While employers historically have been reluctant to take up such efforts, they may begin to do so. Perhaps a greater number of employers can embrace the benefits of (re-)employing and accommodating persons over 50. Perhaps the American Workforce Policy Advisory Board can take a leading role in fixing the cracks that exist in the foundation underlying the aging workforce.

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