

## **Rocky Mountain Conference on Aging Aging in the Workplace**

### **Preparing for a Diverse Older Workforce: Changing Environments and Changing Workers**

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Our workforce is constantly changing and becoming more diverse. As older adults are getting older and living longer, there is now a concern over whether or not we will be able to afford social security. In order to secure social security and successful living for older adults in the future there are some changes that need to be established in the workplace.

In order to prepare for a diverse workplace, we need to evaluate the changes that have occurred over time. There has been an increase in the number of women in the workplace and this number is expected to rise. Thus, the percentage of women (of all ages) is increasing and the percent of men is decreasing. The workplace is also more ethnically diverse. There has been a major increase in over 65 year old Asians and Hispanics in the workplace in the past decade. By 2050, for those 65 years and above, Blacks are expected to increase three times compared to Hispanics and Asians which are expected to increase seven times. Time spent at work has also been shifting. As people age, they are more likely to be employed as part time workers. For example, after age 65 about half the people who are employed work part time compared to 80% working full time before age 65. There has been a change in job categories. There now is more of a demand for service jobs over production jobs.

In order to adapt to this change, we need to understand the limitations older adults may face. First, there are normative changes in cognitive abilities with some increasing (knowledge-related ones) and some declining (abstract problem solving abilities). A pervasive change is cognitive slowing with age. Research has shown that it takes about 50% to 100% longer for older adults to complete and learn a task than younger adults. It has been shown that although older adults are slower, speed can be less important than accuracy for job performance and knowledge is usually the most important factor. Second, there is a lower turnover rate for older adults. Since many older adults have already reached their career goals; they are less into moving up in a job and less focused on the money. They are more content at staying at a company and doing their best. This helps companies save money on training since the turnover rate is so low. Third, older adults have more experience than the younger workers which is more important and relevant than their actual age.

In order to change the workforce successfully, we need to improve training of older adults. They may need more training days and may need to be taught at a slower pace. Research shows that lectures, modeling and active participation are effective for older adult workers. It also helps older adults to let them pace themselves and to work in small groups. A possible good technique to use is to segregate training lectures by age so that the presentation can be tuned to different types of worker. Some other areas for change in the work environment that may provide significant benefit to older workers is to provide larger fonts and to minimize glare in the workplace.

Submitted by: Kristi Stone, Colorado State University, October 31, 2007

Edited by Neil Charness, 11/15/07