

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Older, mid-career workers make up the majority of the longterm, unemployed in the United States and many other countries. They face growing barriers to finding good jobs, not the least of which is the misperception that they are not qualified for today's workforce. That age bias is a key takeaway from a new global survey from Generation. Joining me now to discuss the issue is Mona Mourshed, the founding global CEO of Generation. Mona, welcome to the podcast.

Mona Mourshed, Generation founding global CEO:

Hi Ramona. Thanks for having me.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

This is subject that we talk about a lot at WorkingNation. We look at people in the middle of the careers who've lost their jobs and are now struggling to get back into the workforce. One of the things that you had said in the survey, I thought was really interesting, which was that they make up the majority of the long-term unemployed. Tell me a little bit about the survey, what you found and where do you get those numbers? Because we haven't seen those numbers globally at all.

Mona Mourshed, Generation founding global CEO:

We did the survey about mid-career workers because frankly, we feel that this is a space where there just hasn't been enough attention, whether it's with regards to employment programming or research, or just discourse in the public dialogue. And this was very much informed by our own programming within Generation for age 40 plus workers as well. The survey covered seven countries, Brazil, India, Italy, Singapore, Spain, the UK, and the United States, and we looked at four populations. First, we looked at the age 45 plus unemployed. Then we looked at the age 18 to 44 unemployed so that we had a basis for comparison. Then we looked at those age 45 plus who have successfully switched careers. And then lastly, we spoke with hiring managers across employers in sectors. All told, we had about 3,800 unemployed and 1,400 plus hiring managers and about 600 plus switchers.

Mona Mourshed, Generation founding global CEO:

What we found from the research, and I'll start with your question about the long-term unemployed. So when you look at national statistics and you take what they declare as longterm unemployed, in the US it's six months plus and other countries it's a year plus. But essentially, it's anywhere from 40 to 70% of the long-term unemployed are age 45 or 50 plus. And this number has been stubbornly persistent over the past year. So it's not like this is a new phenomenon. Though, in multiple countries COVID and the pandemic made it worse, as people lost their employment. And then in our survey, we also asked this question of how long have you been unemployed, and in particular for a year plus. And we found those who are age 45 plus, who have been unemployed for more than a year, it was 63% of our sample. And for those who are age 18 to 34, it was 36%. It was the absolute inverse. And then those in the middle, it was about 50 plus percent. So there's no question. Those who are mid career are unemployed for a significantly longer time than those who are younger.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the things in your survey is when you talk to those employers, it's their perception of someone 45 plus, and how they will fit into the workforce. Tell me some of what you found there.

Mona Mourshed, Generation founding global CEO:

This for us was one of the most stark findings of the report. It really puts a number on ageism. We asked employers to describe what are the strengths that you see of different job candidates in the different age brackets. Long story short, employers see the age 45 plus population as having absolutely no strengths relative to those who are age 18 to 34 or 35 to 44. And by the way, the age 35 to 44 are the ones most popular with hiring managers. That's the sweet spot. They've had enough experience, but employers still view them as being nimble and creative and all the things-

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Adaptable.

Mona Mourshed, Generation founding global CEO:

Adaptable, all of these things, right? So then we asked the very same employers, in those cases where you have hired age 45 plus, and we said within the last three years, how are they performing relative to their job peers? And we found that 87% of those individuals are performing as well, if not better than their younger job peers. And when we asked about retention, we found that 90% of those aged 45 plus cases are showing as much potential, if not more than their younger peers. And that is the definition of bias, right? It's that whenever a general bias can prevail despite evidence to the contrary, that's what it looks like. And it's very pervasive.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

When you do a survey, you often have to have a standard question to ask. But my question would be why, why do you feel this way? Where is that disconnect?

Mona Mourshed, Generation founding global CEO:

This is a long and complex answer and I think it's tied to why do many of the isms exist in the world today? When we asked employers what's driving this perception of job candidates who are aged 45 plus, the top three concerns that they would name would be that they are adept with technology or it's going to take them longer to learn, or they're not going to fit with our organization culture. These are all biases and it takes a lot of effort to dislodge them. And it starts by showing the evidence of how age 45 plus individuals who are going into new careers, whether it's entry level, intermediate level, the fact base of how they're performing. That has to be the starting point of beginning to lift the veil to say, "Look at the perception, that's one thing. But look at the performance, that's something completely opposite of what the perception is."

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Is there any effort by the employers that you've seen to change this bias, to lift the veil a little bit and open their eyes and see that there's talent out there and maybe they have to help cultivate it a little bit more?

Mona Mourshed, Generation founding global CEO:

The AARP had done a survey a few months back and they had found that 50% of companies across the world don't even include age diversity as part of their definition of DEI. So that's one answer to your question, Ramona, which is that it's not on the radar screen for at least half of global companies. But I would say to you as, and now we'll just shift to talking about our own programming. So as I mentioned, Generation began by serving a youth population about six years ago, but we expanded our mission about two years ago to also include learners of all ages. And in particular, we've now served about 900 plus individuals who are aged 40 plus. The bias that we see in the hiring process is very distinct, right? And sometimes it's very explicit. We've had conversations where employers say, "Well, thanks for sending me the older people, now send me the younger people." That has happened, very regrettably.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That's pretty blatant.

Mona Mourshed, Generation founding global CEO:

That's very blatant, right? But then on the other hand, the way the hiring and the interview process is set up often doesn't support a recruiting team to look at a different profile. So one of the things we do with our graduates and our employers is we try to structure interview processes that are not people sitting across the table and going through a CV. Rather, it's about demonstration based exercises so that our graduates, who are aged 45 plus and our youth, can actually show their employer what they're capable of doing. We've also experimented with having age blind CVs, so that as employers are screening, we deliberately take age out of that equation and to see how that affects. The overall point is there is no silver bullet here.

Mona Mourshed, Generation founding global CEO:

It requires changing hiring practices. It requires looking at the evidence of those who are age 45 plus, and their performance. It requires creating a supportive community, also inside the employer. One of the other findings that we had was 66 plus percent of the surveyed age 45 plus switchers, those who went into a new career, they were wondering whether they were in the right place for the first three months on the job. Now they somehow managed to power through. And they not only powered through, but they became strong and high performers. But unless that community is also created, then the risk of missing out on this tremendous asset and pool of talent is significant. And companies must reckon with, what does it mean to have intergenerational diversity in the workplace?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the things that I've seen in a number of different surveys and polls is that the older workers, 40, 45 plus, is hesitant to make those switches or get that upskilling because they already feel that there is no place for them because that age bias exists, that they feel like they're hitting a wall in their career. It's like chicken and the egg. How do you solve one if you don't solve the other? Because you have the hesitancy on the older workers' part.

Mona Mourshed, Generation founding global CEO:

Absolutely. And we found evidence of that in the survey as well. 58% of the age 45 plus unemployed stated that they did not want to engage in training to enable them to shift to a new career. You look at that relative to the population of age 45 plus who successfully switched careers, 75% of them said that the training was invaluable to support them to make that switch. So where's this disconnect coming from? And I think it's very easy to look at those facts and say, what are they thinking? Of course they

should be engaged in training. But people make decisions for a reason. In this case, when you then peel the onion and you say, "What are the characteristics of the age 45 plus who don't want to engage in training and who are hesitant?" So first you find that over 60% of them have a secondary school education alone. 70% of them are grappling with meeting their daily financial needs.

Mona Mourshed, Generation founding global CEO:

And so, in many respects, the population that needs training the most is the least likely to access it. And so then that raises, why is this happening? Just given that profile, the K-12 experience was probably not an awesome one, right? And so some may be reluctant to engage in another formal education experience. But for others, just the fact that they're barely making financial ends meet, they must have some sort of a side hustle so that they're able to support themselves, support their family and training is a luxury. They're not able to dedicate weeks or months to a situation where they're not getting income. And the survey also bears that out. When we then asked this population, "What would make you change your mind?" 60% of them said, "If there was a guaranteed job or a job interview, I would engage in the training." And for 40%, they said, "If there were living stipends during the training, I would engage in the training." So as is always the case, you have to look several layers down to understand why is this happening, to figure out a solution.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

There's also the caregiver aspect that we talked about a lot, whether they're caring for their own children or caring for a parent. And we've seen that in the spotlight because of COVID, a lot of women who are staying home, maybe in that age range, are staying home for their kids, staying home for their parents. And it's hard to fit that training in there in any way, shape or form. So I think that's another issue. Let's go into a little bit about what you're doing at Generation. What kind of training is being made available to the mid-career worker?

Mona Mourshed, Generation founding global CEO:

Currently we offer 30 professions and we welcome applications to all 30 across our 14 countries. And we're also launching in three more countries this year as well. I'll just share some examples with you. So in Singapore, we have worked with SkillsFuture Singapore, which is a government agency that is responsible for the skilling ecosystem, along with a public polytechnic. And we've had about roughly 40% of our cohorts age 40 plus. And they have gone from jobs in logistics, into digital marketing, or they've gone from retail into tech roles and so on.

Mona Mourshed, Generation founding global CEO:

And in particular, we have mixed age cohorts. This is really important because that's what the workplace looks like. And what we found is that our younger learners can learn a tremendous amount from our age 40 plus learners and vice versa. And so we seek to cultivate that while we are in the actual learning experience. And we've had strong results. Even if I just look at job retention, if you look at the outcomes for our generation learners who are youth and our regeneration learners who are mid-career, it's 91% to 92%, respectively. So they're essentially equivalent in terms of the job outcome for retention.

Mona Mourshed, Generation founding global CEO:

We have also seen though, in other countries, and I'll speak about tech roles in particular, it takes longer often to place our age 40 plus learners into jobs. For example, at three months post-program completion, it's 56% for our age 40 plus learners, versus 83% for our youth generation learners. But

when you get to six months, then that number goes up to 75, 76%. So the phenomena that we saw in the survey of it takes longer, we see born out in our programming, and this is something that we continue to work at and to improve on.

Mona Mourshed, Generation founding global CEO:

What I will also say is that in the survey, we found that those who identify with underrepresented populations in their country, so whether it's people of color or sexual orientation, whatever it might be, they have to do 50% more interviews to get a job offer than their peers. And this is also the population we serve. You have all these dynamics coming into play. We see them in our own programming, and this is why we're so committed to really figuring out interventions, both that we make and that our employer partners make so that we can get equivalent employment and income outcomes for all populations, irrespective of age.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

If someone here in the United States wanted to find a program that could help them take that next step, someone 45 plus, what would they do?

Mona Mourshed, Generation founding global CEO:

They could visit our website. So it's generation.org, and then we have all the countries listed in the dropdown menu. And you can go to the country where you are and engage in a selection of programs.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Mona, what was the most surprising result of the survey?

Mona Mourshed, Generation founding global CEO:

There were surprising results in terms of magnitude for ageism and the hesitation. But one of the things that really struck us was how uniform the pattern was across seven countries that are wildly different. So whether it is by GDP per capita or culture or country size or ethnic, it was remarkably consistent on each of the questions that we asked. That should give us pause. Ageism is real and it's as global and it is of the same magnitude. No country holds this alone. The globe holds this.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

My last question is where do we go from here? What do we need to do, as a society, to eliminate this bias, make sure the opportunities are there for everyone regardless of their age? And I'll add this little fact in there. The average age lifespan now is 79 plus. So if you're looking at somebody 45, you're talking about another 35 years of their life. How do we make sure that we move forward as a society?

Mona Mourshed, Generation founding global CEO:

That's a great question, and I will only give a partial answer. As is always the case with any ism, this takes decades to unroot. But in the meantime though, for employers, what I would say is having joined up thinking between what the C-suite is emphasizing with the hiring practices of the HR team and the methods that are used has to be demonstration based. Really reflect on the language. Whenever someone says, "Oh, this person is seasoned," that is often code for this person is older. Or, "Will this person really fit in with our workplace?" can often be code for this person isn't young and our team is skewed young. So just really being very mindful of what those words mean and engaging in much more

reflection about how can we figure out how we take the best assets that we've got, who have this great experience and blend them with other age brackets that we have.

Mona Mourshed, Generation founding global CEO:

We have an intergenerational workforce. We must accept that. And we must accept that in order for society to thrive, we need all of the age brackets working. That's just as a goal. The second thing, just tactics. This exercise of actually understanding what is the job performance and retention performance of different age brackets at an employer, hugely important to assemble that fact base, because a lot of these biases will not get disassembled unless it's in the face of that fact base. And then third thing I would say is just really being thoughtful about the fact that the types of practices we have in terms of how we screen CVs, how we engage in an understanding of what a candidate knows and is able to do, the traditional interview is done. It is outmoded. Let's think about these practice-based methods, these demonstration based methods, which are critical, so that people who have the skills and can demonstrate that they have these skills, that's what rises to the fore, not your age.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Mona, thank you very much for joining me on Work in Progress. I really appreciate you coming on to talk about this subject that I think is one of the most under-discussed and most important subjects we have out there today.

Mona Mourshed, Generation founding global CEO:

Many thanks Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You've been speaking to Mona Mourshed, the founding global CEO of Generations. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.