

Nothing is going to drive home the impact of ageing workers more than when their knowledge starts walking out the door as they retire. Jeff Taylor, the founder of the online job site Monster, was recently quoted as saying, "We'll be facing the worst labour shortage in our lifetime within the next five years." If he's right, industry is going to have to focus on attracting, recruiting and retaining older workers.

Is your organisation prepared for an ageing workforce? Are you prepared for potentially losing their knowledge and experience? Will your company be able to apply new and existing knowledge to innovate for its survival? Are

Corporate leadership is beginning to address questions like: Why would that individual want to work with our company at this stage in her life? How will our company engage the older worker's heart and mind in purposeful work? In what ways might we connect our company's purpose to the older worker's purpose? What kind of flexibility can our company offer to workers of all ages?

Issues like these emphasise the value of truly embracing an approach to knowledge management that goes far beyond the collection of data. It means figuring out how to capture and pass on knowledge, keeping older workers involved in work that matters and balancing the new work-life options that baby boomers are demanding.

Retirement is so often defined negatively and individualistically, as the end of a career and the cessation

For more than 50 years, researchers have been studying how people can strengthen and use their creative abilities. Each year, a diverse group of business and government people, educators, non-profit leaders, artists and individual thinkers assemble at the Creative Education Foundation's Creative Problem Solving Institute in Buffalo, New York, US. This week long gathering explores the many applications of the creative process, the development of creative persons, the production of creative outcomes, and the enhancement of creative environments.

Creativity provides a stimulating way for people to become intrinsically motivated, to find joy in the ordinary, and to discover their hidden talents. It is a trait that all people possess and can further develop.

Creativity can be unleashed to regularly experience, discover and foster the power of one's imagination. Although

Creativity by choice, not by chance



A mindset for surviving the ageing workplace

by STEVEN DAHLBERG

you prepared to help your employees learn to tap their creativity and perhaps stay in the workforce longer?

People who make up today's workforce are working longer and living longer (up to 20 to 25 years beyond traditional retirement age). There are 17 million baby boomers in the UK workforce and in the US there are 77 million baby boomers. In fact, a recent report from the Society for Human Resource Management showed that the number of US workers aged 55 and over is expected to increase by 47 percent during the next seven years and nearly two-thirds of workforce professionals say they are preparing for this demographic change.

As a result, governments, agencies, academics, industry – and employees themselves – are starting to focus more on ageing, quality of life, well-being and lifelong learning.

of work. However, retirement, like most transitions, can also be a creative time – a period of renewal and rejuvenation. Individuals preparing to leave their full-time work identity are living the paradox where old and new possibilities exist together simultaneously.

This period calls for applying radical imagination to overcome the blocks and assumptions that keep people from tapping their inherent creativity. This will be required for the survival of both the individual and the corporation. It will mean helping employees imagine a new vision for themselves so that their purpose is partially fulfilled in their work and they choose to stay in the workplace longer. It will also mean thinking of alternative ways to stay competitive and innovative, when faced with a shortage of workers.

we begin our lives with active, vivid imaginations, most of us stop applying this creativity.

Fortunately, we have the capacity to tap that part of our brains that allows us to think divergently – suspending judgment, generating novel possibilities and creating new and different worlds.

Nurturing your creative spirit requires deliberate attention. Just like with physical activity, your brain needs to be exercised. Creative thinking must be practiced. The more you do it, the easier and more natural it becomes.

Can creativity have a bottom-line effect for the organisation, too? Absolutely. When Procter & Gamble implemented a creative thinking programme, it saved six percent of sales, or \$600 million a year. Min Basadur's work showed that training in creative thinking skills improved

both immediate and long-term employee performance. Basadur is a former Procter & Gamble engineer and current professor of innovation in the Michael G. DeGroote School of Business at McMaster University in Canada.

• **Applying imagination**

Creativity helps us think wider and ask the big questions about our lives, our communities and the world. It allows us to explore the unknown and to evaluate the implications and consequences of choosing certain solutions. Creativity allows the mind to diverge, pursuing many possible alternatives and ideas before settling on a workable solution. This seems so easy, but we frequently do not allow ourselves this exploration. Instead, we often start our problem solving with a limited expectation of what the solution will be.

We are programmed to stop exploring unusual ideas after being told things like "There is only one right answer," "Things don't really work that way," or "Zebras only have black and white stripes."

We also learn that mistakes should be minimised and that risk taking comes at a high cost. And we learn to

judge. In fact, judgment is ubiquitous in our lives. We judge ourselves, managers judge everything at work.

Unfortunately, premature judgment kills creativity. It is the fundamental block that keeps us from finding unique ways of looking at problems and challenges. A key to thinking broader is learning to defer judgment and, subsequently, helping others learn to do the same.

• **Becoming aware**

German artist Joseph Beuys said: "Everyone is an artist." He wasn't suggesting that we all become painters, writers and sculptors. Rather, he was challenging us to apply our inherent creativity in a meaningful way.

No one seems to have time to stop and think. But this is imperative if we are going to help people find the artist in each one of them.

People who want to apply their creativity must become paradoxical thinkers. F. Scott Fitzgerald once described this challenge: "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." Creative thinking is a wonderful tool for teaching us to

imaginatively explore the future. Paradoxically, we must become aware of what is happening in the present moment if we are to defer judgement and think wider. Focusing on the following key areas brings us to better awareness of ourselves and of our world.

Practice developing all five senses. For example, the next time you are at lunch, pay attention to your orange. Before you even begin to peel it, observe it with all five senses. Take your time – even 10 minutes just looking at it. When you begin to peel it, be very deliberate and pay attention to detail. Remove each section with full attention.

Honing your sensory awareness will help with problem solving and idea exploring.

In the workplace, we traverse the full gamut of emotions. Emotional self-awareness can reduce stress and productively transform boredom. How often do we create the conditions for us to explore how our feelings influence our thinking and behaviour?

Creative thinking is excellent for resolving conflicts. If we create alternative solutions when emotions flare, better outcomes can emerge. If we recognise where we find the most joy, we can channel our creative endeavours.

Meditation can provide a welcome break to our busy lives. Meditating doesn't mean we have to bring our Buddha pillows to the office. But taking a simple break to pay attention to our breathing can make us more relaxed and increase our concentration – all of which facilitates the flow of creative juices.

• **Engaging and acting**

The faster-better-cheaper focus of corporations has pervaded many aspects of our lives. This creates the threat of over-activity.

If we learn to live with a creative worldview – where we suspend judgment, think divergently, seek many alternatives, become aware of this moment, and connect beyond ourselves – we can radically transform the way we choose to engage in life and meaningfully create joy-filled vocations and careers.

This is no easy task. Creative risk-takers often feel like a "minority of one." Yet they choose to follow this path, intrinsically motivated to follow their heart.

Paul Torrance, a pioneer in the research of creativity, said, "The genius of the future will be the creative mind adapting itself to the shape of things to come. This will require Satori, bursts of new insights. The skills of creative thinking must be recognised as [humanity's] most important adaptability skills."

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Box

Tips for stimulating your creativity

- Regularly ask: What if? What else? Why not?
- Explore connections between seemingly unrelated things. For example, how is a summer storm like resolving an argument with a colleague?
- Look for examples of "making the familiar strange and the strange familiar."
- Regularly use the language "How might we ...?" to encourage multiple ways of looking at ideas and challenges.
- Don't forget to warm up the brain before creative endeavours. A great warm-up is the Alternative Uses exercise, which seeks as many different uses as possible for common items, such as a roll of tape or a brick.

