

Older workers are special

Level: Intermediate +

Time: 90 minutes +

Summary: This lesson is about the importance of adapting workplaces to the needs of increasing numbers of older employees. In this lesson, students:

1. compare their workplace demographics;
2. study a text about what workplace modifications older workers may need to thrive;
3. discuss whether their workplaces are inclusive;
4. plan how they would adapt their workplace to make it more accessible for people with different special needs.

Materials: One copy of the worksheet per student

Group size: Any

Note: This lesson plan is for both pre-experience and in-work business students based on an original article first published in *Business Spotlight* issue 5/2016.

Warmer

Individually, students cross out the words in bold that they don't need to make the statements reflect the situation in their workplace. Hold a short group feedback session to compare their workplace demographics and, especially if the students work in the same company, how they perceive them. Alternatively, you could adapt the sentences so that the students talk about their department rather than the whole company.

Key words

The students read the definitions, then scan the article to find the key words. They should note how the words are used in context as they read the article. Note that the definitions for the words are given in the order the words appear in the article.

Key:

- | | |
|---------------|----------------|
| 1. forecasts | 7. distraction |
| 2. encouraged | 8. spread out |
| 3. forced | 9. mood |
| 4. loyal | 10. agile |
| 5. value | 11. ergonomic |
| 6. initiative | 12. justify |

Understanding the article

Students find specific information in the article to write into the left side of the table, then they make notes in the right side of the table as to why these things are important (from the point of view of the author, the report, and also their own opinions). This task can be done in pairs and then discussed with the whole group.

Key:

| <i>Older employees need ...</i> | <i>because / so that ...</i> |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • workplaces that are free from distraction • workplaces that offer good (preferably natural) light • workplaces that provide extra protection against background noise • spaces to spread out their work • places to chat with colleagues without having to worry about making noise • a kind of high-tech kitchen table area, which is warm, well-equipped and relaxed • Zen-like spaces where ideas can grow • better light • buildings and equipment that are designed to transmit sound clearly • good furniture • better (colour-coded) signs • colleagues to respect them | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (students' own ideas and suggestions) |

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Phrases

Students find and circle the phrases in the article, see how the author has used them and show that they understand what the phrases mean by explaining them using their own words. When you are sure the students understand the phrases, get them to use them to talk about their own place of work (even if they use them in a negative sense, for example *There are no colour-coded signs in my office*).

Key:

a. (possible answers)

1. *when things are marked with different colours to make it easy to see their different features or uses*
2. *the design of equipment, places and furniture so that it is comfortable to use for older people and leads to the best work results*
3. *people who work with their heads rather than with their hands*
4. *a place where you are happy to work*
5. *relaxing, calming areas*

b. *shoot the breeze*

Discussion

Students discuss the questions in groups and then feed back to the whole class.

Group task

In groups (or, if you prefer, in pairs or individually), students choose one of the three special needs categories provided, or another of their choice, and discuss how the training room or classroom they are in right now, or their office or workspace, could be changed to be more comfortable and barrier-free. Ask them to consider not only the benefits to the workers and to productivity but also the potential costs and savings for the company.

Students then put their ideas and suggestions into a presentation for the company directors or school board.

Vocabulary record

Here, students should be encouraged to record all of the new and useful vocabulary they have learnt during the lesson, not only in the form presented in the article but also in related forms.

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1 Warmer

Cross out the words that you do not need to make these statements true for your workplace.

In my workplace, ...

... the employees are mostly **under / over** 40.

... people in management positions are generally **older than / younger than / the same age as** the other employees.

... the workforce consists of people of **a similar age / all ages**.

2 Key words

Find the key words in the article and write them next to the definitions below.

1. statements about what is likely to happen, based on available information and usually relating to the weather, business or the economy
2. when it is suggested that someone does something
3. be made to do something
4. continuing to work somewhere, even in difficult times
5. the degree to which someone or something is important or useful
6. a strategy or new business intended to resolve a difficulty or improve a situation
7. something that gets your attention and prevents you from concentrating on something else
8. separate things that were together and then put separately on a surface
9. the way that someone is feeling, for example whether they are happy, sad or angry
10. able to move quickly and easily
11. designed to be easy and comfortable to use and to produce the most benefits for the user
12. show that there is a good reason for something, especially something that other people think is wrong

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Adrian Furnham



With an increasing number of older employees, workplaces have to be made age-appropriate. What do workplaces need to take into consideration?

- 1 Forecasts suggest that, by 2020, half of Europe's adult population will be over 50. Many will be encouraged – or forced – to work beyond what we used to think of as the normal retirement age.
- 2 The situation has its advantages. Older workers are more loyal and less likely to change jobs than younger ones. Those who work with their heads rather than their hands, “knowledge workers”, also bring the most value to an organization. And as long as they are fit and well educated, older workers perform just as well as younger workers.
- 3 But they do present an interesting problem for office designers, a fact that a British initiative called Designing for the 21st Century looked at in 2007. Their report, “Welcoming Workplace”, argues that older people need spaces that help them to be creative and productive but that also take into account their physical and psychological needs.
- 4 They need workplaces that are free from distraction, offer good – preferably natural – light and provide more than the usual protection against background noise. They also require spaces to collaborate. Just like younger people, older people need places to spread out their work and shoot the breeze, without having to worry about making noise. They need a kind of high-tech kitchen table area – warm, well equipped and relaxed.

5 And they need places where they can think – where ideas can grow – calm, quiet, distraction-free, even Zen-like spaces. But older people also have special physical and psychological needs. For example, they need better light. They can't read as well as they once could and poor lighting can affect the speed and accuracy of their performance as well as mood.

6 People from their mid-40s on can begin to lose their hearing. So it is important that buildings and equipment be designed to transmit sound clearly. Older people are also less agile and physically strong. They need good furniture that helps them to sit, move and work comfortably. They also need better signage, as they can have difficulties finding their way. Colour coding works well, as does intelligently planned office space. Then, there is the human element: respect for the old.

7 Maybe we need a form of “geronto-ergonomics” to make workspaces work for older people. But the open question is: does the cost of providing an ergonomic workplace for older knowledge workers justify the cost of the special design and building they require?

ADRIAN FURNHAM is a psychology professor at University College, London. His latest book is The Resilient Manager: Navigating the Challenges of Working Life (Palgrave Macmillan).

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3 Understanding the article

- Complete the first column of the table with specific information from the article.
- Then, make notes in the second column on why these things are important.

| Older employees need ... | because / so that ... |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| | |

4 Phrases

- Find these phrases in the article. In your own words, explain what they mean. Then use them to talk about your workplace.
 - colour coding
 - geronto-ergonomics
 - knowledge workers
 - welcoming workplace
 - Zen-like spaces
- Find an informal three-word American-English phrase in the article that means *spend time talking about unimportant things*.

Use the phrase to complete this sentence.

We still have half an hour until the meeting starts. Let's go out onto the terrace and just _____ until the others get here.

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5 Discussion

- Do you agree with this statement from the article?

‘... as long as they are fit and well educated, older workers perform just as well as younger workers.’
- What is the normal retirement age in your company or field of work? Do you think the retirement age should be lowered or raised?
- At the end of the article, Adrian Furnham asks ‘does the cost of providing an ergonomic workplace for older knowledge workers justify the cost of the special design and building they require?’ What’s your opinion?
- Is your workspace more appropriate for younger or older workers? Why?
- What would have to be changed to make it a good place to work for both younger and older people?

6 Group task

Plan how you could adapt your training room or office to make it more comfortable for people in one of the categories listed below. You could also use another category of your choice.

- wheelchair users
- the hard of hearing and deaf
- the visually impaired and blind

Present your suggestions to the class.

