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“Older Workers” as a Factor of Discrimination in Business Life and a Conceptual Self-Criticism for the Tourism Sector*

Güney ÇETİN GÜRKAN^{a**}, F. Kübra AYLAN^b

^a Trakya University, Faculty of Applied Science, Department of Tourism Management, Edirne, Turkey,
E-posta: guneycg@yahoo.com.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-1964-6966

^b Selçuk University, Tourism Faculty, Recreation Management Department, Konya, Turkey,
E-posta: kubraceliloglu@selcuk.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-6703-2934

Abstract

The age diversity among the workers in the business life increases in line with the increase in differences in general population over the years. Studies on discrimination in the workplace in recent years suggest that the age-based discrimination has started to be most commonly observed, following gender-based and racial discrimination. The positions and performances of the older individuals in business life could be assessed in terms of positive and negative aspects thereof. Considering that ageism mostly affects older individuals, accepting this as a problem and then performing the necessary arrangement shall prevent the increasing ignorance of older individuals in business life. This admission and the actions taken are important for maintaining peace in business life. Accordingly, this paper aims at examining the reflections of the discrimination against the older individuals on the tourism sector through the literature review method. This study firstly examined the theories and literature on ageism. Then, the situation of this sector was addressed in order to emphasize the importance of the determination of the situation regarding older workers in the tourism sector, one of the most competitive sectors in the world, to trigger the enterprises serving in the sector to consider on the issue and to guide future discrimination studies on older workers. It has been observed as a result of the study that some managers in the tourism sector regarded the aged as stubborn and mentally and physically weak people reluctant to computerization and discriminated against older workers in the tourism sector and suggestions to combat this situation have been presented.

Key Words: Discrimination, Older Workers, Aging Workers, Tourism.

Jel kodu: M54, L83

Özet

Yıllar itibarıyla farklılıkların arttığı iş hayatında çalışanların yaş çeşitliliği de artmaktadır. Son yıllarda işyerinde ayrımcılık ile ilgili araştırmalar, cinsiyet ve ırk ayrımcılığından sonra en fazla ayrımcılığın yaş konusunda görülmeye başladığını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu doğrultuda çalışmada literatür taraması yöntemi ile yaşlı ayrımcılığının turizm sektörüne yansımalarının incelenmesi amaçlanmıştır. Çalışmada, önce yaş ayrımcılığına dair kuramlar ve literatür incelenmiştir. Daha sonra ise dünyada en rekabetçi sektörlerden birisi olan turizm sektöründeki yaşlı çalışanlara dair durumu tespit etmenin önemini vurgulamak, sektörde hizmet veren işletmelerin konu üzerinde düşünmelerini tetiklemek ve yaşlı çalışanlara dair gelecekte yürütülecek ayrımcılık araştırmalarına yol göstermek amacı ile bu sektördeki duruma değinilmiştir. Çalışma sonucunda, turizm sektöründe bazı yöneticilerin yaşlı insanları, işletmelerin imajına olumsuz etki, yavaş, esnek olmayan ve değişime karşı isteksiz, zihinsel ve fiziksel olarak zayıf şeklinde nitelendirdikleri ve turizm sektöründe yaşlı çalışanlara karşı ayrımcılık yaptığı görülmüş olup bu durum ile mücadele konusunda öneriler sunulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelime: Ayrımcılık, Yaşlı İşçiler, Yaşlanan İşçiler, Turizm.

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** Corresponding author: G. Çetin Gürkan (guneycg@yahoo.com.tr)

1. Introduction

The definition of old age and the age at which an individual is considered old are not issues generally concurred on (Tereci, 2016). When the concept of aging is basically addressed at the biological level, it refers to a condition that occurs with the accumulation of molecular and cellular damage. This accumulation eventually results in death. But this is not the same for everyone. Factors such as retirement, living conditions, death of friends and spouses/partners may accelerate the aging process (WHO, 2021). Consequently, focusing on the living conditions rather than exact limits on the age at which people will be considered old may provide a more accurate perspective. However, it is striking that the age of 65 is generally selected as the baseline when it is necessary to give statistics as well as data on the aging of the population. From this point of view, the proportion of the old population in the world is increasing day by day. Although the aging of the population, which started much earlier in developed world countries, has occurred relatively slowly in Turkey, the 2020 data have shown that Turkey's old population (aged 65 and over) increased up to 9.5% within the total. Considering that this rate was 8.2% in 2015, it has been observed to be very close to the rate of 10%, which is considered as the threshold limit for "aging of the population" (TUİK, 2020).

While the concept of old age is generally used for individuals aged 65 and over in society and statistics, the retirement age of 65 years in business life in many countries prevents it from being considered as the baseline age for older workers. Therefore, the evaluation of the concept of "aging workforce" in the workforce varies considerably. There are different opinions especially as to the age at which workers are described as "aging workforce". The study by McCarthy et al. (2014) asked the managers of 407 different companies in Ireland about this limit, and determined the lower limit as 52. There were reviews on workers aged 45 to 55 by the Institute for Employment Research of the German Federal Employment Agency (Brun & Milczarek, 2007), those aged 45 to 64 by de Zwart (1995), those aged 55 to 64 by Eurostat (cited in Steiber, 2014), those aged 55 and over by Koopman-Boyden, & Macdonald, (2003:35), by evaluating them within the scope of older workers. The OECD excluded the evaluation of biological age from the scope as well, and the age of 50, which is considered as the age at which the age of participation in employment has started to decrease in many countries, was stated to be likely to be the lower limit for older workers (Baş, 2012; Öktem Özgür & Demirbilek, 2020).

As a result of the continuous aging of the world population, it has been estimated that the population aged 50 to 64 among the working population has been on an upward trend since 1950 and that approximately one fourth of the total working population will consist of this age group in 2030 (Baş, 2012:10). Also, the predictions have pointed out that Turkey and Mexico will be the two countries where the share of the workforce in the 45 to 59 age group will have the highest increase in the total workforce in 2030 (Gündoğan, 2001). Thus, there is an ever-increasing need for in-depth analysis of the issues related to the aging workforce in Turkey. Considering the huge employment potential of the tourism sector, one of the locomotive sectors of the Turkish economy, within this framework, the employment and working conditions of the aging workforce in this sector is also one of the key issues to be considered. So, the examining of the existing attitudes (Poulston & Jenkins, 2016), towards older workers in business life is of great importance in order to draw attention to the phenomenon of "older worker discrimination", which has recently been highlighted as an issue that needs to be addressed as much as gender and racial discrimination. From this point forth, it was deemed necessary to evaluate the subject with regard to the tourism sector. The study aims at dealing with the theories about aging, ageism, older employee discrimination and discrimination against older

individuals in the tourism sector from a general point of view using the method of literature review. Since there are not many studies examining ageism in the tourism sector, it is thought that this study is important and will contribute to the literature.

2. Theories of Aging

There are several views on how aging emerges and what kind of development process it undergoes. Some of the views on aging can be addressed as theories of biological and social aging. The general information transfer on these theories would be useful for understanding the structure leading to discrimination against older individuals.

2.1. Theories of Biological Aging

The theories of biological aging examine the anatomical and physiological changes that occur due to aging. There is no single theory that can provide a clear explanation of biological aging alone. More than 130 theories have been developed to explain the process of biological aging (Bulut & Özçakar, 2016). Some of the theories, such as energy of life theory, immunological theory and free radical theory, which may affect business life, can be evaluated for giving a general opinion. According to the *Energy of Life Theory*, which was first put forward by the German biologist Max Rubner, every living thing begins life with a certain energy reserve and spends from this reserve throughout its life. Energy consumption takes place within variable periods depending on the lifestyle, and individuals with a high metabolic rate experience faster exhaustion. According to this theory, a long and healthy life is especially related to the rate at which we spend this energy. Stress, insomnia, malnutrition and excessive release of adrenaline due to excessive sportive activity and overactive thyroid gland with excessive exercise, and chronic infections boost metabolism (Bulut & Özçakar, 2016), which may lead to faster aging. It has been suggested within the scope of the *Immunological Theory* that there is a decrease in the defense system against external factors along with aging and that the cells of immunity can fight against the body's own tissues (Aydemir, 2013; Öksüzokyar et al., 2016). Many factors such as stress, mistakes in nutrition and insomnia, disrupt the delicate balance of this immune system, thereby making the formation of diseases possible. Along with aging, the cycle triggers each other in itself, facilitates the formation of diseases and tumors and thus aging is accelerated (Yalçin, Terzioğlu & Gorczynski, 2011). The *Free Radical Theory* is also a biological theory that affects aging. Free radicals are defined as high-energy atoms or molecules that carry one or more unpaired electrons in their external orbital (Karabulut & Gülay, 2016). One of their properties is that they are short-lived, and the other is that they react with non-radical substances to form new radicals and initiate a chain reaction (Öğüt & Atay, 2012). The free radical theory of biological aging was first set forth by Denham Harman in 1956. The decrease in the antioxidant defense system as well as the increased production of free radicals in the aging process are accepted to be important contributing factors and to cause aging (Özer, 2019). According to this theory, aging is the result of deterioration in cell proteins and genetic structures. Stress, smoking, ultraviolet rays, x-ray and environmental pollution accelerate the production of free radicals (Bulut & Özçakar, 2016) and consequently accelerate the biological aging.

2.2. Theories of Social Aging

Decrease in biological capacity, physical decline, disruption in social roles and social life and a rapid decline in the level of social and individual expectations are experienced during the old age. These changes cause the individual to isolate herself/himself from her/his social environment gradually and the old individual to

experience social adaptation problems. These problems lead the old individual to disengage from life, not to enjoy life and not to actively participate in life (Özer, 2019). The theories of social aging explain aging by addressing these problems. The **Disengagement Theory** was proposed by Elaine Cumming and William E. Henry (Onur, 2017). From the perspective of the disengagement theory, an individual has a chronological age and the theory is based on this ground. It considers the gradual disengagement of the individual from the roles and activities obtained during the developmental period of adulthood as compulsory, natural and necessary (Tufan, 2001). Here, the aging individual isolates herself/himself from her/his social environment, becomes a kind of lonely person and returns to herself/himself (Üçok, 2018). The **Activity Theory**, which is the other theory developed by Havighurst in 1963 emphasizes the concept of balance. This theory opposes the disengagement theory and claims that some of the individual's losses are replaced by new achievements during the aging period, thus redresses the balance (Şentürk, 2018). The activity theory argues that healthy and successful aging is possible and that behaviors and activities in middle age should also be maintained. According to this theory, individuals should maintain their activities and behaviors in the middle age (Şentürk, 2018). The fact that old individuals should actively participate in life and that the old individual should not fall into the trap of social isolation imposed by the society's perception of old age are among propositions set forth by this theory (Onur, 2017). This theory has emphasized that all individuals should be active regardless of the physiological, biological and psychological characteristics of the old people. However, every old person does not get older under the same conditions. There are also old people who lose their activity for some reason. This is the reason why the theory has been criticized (Ersanlı & Kalkan, 2008). The **Continuity Theory** developed by Atchley (1972), is based on the thesis that an old individual will want to maintain the lifestyle she/he likes. This theory suggests that in the aging process, the individual will try to continue the lifestyle, habits and preferences s/he has already acquired (Şentürk, 2018). As the individual gets older, the continuation of these behaviors and roles and having few changes in this whole of identity and relationships create conditions that make old age less problematic. Therefore, it is important for a healthy and trouble-free aging process that the aging person does not significantly change her/his prior and continuous lifestyle. The choice of the "continuity" method as a strategy for coping with the old age is also crucial not to disengage old people from life as a problem of possible physical and mental deficiencies that may be experienced in old age (Kurt, 2008). Factors that increase the quality of life of old individuals include physical exercise, cognitive openness, participation in life, and extent of social relation network and having these factors leads the individuals to maintain a freer and more independent life (Baran, 2008). The **Social Role Exit Theory** was proposed by sociologist Z.S. Blau. According to Blau, retirement and widowhood end the participation of old individuals in the work and family, the fundamental institutional structures of society. As a result of this, the characteristics of old people that make them socially useful decrease. Blau regards especially the loss of professional and marital status as a situation that has a destructive effect (Özer, 2019). The individual has to disengage from many roles and statuses, albeit unwillingly, upon retirement. Loss of professional role and status accompanied by retirement, and loss of roles for reasons such as children leaving the house and death of spouse/partner pose an important problem. These losses also cause the old person to limit her/his social relations in the process, thus create a negative situation (Ersanlı & Kalkan, 2008). Like any theory, the role exit theory has also been criticized. Exaggeration of the social losses, i.e. the loss of roles, experienced by the old individuals is the issue criticized in this theory (Onur, 1995). The theories mentioned in this section generally emphasize the points by which old individuals are affected and their consequences. Since the problems addressed in these theories lead the old people to be differentiated

from the rest of the society, they also cover the causes of discrimination against older individuals, which will be discussed in the next section.

2.3. From Ageism to Older Worker Discrimination

The concept of age has a very broad meaning. For example, age is considered from different perspectives such as functional age based on a person's ability to perform certain tasks on daily basis; psychological age which refers to how old a person feels subjectively; organizational age based on term of office in the same organization; lifespan, which considers biological and social factors holistically and focuses on the roles people play throughout their lives, and chronological age, a measure of time since the birth (Raemdonck et al., 2015). The concept of aging, on the other hand, refers to the change that occurs in the physiology and psychology of people as they get older (Özen & Özbek, 2017). The term ageism was firstly used in Butler's following statements in 1969: *"a process of systematic stereotyping or discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish with skin color and gender"* (Martin & Gardiner, 2007:310). However, ageism does not only affect "old" individuals and so, Martin and Gardiner (2007) have defined it as *"discrimination or unfair treatment based on a person's age"* to cover all ages. Ageism is not a new phenomenon. Since the 1920s-1930s, there have been debates about ageism in employment, both in the United States and in the UK (Macnicol, 2006). Although ageism against both young and old people is observed, this situation affects old people more than younger people (Buz, 2015).

The negative effects of age-related prejudices and stereotypes are evident in employment (Baybora, 2010). Workers are exposed to discrimination because of their age when they are recruited, work or are dismissed. An example of this is the statement of *"Those over the age of 35 do not need to apply"*, which is often encountered in job postings (Özben & Özbek, 2017). Within this scope, unemployment rates and the number of people who gave up looking for a job due to their failure to find one although they wanted to work because they are not entitled for legal retirement are as important as the employment rates of the 55-64 age group. According to certain studies conducted in the UK, it has been estimated that 2.7 million people between the age of 50 and the legal retirement age are not working, and more than 1 million want but are unable to work (Baybora, 2010:40). At the same time, certain practices, such as mandatory retirement demonstrate that ageism is frequently in question in employment. Accordingly, the viewpoint of *"Age discrimination occurs when those who need and want to continue working are forced to retire at a certain age"* is quite common as well (Macnicol, 2006).

Ageism in the workplace may take place at various stages, including the recruitment process, employee selection, performance evaluation, promotion decision-making, and training process in the form of biased decision or inappropriate behavior. Occupational ageism may have negative effects on workers (e.g. poor job attitudes and performance), management (e.g. turnover and litigation), and employee-employer engagement (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). For example, older workers sometimes cannot have the opportunity to have job interview, despite having the same skills as younger workers. The workplace does not appear to give a fair opportunity for participation, training and promotion for older workers (Sayed & Elsaid, 2021). Moreover, the higher training costs for older workers compared to the younger ones and the idea that the investment in training may go down the drain because the worker will not stay in the enterprise in the long term are among the reasons for discrimination against older workers (Ofloğlu & Özbucak Albar, 2017). From a different viewpoint, only job outputs are not taken into account in the old-young employee discrimination

by the employers in enterprises. The most important factors that lead the enterprises to prefer younger employees include lower costs of the younger employees for the enterprise, being more open to training and development, having more rotation opportunities, and having more limited social responsibility (being a parent or having a child) (Demir, 2011:769).

Reid (1985) emphasized in his study the negative aspects of older workers. Reid listed those negative aspects as rigid and stubborn attitudes, previous knowledge and tasks interfering with learning new things, having learned to earn a living with less effort, receiving less training, slower adaptation to new situations, slowly acting and thinking. Similarly, Lucas (1993) clearly emphasized the negative aspects of employing older workers, such as being slow, pensive, shy, more resistant to change, decreasing motivation, ambition, health and mental functioning, followed by other disadvantages such as being physically weaker, less skillful, lacking self-confidence and adaptability and also being more difficult to be trained.

Besides all these disadvantages, it has also been reported that there are various benefits of hiring older workers compared to younger ones (Brooke, 2003). Regarding the positive characteristics of older workers, Çilingiroğlu (2004) stated that they produced more products, changed jobs less often, had fewer accidents and less absenteeism than younger ones, and Reid (1985) pointed out that older workers had less absenteeism, a lower rate of on-the-job injuries, were more satisfied with their jobs, experienced less work-related stress, visited psychiatry centers less than younger workers, and also they used drugs less than the general public. Lucas (1993) indicated that they exhibited higher output, seniority and organizational commitment and more experience, and had a better idea of service. In addition, Lucas stated that older workers were perceived as having many admirable characteristics such as reliability, attention, responsibility, stability, loyalty, and that they could communicate better.

Briefly, despite older workers with many positive qualifications, enterprises become deprived of an important source of talent while they prefer to hire young people who have relatively less experience, do not pay much importance to social rights, and most importantly, with lower wages (Çayır, 2012). It seems that hiring old people without ageism may provide a wide range of advantages such as lower absenteeism rates, increased job satisfaction and higher productivity levels (Lucas, 1993).

2.4. Ageism in Tourism

The workforce is aging in many parts of the world and governments are increasingly making policies to encourage aging workers to extend their working lives beyond the normal retirement age and their employers to keep them in the workforce (Dymock et al., 2012). Unfortunately, workers over the age of 50 are usually the first to be fired and the last to be hired. If societies are to continue to get older as projected, older workers need to stay active in the labor market (Armstrong-Stassen & Schlosser, 2008). Lucas (1993) also concluded that hiring older workers and ageism were more common in the tourism sector than in the other sectors. Since it is considered to have a negative impact on the images of accommodation and other tourism enterprises, such enterprises do not want to hire older workers to work in public areas.

It may be a starting point to further highlight the positive aspects of older workers and accept that these workers can actually be more sensitive and more productive. These characteristics are considered to be important for the tourism sector as well and even it can be very beneficial for an industry with demanding working conditions, such as the tourism sector, to employ older workers who deal effectively with customers, have lower absenteeism and turnover rates, have lower disease and accident rates, are more responsible,

loyal, honest and have a strong organizational memory (Brooke, 2003). When the literature is examined, the issue of older workers employed in the tourism sector does not seem to be a very popular topic. However, older workers may be considered vital for the tourism sector with a high workforce turnover rate since they have higher organizational commitment rates (Sayed & Elsaid, 2021).

Though not very common, there are studies on "older workers" in the tourism sector. Iverson and Deery (2007) stated in their study on Australian hotels that "*younger workers are more likely to leave their jobs than older workers*". Magd (2003) concluded in the review of the attitudes and perceptions towards older workers in hospitality management that "*many accommodation establishments have understood the value which older workers have added to their organizations and start hiring them quickly*". According to Leirdal's (2019) study, there was a common perception that the age distribution of accommodation enterprise managers should be young. The study focused on the different characteristics of young and older workers to which the managers paid attention. Today, it is observed that young people take more responsibility in the workplace than the previous generations, are more mature than required by their age, but not perceived as a stable workforce due to their desire to travel and explore the world, to change their sector easily and to ask for leave suddenly. Although it has been mentioned that older workers, on the other hand, were useful in the workforce, exhibited high work ethics and work attitude, had valuable experience and life wisdom, took their job seriously and understood the responsibilities of managers very well, it has been stated that they had difficulty with implementing and accepting changes and had less technology competence compared to younger employees. While Meyer and Meyer (1988) mentioned in their study that the managers of the accommodation enterprises stereotyped the older workers as slow, inflexible and reluctant to change, contrary to this view, Furunes and Mykletun (2005) stated that the managers did not exhibit a clear negative attitude towards the old people and that the older managers had more favorable attitude towards the older workers.

Although it is observed that the negative perception of the sector towards older workers actually includes prejudices, it should be highlighted that there are also studies focusing on their positive aspects. Canning (2011) conducted an extensive study with older workers, managers and human resources managers in the field of accommodation and events. The results of the study have shown that older workers share their experiences gained in many years with great enthusiasm to enable their colleagues and managers to learn, and they informally guided young workers. It does not refer to a formal learning program, but an exchange of knowledge and experience in the sense of social sharing. The study (Çalışkan & Özkoç, 2020) conducted in accommodation enterprises in Turkey, despite not being directly related to age, examined job insecurity and employability perceptions, and demonstrated that workers aged 45 and over perceived job insecurity at a lower level than younger ones. However, the same study revealed that the workers aged 31 to 44 regarded themselves as more employable than those over 45 years when they were asked to evaluate themselves in terms of employability.

It is understood that it is necessary to pay more significance to retain the older employees in the enterprises and to develop strategies for creating labor force on the basis of age balance in order to eliminate ageism in the tourism enterprises. Furunes and Mykletun (2005) assume that accommodation enterprises with heterogeneous workforce will have higher and more stable service quality levels than organizations that employ only younger ones. This assumption is based on the proposition that older and more experienced workers are more likely to respond to customer expectations than their younger colleagues. Likewise, Magd

(2003) supported this view stating that “companies that could not hire older workers may renounce potential advantages arising from a large pool of operational and managerial talent”.

3. General Discussion and Suggestions

Ageism is not related to a small minority group or a specific period. Therefore, aging is a risk that people cannot escape or avoid, and it should be defined as a social problem because it affects all people. This reveals the importance of age in the labor market (Özen & Özbek, 2017:559). Vasconcelos (2012) stated that old individuals (aged 55 and over) struggled with problems related to age discrimination when looking for a job. Age discrimination in business life can occur when the old individual is looking for a job, in her/his working life or when she/he leaves the job. These problems lead to the poverty and exclusion of the old individual and her/his family from the social life as well (Tekin Kaya & Örsel, 2018:1353).

According to the study by Poulston and Jenkins (2016) on the obstacles to employment opportunities of older individuals in hotel enterprises, managers identified older people as stubborn, mentally and physically weak and struggling with computers. This study also stated that nearly half of the managers participating in the study discriminated against older workers in the tourism sector. With a few exceptions (Magd, 2003; Furunes & Mykletun, 2005), current human resources management in the hospitality industry is observed to support a younger workforce (Lucas, 1993). This leads to higher number of younger workers in the sector than that of older workers (Furunes & Mykletun, 2005).

When it comes to age-based discrimination, the preference of a certain age range in establishments is observed to vary depending on the perspective of the managers or employers rather than the characteristics of the employees (Duncan & Loretto, 2004). In this case, managers or employers need to break down their prejudices on this issue and strive to reduce the practices that may lead to ageism in their businesses. For example, considering the positive contribution of older workers to their hotels, Marriott established the “Senior Employment Council” to provide consultancy service for their older employees. Again, some of the managers in Doubletree chain (Waltham/Massachusetts) put emphasis on the importance of older workers on issues such as “maturity and experience of older workers in dealing with tough customers” and “being able to take charge easily in shifts starting at very early hours” (Matuson, 2021). In order to prevent discrimination against older workers, the obstacles before the senior employees may be removed through proper management. Walker and Taylor (1998) draw attention to four application areas for age management in organizations. These are (i) recruitment, (ii) training, (iii) flexible work design and (iv) job design, respectively. Recruitment involves the absence of age limits and discriminatory mechanisms in recruitment processes. A process of training, development and promotion implemented properly implies that older workers are not ignored and are provided with learning opportunities throughout their working life. Flexible working means giving older workers more flexibility in working hours or with respect to the timing of their retirement. Job design refers to taking preventive measures to compensate physical decline (Furunes & Mykletun, 2005). To reduce ageism in hotels, the recommendations by Jenkins (2008) can be summarized and presented to the managers:

- Running an evaluation process independent of age in recruitment processes,
- Providing ageism awareness training to all workers and managers,
- Training unit managers on diversity management,

- Organizing trainings to increase the competence of older workers in technology,
- Implementing a flexible working model to include all workers,
- Developing policies to prevent age-based discrimination,
- Developing procedures that will ensure age neutrality in all processes.

In conclusion, it will holistically help all the enterprises in the tourism sector with contributing to the peace of work in the sector if they strive to create an age-neutral, age-friendly work environment, avoid practices that may cause discrimination against old people in their recruitment and training plans, authorize the human resources departments, if necessary, to create systems that will benefit from the experience and knowledge of older workers at the highest level.

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