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The Power of People You Overlook

The hidden value of tapping nontraditional talent pools—and how they can put your business over the top.

By Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., SHRM-SCP | August 30, 2021

When we talk about aging employees, workers with disabilities, military veterans, people who were incarcerated or people with criminal records, where does your mind go? Do you see these folks as valued additions to your workforce or “mercy” hires? If the latter, ask yourself, “Am I caught up in the wrapping?”

Feedback

Changing your mindset means seeing the real opportunities. No question, this new work world is going to be filled with shifts and pivots after a massive stretch of unemployment. A crisis always reveals who took the difficult moments and workplace challenges and became the aggressive visionaries of industry—and who became paralyzed.

The winners and losers of our times will shake out, but fundamentally we are experiencing a population decline in the United States and globally. And with the exception of a few countries, we're aging. As a result, we are going to have fewer human resources available to achieve growth in business.

So we have a numbers problem. A 2021 survey from McKinsey revealed that 87 percent of executives expressed concern about a skills gap and fewer than half said they knew what to do about it. But you don't need a divining rod to find talent; you need a plan to overcome both the math problem and the stigma issues.

This is not pro bono work. You are preparing your company for the next era. There are new pools of talent filled with workers who will add skills, innovation, positive morale and a strong bottom line. Yet here we are, with so many leaders trapped in their own cul-de-sac.

What are the real reasons people have not yet looked beyond the same-old, same-old? Ignorance? Laziness? Complacency? Fear of the unknown? Fear of lower profits? Let's focus on top executives for a minute: Do they like the status quo? Are they comfortable only with someone like them? What would happen if your recruitment team brought you a CFO candidate who uses a wheelchair?

It's a gut check. As humans, we're all flawed, but you have to ask yourself the hard questions. Can you see yourself across the desk from a Black woman with a disability or an aging veteran of the Iraq War? There is intersectionality in our society. A lot of people tick a ton of check boxes, if you will, but are not commonly considered to fill open jobs.

Now you're seeing the belly of the beast, where fear of discomfort lives. But here is what's really uncomfortable: losing. Losing the competition for talent. Losing the edge in your industry. So ignore pools of uncommon talent at your own risk, because these people can be transformative assets for your organization.

Where are these skilled workers? They are on various networks, they are companies of one, they are all ages, they are military veterans, and they are people with criminal records. Smart leaders can learn to find the right hires, effectively develop them on the job, and keep them passionately engaged in a way that also creates a desirable culture of community, collaboration and innovation.

This is a wake-up argument and appeal for leaders to acknowledge long-undisputed facts, such as how teams in which women account for at least 50 percent of the members are more innovative, or how hiring workers with disabilities increases both morale and retention rates, or how not all workers want to be regular full-time employees. The contemporary mindset isn't just about being ready for change; it's also about being fed up with the lack of change and having the determination to do something about it.



Do Good and Do Good

According to Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) research, when you discuss recruiting with HR professionals, 48 percent of them will tell you their biggest problem is finding a deep enough pool of talent to be able to make good hiring choices. When you ask managers what their biggest frustration with HR is, they say HR can't source talent as effectively as they would like. So there's complete convergence.

It's about growing that talent pool to include untapped resources, increasing the pipeline and closing the skills gap. We have to unlock the talent and tap the potential by valuing workers who have been overlooked, marginalized and discarded. Morally, it's a move in line with diversity, equity and inclusion. Morally, we can all have a warm feeling about it. But businesswise, it's a cold, hard necessity.

I like to say, "Do good and do good." Because the upside is enormous: Society gains; businesses thrive. We've talked a lot about valuing Black and brown workers, about the obstacles to equal pay that women face as they rise in the ranks, about racial and gender diversity. Now let's also think about a few nontraditional, increasingly diverse groups that can help bridge our skills gap.

"This is not pro bono work. You are preparing your company for the next era."

Older Workers (the Silver Tsunami)

We all get older, and many of us recognize one of the most common workplace biases is discrimination against individuals because of their age. Ageism never gets old. It's been 50 years since Congress made it illegal for employers to discriminate against workers age 40 or older, and yet reports from the Urban Institute and ProPublica underscore the reality: More than half of older U.S. workers say they were pushed out of longtime jobs before they chose to retire.

The U.S. has a youth-obsessed culture, no question. But businesses that reflect this bias are only shining a mirror on their own shortcomings and insecurities. To hire so narrowly young means to overlook older talent with institutional knowledge, a history of key relationships and a focused approach to accomplishing goals.

As we look around us, people in the U.S. are living longer and need to work longer. So we need to bring them into the workplace and value their experience. Mature workers have honed skills over decades of employment. Many have pursued further education and expanded their skill sets during their careers and in periods of unemployment or underemployment. Retaining talented mature workers and recruiting new ones is simply smart for most organizations.

OLDER WORKERS ON THE RISE

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the workforce growth rates of individuals age 65 and older are projected to outpace those of individuals in all other age groups between 2014 and 2024.

Annual Growth Rate in Labor Force by Age, 2014-24 Predictions

AGES	GROWTH RATE
16-24	-1.4%
25-34	0.8%
35-44	1.0%
45-54	-0.8%
55-64	0.6%
65-74	4.5%
75+	6.4%



Workers with Disabilities (Able and Willing)

During the COVID-19 crisis, a stunning headline topped an online news article from SHRM: “A Million People with Disabilities Have Lost Jobs During the Pandemic.” It was hard to wrap our heads around, but beginning in March of 2020 and extending through the fall—when the coronavirus first began to spread in the U.S.—1 in 5 workers with disabilities were dismissed by employers, in contrast to 1 in 7 among the general population, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

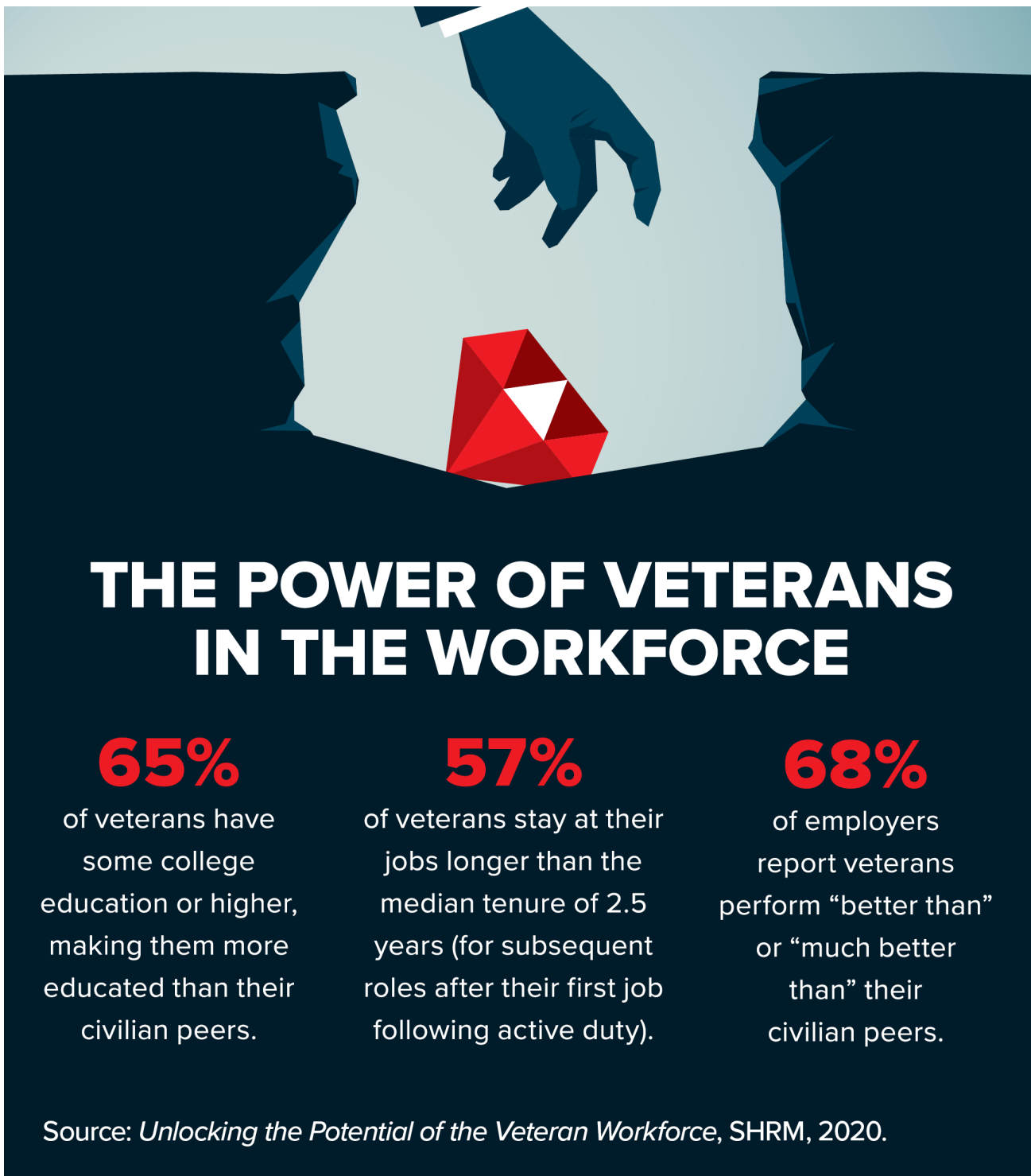
While there will be an unemployment reckoning for everyone in our post-pandemic workplace, ultimately you’ll face the shrinking talent pool and you’ll need to find highly skilled, motivated workers who will be an asset to your business. We have to embrace that fact and search out workers with disabilities to help grow our bottom lines.

Voya Financial is doing just that. The company has been tearing down stereotypes by hiring employees with disabilities for several years. Making accommodations is not a burden; it’s good business.

In 2020, Voya’s CEO joined companies such as Walmart and Microsoft to write a letter to other CEOs. “We have experienced firsthand the potential for innovation, sustainability and profit of disability inclusion,” it stated. “Only 33 percent of working-age people with disabilities are participating in the labor force—as compared to the 63 percent workforce participation rate for people without disabilities. We are failing to build sustainable futures that empower all.”

Success is part of the empowerment. Companies that incorporate job candidates with disabilities have seen higher revenue, higher net income, reduced turnover, lower recruiting costs, increased productivity and improved customer outreach.

In fact, a recent study from Accenture, conducted in partnership with Disability:IN and the American Association of People with Disabilities, found that companies that seek to hire those with disabilities performed better and saw, on average, 23 percent higher revenue.



Military Veterans (Warriors Around the World)

In HR, we hear so many misperceptions about veterans in the workplace: “Why bother? They’re going to get called up or relocate anyway” and “I need someone who can lead, not just follow orders” and “I’m concerned about bringing PTSD into the workplace.”

The arguments against hiring veterans are hollow and ignorant, and they play into every stereotype of soldiers being unable to function in the civilian world. Let’s start with a basic fact: Only 14 percent of active-duty military are combat specialists. Now add other truths, such as the increasing diversity of the military and the additional education many service members and veterans have compared to their civilian peers.

To overlook veterans is a disturbing failure of management. We know employers that successfully attract and hire veterans in their workplaces find that those with military backgrounds often not only outperform other employees but also stay with the organization longer than the median length of employment.

There are so many companies recognizing this value: Coca-Cola, The Home Depot, Johnson & Johnson, Intel and, yes, SHRM. The list is growing longer because the need for skilled workers is expanding.

All Things Work

Reset: Employer Culture, Brand and the Future of Work by Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.

SHRM President and CEO, Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., SHRM-SCP, joins *All Things Work* host Tony Lee to discuss questions explored in SHRM's new book, *Reset: A Leader's Guide to Work in an Age of Upheaval* (<https://reset.shrm.org/>). As the book's author, Johnny discusses the role of employer brand and organizational culture when attracting top talent, their intersection with diversity, equity and inclusion, and the steps CEOs and HR leaders can take to reset their organizations.

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Formerly Incarcerated (Second-Chance Payoff)

We are long past the Willie Horton stigma of the 1988 presidential campaign, back when a felon on furlough went on a violent crime spree as the U.S. was discussing felon rehabilitation. That one example blew up the entire cause for years. But what we've seen of late is how smart CEOs, such as Jamie Dimon at JPMorgan Chase, are making it a point—and a successful one—to expand their talent pools by hiring employees with criminal records. A couple of years ago, Chase reported hiring 20,000 workers in the U.S., and 10 percent of them had a criminal history. That's phenomenal.

Chase went so far as to “ban the box” by removing the question of criminal records from its job applications. As Dimon stated in a press release, “When someone cannot get their foot in the door to compete for a job, it's bad for business and bad for communities that need access to economic opportunity.” There are benefits and downsides of banning the box, but the fact that Chase made this decision is admirable because it is acknowledging the criticality of trying to tap untapped pools of talent.

The numbers back this up. As the U.S. government reports, for people who have been incarcerated, finding employment within a year after their release reduces the chance of recidivism from 32.4 percent to 19.6 percent. And yet 75 percent of those released from prison remain unemployed a year later, according to the American Civil Liberties Union.

We have to do better by them as we do better by business, too. There is no doubt the workplace is ready to give second chances to those who have served their time. SHRM helped produce a study revealing that while people with criminal records face additional scrutiny during the hiring process, many employees, managers and HR professionals are open to working with and hiring people with

criminal histories.

There is nothing to fear in providing second chances to skilled workers who have paid their dues and earned a position that pays. This isn't charity. It's good business.

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