

## COMMENTARY

# Malleable mindsets and supervisor support to teach old dogs new tricks

By Irene E de Pater

THE Ministry of Manpower recently reported that almost half (47 per cent) of Singaporeans aged 40 and above who lost their jobs were not able to find one within six months. Those below 40, however, were able to re-enter the workforce at a faster rate.

This appears to stem from the common concern among employers that it is difficult to teach an old dog new tricks – that older employees are less willing than younger ones to be trained or adapt to a new job. The fear is that when older workers are less willing to adapt to change, they may hold companies back in meeting new challenges.

In addition, ageing is often associated with a decline in cognitive abilities – the brain's ability to learn and remember skills and to problem solve. With multi-tasking now a common feature of many jobs, there is a view that older workers may be less competent in handling the demands of the workplace.

But like many developed countries, Singapore faces an ageing population. To maintain sustained growth, the challenge is to ensure that the population remains productively employed, their skills remain relevant, and that judgement against older workers are challenged.

The SkillsFuture movement is now reportedly reaching out to businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises.

There are, however, some basic questions that need to be answered: Would older employees be willing to participate in training and development programmes if they were asked to do so by their company? And if they aren't, what could the reasons be for the reluctance?

I was a co-researcher in a project that found several characteristics influencing attitudes towards training and development.

### Fixedness or malleability

Our findings suggest that whether older employees are inclined towards learning may have already been fostered at a young age, but only becomes more obvious as they grow older.

A critical factor that determines an individual's attitude towards training and development is whether they think personal characteristics are fixed or malleable.

Some employees hold the view that personal characteristics such as intelligence and skills are fixed (cannot be changed), while others believe in the incremental view that these characteristics are malleable (can be shaped or improved).

Such beliefs have implications for employers, given that learning at the workplace is focused on the development of work-related capacities and skills.

When employees believe that these capacities and skills are fixed, they tend to hold on to current tasks that they perform well in order to avoid failure. To them, the validation of their competencies is more important than acquiring competence – learning.

In contrast, we found that employees who believe that their capacities are malleable are more willing to engage in learning new skills and invest in career development. They actually enjoy the experience and become more confident as they learn and master new skills.

### The attitude towards learning

Older employees who believe that their capacities are malleable see training as an opportunity to enhance their capabilities. Their attitude towards training is no different from those of younger employees: they want to learn.

But when they view their capacities as fixed, we found older employees to be less willing to undergo training than younger counterparts.

On the other hand, for young adults starting out in their careers, it is only through their work experience where they learn more about the types of work they find easy or difficult to master.

Thus, even if a career starter believes that a person's capabilities are fixed, he or she will put effort into learning and training to find out more about their own capabilities and enhance their experience.

### Perception of supervisor

An additional factor affecting training attitudes is the perception of supervisory support. While a supportive supervisor facilitates positive attitudes among younger and older employees, a less supportive supervisor does not encourage older employees to have a keen interest in training.

In fact, older employees see the lack of supervisory support as a reflection of negative expectations about older people, reinforcing the perception that they have limited cognitive ability.

Finally, we observed a Pygmalion effect – a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby employees act in line with the beliefs of their supervisor. In other words, if a supervisor believes that older workers prefer tasks they have already mastered, the supervisor may create an environment in which older subordinates are expected to keep their current tasks rather than take up new challenges.

### Encourage growth

Given that one's early beliefs tend to play a role in working life, younger employees should be encouraged to adopt a malleable mindset, which could have lasting effects on career development.

Likewise, firms would do well by ensuring that first-line supervisors are aware that their explicit and implicit behaviours influence workers' developmental attitudes.

Along with verbal persuasion and the allocation of resources to encourage older employees to take part in learning activities, other supportive signals should be embedded in supervisors' day-to-day practices.

For instance, supervisors could challenge staff by assigning tasks and roles that are different from their current ones, yet not too different.

This signals that the firm trusts its older employees to be able to learn, thus boosting workers' expectations of the benefits of learning. There's no stopping an old dog from learning new tricks.

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