



WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Because the gray matter under those gray hairs counts for a lot.

The demographic data tells us that a “silver tsunami” is headed our way. We’re told that these fellow citizens are increasingly litigious, that retirement bores them, that they haven’t saved enough and that we should get used to tolerating their overextended presence in our workplaces. But don’t be so hasty

about putting grandpa out to pasture. According to a new study in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*:

Older applicants demonstrated consistently higher “crystallized intelligence.” Researchers Rachael Klein, Stephan Dilchert, Deniz Ones and Kelly Dages tested more than 3,000 individuals ages 20 to 74 applying to executive-level jobs such as vice president or general manager positions within professional, technical and sales occupations, and found that older employees in executive-level positions may possess several key cognitive skills in greater abundance than their younger counterparts, including verbal ability and experience-based knowledge.

“When it comes to job performance in general, job knowledge determines whether people succeed in their respective roles,” says Dilchert, a professor of management at Baruch College, City University of New York. “So older workers who score high on so-called ‘crystallized abilities’ might have a leg up in more complex jobs such as those in the engineering, legal, and medical professions, where job knowledge changes at a slower pace.”

It wasn't an all-around cognitive triumph, however, for the older execs tested. The study, the first to focus on higher-level executives and how different cognitive ability tests may impact the hiring of older applicants, also found that, compared to younger employees, the older ones showed steeper declines in "fluid intelligence," including the ability to reason, particularly after age 59.

Of course, there's more to job performance than cognitive ability, says Dilchert, including an employee's personality and relational skills, which are not subject to the same age-related decline. And "wisdom is not as easily measured as cognitive speed," cautions Suzanne Degges-White, a professor of education at Northern Illinois University. "There is a great deal more to professional success ... and the value of an older worker than fluid intelligence assessments can measure."

But as long as we live in a world where many employers insist on measuring such skills — and to hire, retain or retire their employees accordingly — it's good to know at least that the cognitive knife can cut both ways when it comes to younger and older workers. And for those approaching the tail end of their careers, it's reassuring that it might not just be your golf game and your grandchildren that you hear beckoning; it might increasingly be your employer as well.

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