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GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF OLDER WORKERS' CAPABILITIES

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Introduction

Research has consistently shown that older adults in general and older workers in particular have suffered negative perceptions of their capabilities and desires for continued work. Recently, however, changes in the employment context and new research suggest that the tide may be turning for older workers. One key reason for examining the current situation for older workers is that many businesses have begun to worry about finding enough workers to fill the void created by the retiring Baby Boom generation. Employing older workers can be a positive step for organizations now that AARP has begun to recognize and reward companies seen as "older worker friendly." And, finally, new research looking across generations of workers reveals that, at least in some instances, employers prefer older workers to those from younger generations.[1,2]

As today's older adults live longer and remain healthy for longer periods of time than did previous generations, current cohorts of older workers are facing new pressures to continue work beyond the conventional retirement age. Some continue to work because they enjoy it and need the meaning, structure and life purpose that work provides i.e., because they want to.[3] Others continue work in order to maintain costly health benefits and/or to supplement inadequate pensions.[4] Some, of course, work because they can ill afford retirement at all: they have to.[5] A study by AARP revealed that nearly 70% of workers over 45 say they plan to work in their retirement years.[6]

About This Study

The relative lack of older workers in the recent past meant that there were few reasons for conducting cross-generational research, but today it is common to find members of four generations (Generation Y, Generation X, Baby Boomers, and the Traditionalist Generation) working side by side. The purpose of this brief is to examine the extent to which negative perceptions of older workers persist among inter-generational workers in a contemporary employment setting and to identify how these perceptions affect workers from older generations. Specifically we focus on two research questions:

1. How do Traditionalist Generation workers rate themselves in comparison to how Baby Boom workers, and Generation X and Y workers rate them on 11 characteristics deemed to be important qualifications for continued work in later life?

2. If employees perceive their workplace environment to be less likely to offer opportunities for training and promotion for older workers, what effect does this have on their own well-being, and on their commitment to the organization?
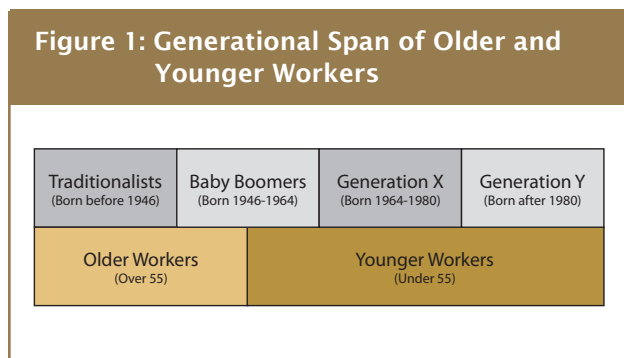
Who is an Older Worker?

There is no consensus about who is and who is not an older worker. Pitt-Catsouphes and Smyer suggest that the definition varies across historical periods and industrial sectors, and in some cases, the definition is not as linked to chronological age as it once was.[7] As long ago as 1986, Zepelin, Sills, and Heath found that "those between ages 18 and 35 were considered young; those between 35 and 60 were considered middle aged, and those between 65 and 80 were considered old."[8] Gergen and Gergen say that current generations do not expect to think of themselves as "old" until age 80.[9] Thus, researchers use different definitions.

Anyone over 40 is protected by the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA). In general a worker starts to be older at age forty for hiring purposes.[10] Nearly 40% of employees think that employers begin to view a worker as old by the age of 50.[11] Pitt-Catsouphes and Smyer define an older worker as 45+ years and point out that those workers make up 37% of the U.S labor force.[12] Twenty years ago, Ashbaugh and Fay reviewed over 100 studies and found that the average age for operationalizing "older workers" was 53.4.[13] One recent study examining perceptions of older workers used age 55+ as the definition.[2] We have chosen to use that definition for this study, as it was used in our survey questions as the boundary.

Younger Generations in the Workplace

In the context of the study presented here, younger workers span 2-1/2 generations. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1: Generational Span of Older and Younger Workers

Traditionalists (Born before 1946)	Baby Boomers (Born 1946-1964)	Generation X (Born 1964-1980)	Generation Y (Born after 1980)
Older Workers (Over 55)	Younger Workers (Under 55)		

Although different analysts use slightly different eras and descriptors for "generation," Eisner suggests the following delimiters: Traditionalists (born before 1946), Baby Boom (1946-1964); Generation X (1965-1980); and Generation Y, born since 1980.[14] It is said that these generations have different values, attitudes and expectations based upon formative events in their lives, although there are individual differences in the response to the same event.[15] Stillman says that the mix of ages and stages in the 21st century workplace creates a kind of collision course and creates challenges for management.[16] Much of what we know about inter-generational differences, however, is derived from the popular press and proprietary studies within organizations, although some academic research has begun. It is important to add that there is also controversy about whether age, generation, career stage or the life course perspective is the more useful lens through which to view differences among the vast array of workers in the workplace today.[17]

On the other hand, members of the older generations of workers are widely seen as disinterested in promotion, yearning for retirement, and decelerating (Simon, 1996).[18] Younger generations of workers, especially Generation Y, are seen as eager to get ahead, and impatient for promotions.[15,19] Moreover, Siegel (1993) found that younger workers are clearly perceived as having a greater likelihood of promotion.[20] With heightened interest in differences among the generations, and little research on different generations' perceptions of their older co-workers, it is important to explore the extent of these differences.

Using our definition of older workers (55+), all members of the Traditionalist Generation are older workers as are older members of the Baby Boom Generation.

Research on Perceptions

We do not have to go far to find negative images of the elder population. Birthday cards are rife with depictions of hair loss, wrinkles, memory deficits, sagging bodies, toothless jaws, and the "over the hill" theme in general. These images also abound in the print and television media.[21] Levy and Banaji find that discrimination against older people is more entrenched than any of the other "isms" they study.[22] Ageism is particularly pernicious because all of us are aging, no matter how old we are, and if we are

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lucky, we will all be elders. As Duncan and Loretto point out, everyone is prone to age discrimination; thus, "…it is difficult to distinguish oppressor from oppressed" (p. 97).[23] Older people themselves often have negative views of elders. Indeed negative views of older persons may be viewed as legitimate by government rules, customs, social norms, and physical conditions.[24] Such views extend to the workplace and can have damaging effects on the careers and psychological health of older workers.[25]

Recent research on perceptions of older workers has identified both negative and positive stereotypes in employer attitudes toward older employees.[23] On the positive side, older workers are seen as having a good work ethic, and a good attitude toward work. On the negative side, they are considered to be stuck in their ways, and, as mentioned, not interested in further training or promotions. Rix, for example, describing periodic surveys with employers over 15 years, reports that they "consistently tend to rate older workers highly when it comes to loyalty, dependability, experience, and customer relations; however they rate older workers far less positively when it comes to flexibility, adaptability, technological competence, and ability to learn new technology" (p. 35).[26] Older workers are also seen as incurring higher costs for the organization[1] and as unhealthy or in decline.[25] Negative perceptions have been particularly pronounced in the area of training, where managers and other employees as well see older workers as slow learners, computer illiterate, as disinterested in training, and hankering for retirement.[18] Unfortunately, if negative perceptions persist about older workers' ability to learn, their propensity for career development and promotion, and their general adaptive capacities, then older workers will continue to face obstacles to continued employment.[1]

The Current Study

How pervasive are such perceptions today? How damaging are they? To whom? The worker, the employer, or both? Using data gathered as part of a larger study comprising employees in 388 stores and 37 districts of a national, retail chain (hereafter referred to as CitiSales, a pseudonym) we examine the perceptions of older workers across four generations, while also studying the effects of these perceptions on the older workers themselves.

We assessed employees' perceptions of older workers using 11 items from Marshall's Issues of an Aging Workforce Study.[27] Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed (1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=neutral; 4=agree; 5=strongly agree) with the following statements:

Workers 55 and older…

- …can serve as mentors to younger workers.
- …are respected.
- …are more reliable than younger workers.
- …adapt well to new technology.
- …are eager for training.
- …work well with younger supervisors.
- …are just as likely to be promoted as younger workers.
- …have great loyalty to the company.
- …are flexible.
- …are interested in being promoted.

We assessed the employees' general perception of opportunity for advancement in the organization by asking them to state the extent to which they agreed or disagreed (same scale as above) with the statement: "In decisions about promotion, CitiSales gives younger people preference over older people."

We also assessed employee engagement using the organization's own measure. Again, employees were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed (same scale as above) with the following questions:

- I feel like I am an important part of CitiSales.
- I really care about the future of CitiSales.
- I feel like my work makes an important contribution to CitiSales' success.
- I would highly recommend CitiSales to a friend seeking employment.
- I am always willing to give extra effort to help CitiSales succeed.
- It would take a lot to get me to leave CitiSales.
- I would like to be working for CitiSales one year from now.
- Compared with other companies I know about, I think CitiSales is a great place to work.

Results

Research Question 1: In general, how do different generations rate older workers on 11 characteristics deemed to be important qualifications for continued work in later life? Are there any differences in perceptions of older workers related to respondent's employment status, gender, marital status, race, or education level?

The responses for six of the eleven categories varied with age. In each of the following perceptions of capabilities, the responses are significantly more negative with each successive generation, from Traditionalists to Generation Y: the ability of older workers to serve as mentors; seeing older workers as reliable; deeming them to be more productive than younger workers; seeing them as adaptable to new technology; eager for training; and flexible. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2: Perceptions of Older Workers
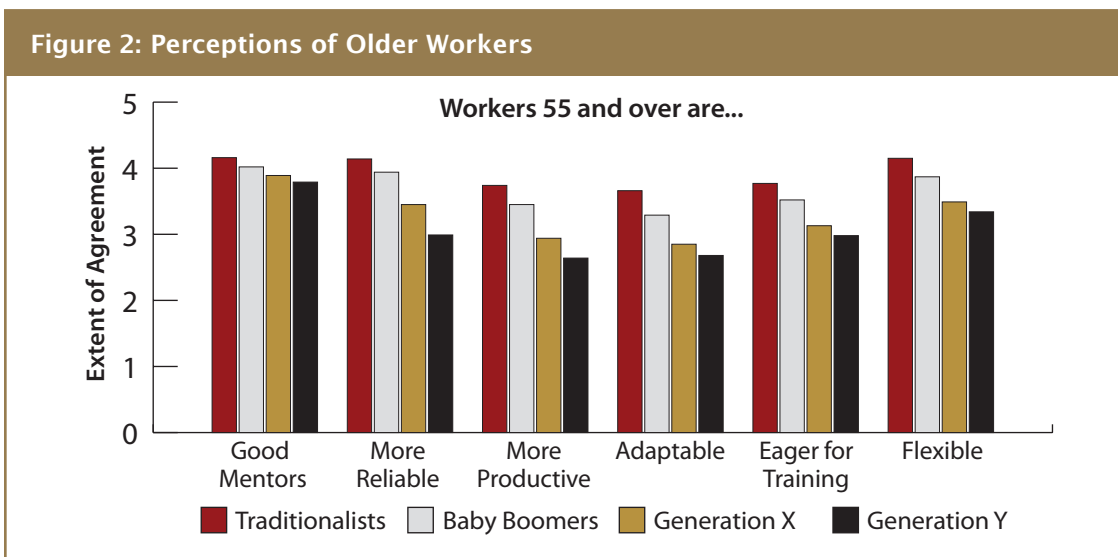
Further, the older generations are more positive in their responses regarding older employees' ability to work well with younger supervisors and to be loyal to the company. (See Figure 3.) Employees from the Traditionalists Generation agree with these statements significantly more than do the other three generations. In turn, the Baby Boom Generation agrees with these same statements significantly more than those in Generation X and Y, with no significant differences between the responses of the younger two groups.

Figure 3: Perceptions of Older Workers
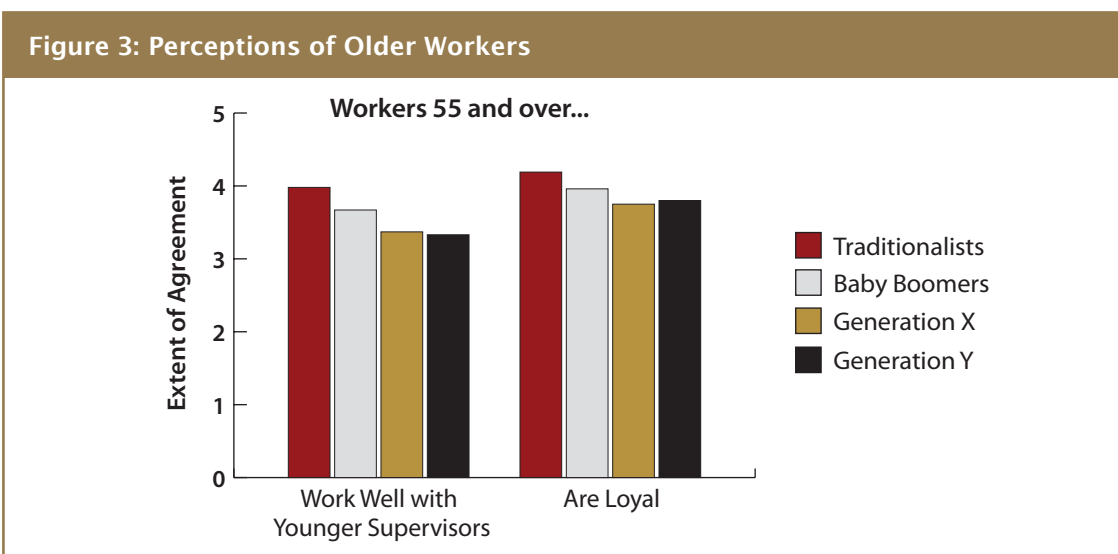
In a shift from the positive correlation of age with positive perceptions of capabilities, the Baby Boom Generation agrees significantly less than do the other three groups that older workers are "respected," with no significant differences among the responses of the other three groups. (See Figure 4.) Those from Generation X agree significantly less than those from the other three groups that older workers are interested in being promoted. Again in this instance, the responses from the other three generations are not significantly different. It is interesting to note here that the youngest generation in this work environment agrees that older workers are interested in promotion opportunities to the same extent that the older workers themselves do.

Finally, in terms of perceiving that older workers are "just as likely to be promoted" as younger workers, the two older generations' responses did not differ significantly, however both the Traditionalists Generation and the Baby Boom Generation agree with this statement significantly less than those from generations X and Y do.

Figure 4: Perceptions of Older Workers
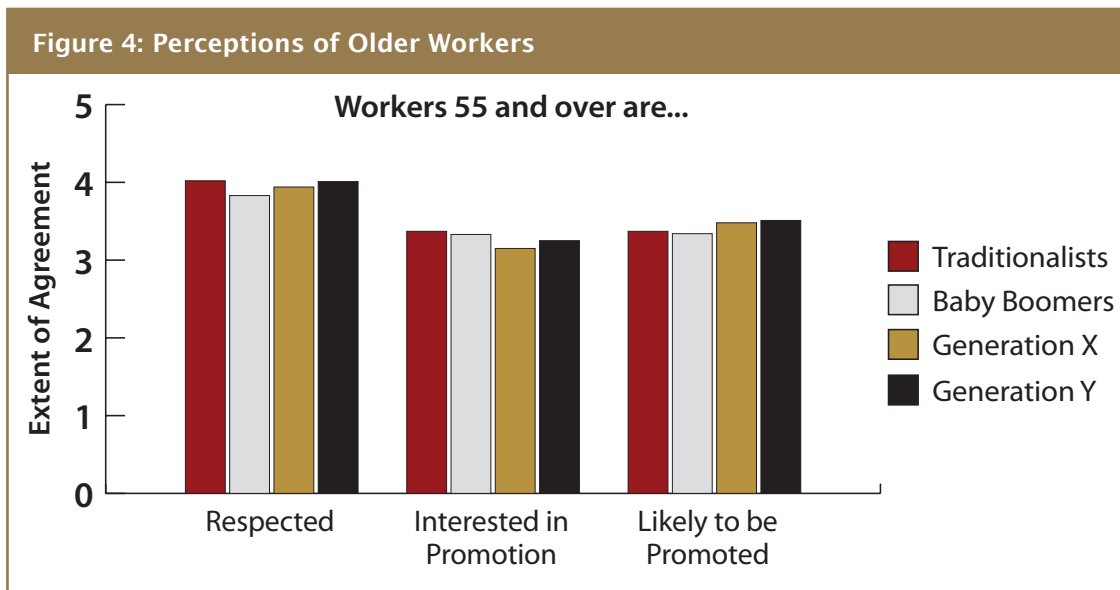
Research Question 2: If employees perceive that there are fewer opportunities for promotion for older workers, what effect does this have on well-being and employee engagement? To examine the effects of perceptions of age discrimination for each of the generations, the responses for each group were analyzed individually. In each case the responses were split into: (1) those who disagreed that younger workers are more likely to get promoted; (2) those who agreed that younger workers are more likely to get promoted (the responses of those who reported a neutral stance on this statement were not included in this analysis). The results show that there are significant differences among all of the groups. (See Figure 5.) Employees from the three older generations who perceive equal promotion opportunities for older workers are all significantly higher in employee engagement than those who do not. However, the youngest group of employees, those from generation Y, report significantly lower levels of employee engagement when they perceived workers over 55 had the same opportunities for promotion as younger workers. We will return to this point.

In terms of psychological well-being, employees among the two older generations who perceive equal opportunities for older workers are significantly higher in well-being than those who perceive an unfair advantage for younger workers. (See Figure 6.)

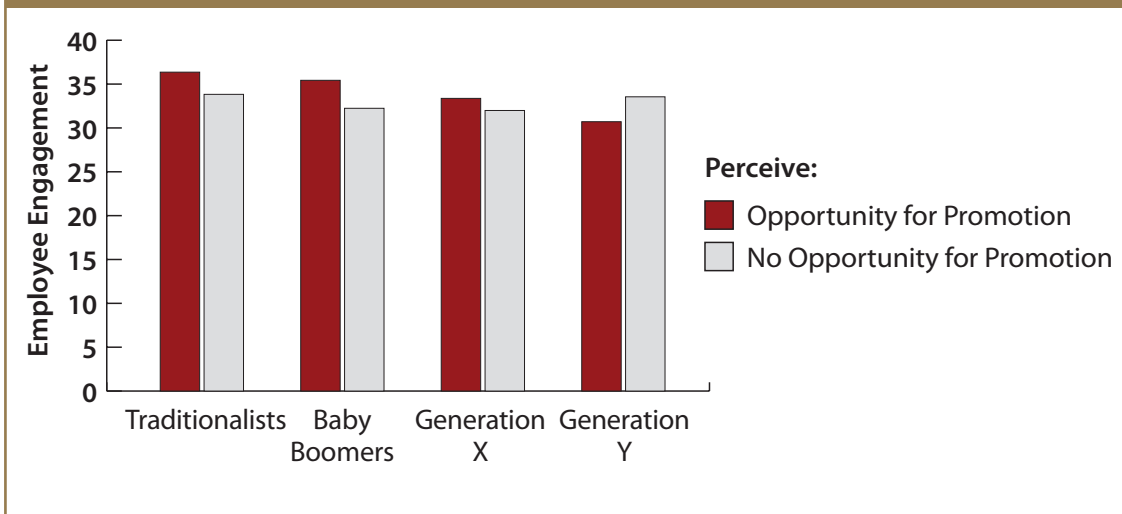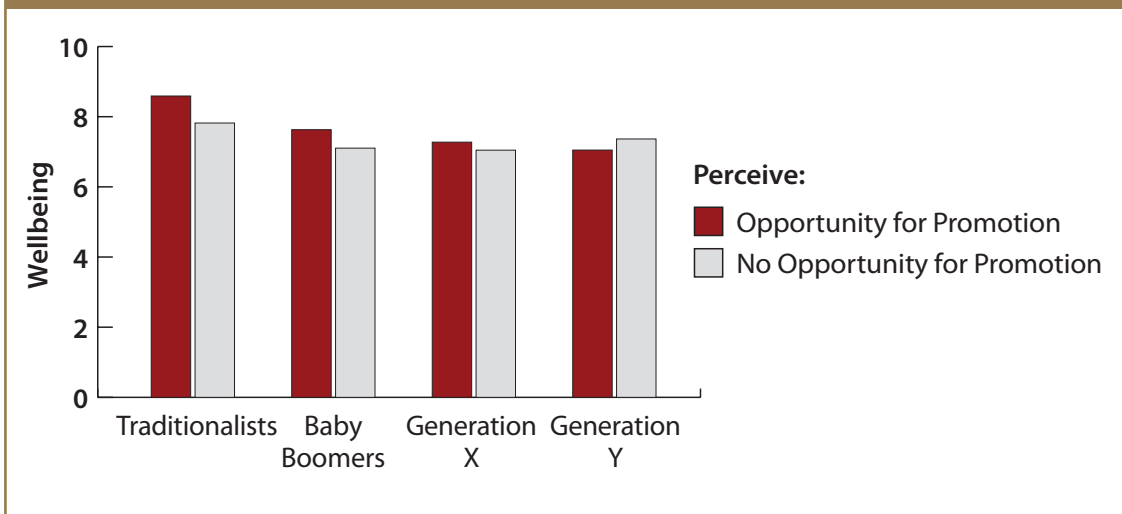## Figure 5: Effects of Negative Perceptions of Opportunities for Older Workers

Y-axis: Employee Engagement (0–40)
X-axis: Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y

Perceive:
- Opportunity for Promotion
- No Opportunity for Promotion

Figure 6: Effects of Negative Perceptions of Opportunities for Older Workers

Y-axis: Wellbeing (0–10)
X-axis: Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y

Perceive:
- Opportunity for Promotion
- No Opportunity for Promotion

Conclusion: Summary and Implications

- In general, older workers (both the Traditionalists Generation and the Baby Boom Generation) are very positive about themselves and the company they work for. They see themselves as more reliable than younger workers, more productive, and as having great loyalty to the company. Indeed they have the highest employee engagement scores.

- On the other hand, older workers are more likely to perceive that younger workers are given preference in training and development opportunities. For those in the 3 older generations who have this perception, employee engagement and psychological well-being is lower than for those who do not hold this view. Interestingly, members of Generation Y who hold this perception are more engaged than those who do not. This suggests, as some have reported, that Generation Y is subjected to the opposite type of stereotyping i.e., often reminded that they are too young for a promotion. Unlike Generation X, Generation Y was more likely to believe that older workers were interested in promotions. They may have been expressing their feeling that less opportunity for older workers means more opportunity for them. Such findings suggest that the lens of "generation" is a useful one here for understanding some level of conflict that may exist among workers of the oldest and the youngest generations in today's workplace.

- Important caveat—Hagen says that "with a few exceptions it is impossible to generalize about older employees—their individual differences are at least as great as those of any other age group...they include the wise and the foolish, the bitter and the cheerful, the dedicated and the clock-watchers, the slipshod and the careful workers" (p. 7).[28] We believe this statement holds for each generation. In our study there are men, women, professional workers, hourly workers, people of different races and ethnicity, and those who are more and less educated. These are but a few of the within-generation differences that matter in thinking about people's values, attitudes, and work styles.

- Managers have a complex balancing act to meet the expectations and needs of a multi-generational workforce. Many employees in the older generations still want and need training, development, and recognition for their work in terms of promotion. However, employees from the youngest generation can become discouraged if they see all the opportunities and promotions going to workers from the older generations. Determining which staff will be developed and promoted will have to be based on some transparent standard not related to age or generation. This issue is one that managers will need to handle carefully to ensure retention and engagement from employees of all generations.

The Center on Aging & Work/Workplace Flexibility at Boston College, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, is a unique research center established in 2005. The Center works in partnership with decision-makers at the workplace to design and implement rigorous investigations that will help the American business community prepare for the opportunities and challenges associated with the aging workforce. The Center focuses on flexible work options because these are a particularly important element of innovative employer responses to the aging workforce. The studies conducted by the Center are examining employers' adoption of a range of flexible work options, the implementation of them at the workplace, their use by older workers, and their impact on business and older workers.

The Center's multi-disciplinary core research team is comprised of more than 20 social scientists from disciplines including economics, social work, psychology, and sociology. The investigators have strong expertise in the field of aging research. In addition, the Center has a workplace advisory group (SENIOR Advisors) to ensure that the priorities and perspectives of business leaders frame the Center's activities and a Research Advisory Committee that provides advice and consultation on the Center's individual research projects and strategic direction. The Center is directed by Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes, Ph.D., and Michael A. Smyer, Ph.D.

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