

The brood of millennials who can't find jobs aren't alone. Another demographic is in the same mess

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Older workers struggle to find opportunities to earn cash, stimulate their minds, offer purpose and social interaction

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Oksana Slavutych of OK Props in her studio: 'Feeling young doesn't cut it in today's cut-throat job market regardless of talent and vast experience.' Photo by J.P. Moczulski for National Post

For those of a certain age, work can be hard to come by in a world where millennials seem to rule. And by all accounts, it's not a pretty scene.

“When I started in the business 20 years ago, people saw my work in magazines and the phone rang continuously,” says prop stylist Oksana Slavutych of Toronto-based OK Props, which provides props for print and motion shoots. “But as I got older, especially 10 to 15 years in, the phone started ringing less. Most of the photographers I work for are older

than me and they are also getting less work. They're being replaced by new grads in their 20s and 30s who are hiring their friends or people they went to school with. It makes me feel frustrated that I'm not being appreciated."

Slavutych hesitates to give her exact age for fear of her work drying up completely, saying only that she's "over 50" with a youthful look, attitude and energy level. Still, she realizes that feeling young doesn't cut it in today's cut-throat job market regardless of her talent and vast experience. When she tries to make her case, though, nobody's listening.

"There's a belief system out there that the younger you are, the fresher your ideas are or the fresher your energy is or that you have more to offer," she says. "But I'd say it makes no difference at all because somebody with a lot of experience has more knowledge, has more access to researching new ideas and can explore other options. Some of the ideas that new stylists bring to the table we've already done. They're just rehashing stuff; though they think it's new, I've seen it before. That's where experience comes into play. My career has always been built on keeping up with trends and using my judgment."

Though millennials complain they can't find work because Boomers are working longer, it ain't exactly so. Slavutych's sentiments are echoed by a slew of older Canadians struggling to find work or retain their job. Some love working and want to keep at it for as long as possible while others simply can't afford to retire. But like Slavutych, when measured against younger colleagues and competitors, it's a losing battle.

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Lisa Taylor, president, Centre for Career Innovation

"We have a stunted view of working life," explains Lisa Taylor, president of Challenge Factory and the Centre for Career Innovation in Toronto. "The retirement age was set at 65 in the 1930s and life expectancy was only 62. People are hitting this milestone, this goalpost that they've had in their mind their whole life, that they'll retire in their 60s. Then they're getting there and realizing they don't feel like a retired person is supposed to feel. That's because we live well into our 80s and that gap between working life expectancy and life expectancy takes them by surprise."

Taylor cringes when she hears people say that older workers aren't at the top of their game, are coasting into retirement or are too expensive to keep on. Rather, many are feeling unchallenged, underwhelmed and ignored.

"They're 'checking out' in the same way that someone in their 20s or 30s would, (if they'd) been left for a decade without any development or challenges," she says. "There's an obligation on the organization's side to fully utilize the talents that they have and not stunt people's careers early by withdrawing opportunities to grow. If there is a true performance issue with someone who is older, that's a conversation they need to be having – just like they should with anyone at any age."

One organization that gets it is the Ontario Securities Commission, where 60 per cent of the workforce is older than 40 and 17 per cent is over 55. Not only do they have the skills and can get up and running quicker than their younger counterparts, says chief HR officer Lisa Wilkins, but they're also more relaxed "and can adapt quicker when the unexpected happens – and the unexpected always happens!"

That said, the OSC has developed wellness and retraining programs, a phased-retirement program and flexible work arrangements to keep them engaged. To bridge the generation gap, OSC hosts an annual "speed mentoring" event giving younger employees six minutes to pick the brain of their mid- to late-career colleagues, and are encouraged to keep the conversation going afterward. To keep all employees up to speed on new technology, OSC provides retraining and skills-upgrading opportunities, supports external learning and moves people around the organization to gain exposure.

"We treat them like the professionals they are," says Wilkins, who recently shared tips at the inaugural Forty Plus Training Summit focused on the shifting employment landscape of older workers.

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Oksana Slavutych, prop stylist

For now, the Gig Economy may be the answer, with platforms available that allow matchmaking to happen between those with skills, expertise and knowledge to share and employers yearning for it. One such service is Kahuso, an online marketplace connecting accomplished executive talent to companies for full-time, contract, board and advisory opportunities. As CEO and co-founder Michael Carter says, many companies are desperately trying to figure out how to access talent rather than own it. At the same time, older workers are struggling to find opportunities that will earn them cash, stimulate their mind and offer purpose and social interaction.

"With our aging population, there is a tremendous amount of experience and expertise hitting the market," he says. "These individuals still want to work but they're finding they may have to work differently. Some may want more control and flexibility to work on their own terms, but that doesn't have to mean 60 hours a week for one company. Similarly, companies are looking for more control and flexibility with their own resourcing strategies. They don't necessarily want or need permanent employees to achieve the objective or results they are looking for. We connect the right executive to the right company, at the right time, for the right amount of time. For older folks who are finding themselves in a tight spot, or who are looking for a new way to work, it's a win-win."

Experts advise those worried about being left out to stay nimble, keep up with technology, network heavily, and find retraining opportunities at a current job. Employers should partner with educational institutions to enable retraining.

As for Slavutych, she welcomes calls from young prop stylists seeking advice. But what irks her is that they end up getting the jobs instead of her – usually because they’ll work for peanuts. She recently signed with an agency and it’s been helping.

“Regardless of whether you are 45 or 55 or 65, if you are in shape physically and mentally, there is no reason to quit doing a job that you love,” she says. “The key is to be able to work together. It is such a pleasure to be in the company of 20-year-olds and learn about what is important to them right now, in this moment. But it is also nice to be able to offer the same to them, to share, to be included.”