



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

EPISODE 18: KATHY BLACK – AGE/ING PART 2

Kathy Black

The nowhere for retirement fills work, and many people will find themselves having to financially support themselves. We can talk about some of the macro policies surrounding that, but the reality is people will be in the workforce longer.

Phil Wagner

Hello from the halls of the Mason School of Business here at William & Mary. I'm Phil, and this is Diversity Goes to Work. Buckle up because we're getting ready to take a deep dive into the real human lived experiences that shape and guide our diversity work in the world of work. Should be fun. Welcome listeners to yet another episode of Diversity Goes to Work. This week, we're continuing our conversation on aging and age diversity in the world of work. And we are joined by a true expert. Dr. Kathy Black is a professor of aging studies at the University of South Florida. She's a Next Avenue Top 50 National Influencer in Aging, a Hartford Geriatric Social Work Faculty Scholar, a fellow in the Gerontological Society of America, and an advisor for age-friendly Sarasota. Dr. Black has more than 40 years of experience working in the field of aging. She's been a practitioner, an educator, a researcher, and she's worked directly with older adults and their families as a geriatric case manager, a medical social worker, and a geriatric nurse in long-term care, hospital, nursing home, and community-based settings. She's got experience at every single level. She has conducted over 200 presentations in the field of health and aging at local, state, national, and global venues. She's been the principal investigator on more than a dozen grants in aging. She's authored over 50 peer-reviewed publications in top-tier journals. She's widely cited. She's a phenomenal expert. She is a dear friend and someone I am delighted to be able to host on today's episode. Kathy, thanks so much for joining us today on another episode of Diversity Goes to Work. I'm delighted to speak with you. I'm very familiar with your work. I'm very familiar with you, given that we were once colleagues, and I could not be more excited to hear your insight on age diversity in the world of work. Kathy, you spent your very impressive professional career really focusing on age. What drives your personal interest in creating age-friendly spaces?

Kathy Black

Well, Phil, it's an honor to be with you, and you are just an esteemed colleague. So truly, this is my privilege to be with you today. As you know, Phil, I have a passion for aging, as other people have a passion for what they do. And I just, from a very early age on, enjoyed older adults, love the stories, love the people, and literally have made a career caring about how

people age. And of course, as society has continued age, it's more about how do we live fully across our life course, at every life stage and ability.

Phil Wagner

And that's what sticks out to me about your work, Kathy is that a lot of your work focuses on dignity, dignity among aging adults. From your perspective, how does dignity factor into age in the world of work specifically?

Kathy Black

Well, Phil, I'm glad you asked about that. And we did a study about a decade ago, and we asked the community, older adults in the community what dignity and independence meant to them. And Phil, as you know, I can take your blood pressure, I can get a blood value. But there is no barometer reading on dignity. It's very subjective. And what we found was that three main concepts and they really do apply to work as well. And that is this concept of autonomy, which is people's dignity is part of feeling that they have self-direction, self-choice. They can rely on themselves self-sufficiency. So that's very important. Again, it's subjective. People have different balance on these aspects. But autonomy was very closely related. There was a very strong relational component with dignity. That is, my dignity is also impacted on how I'm treated. So your recognition of me is part of my dignity. So respectful treatment. And by the way, it's also respectful treatment of others because you can't be in a dignified space if others are being treated without dignity.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Kathy Black

And again, there's a persona aspect here. I don't want to say that it's all embodiment, but for example, you do hear people say that they feel invisible or that they are judged as feeble, perhaps because of some changes. So that's a very important component of this sort of interpersonal relational angle. And then lastly, we also heard from people that it's highly intertwined with their identity. People have a sense of self-pride, acceptance, self-appreciation, self-worth. And that's an inherent worth. After all, we all have inherent dignity from birth, but also an earned worth. And so, again, it's a highly subjective construct but very important to all of us. Very much plays out in the work world.

Phil Wagner

It does, and it plays out in the pragmatic recommendations that you make based off of your work, too. Cathy, some of our listeners may not know that you've really spent a lot of your professional career cultivating age-friendly spaces, and you've been recognized for that work. Can you share with us from your perspective what is an age-friendly organizational space even look like?

Kathy Black

Excellent question. There is a certified age-friendly employer website now, and I'm quite impressed with it. They're professionals who have really pulled together, and people can be identified as age-friendly businesses. And I'll tell you what they're looking for. First of all, you do a self-study, and then you can do more to promote yourself. But they're looking really the entire gamut of the work world, from organization management HR. So, for example, that there's a commitment in workforce policies, organizational culture, employee relations, workforce planning, and composition, retention, candidate recruiting, management style, training and development, the content of the job, the process, work schedules, arrangement, compensation, healthcare benefits matter, a lot and savings and retirement benefits. So that's sort of some of the structural elements I also want to share with you. I was very impressed with this model that just was I think it was one of the last issues of the Gerontologist, which is the leading journal in my field. And they looked at age-friendly workplaces, and they really scoured what is out there in the work world. And so, an age-friendly work organizational culture. And so, by the way, that's a distinction. We could look at this from a societal level. We could look at this from an organizational level, from an industry level. We could look at this from a personal level. But what is an organizational and age-friendly workplace? Well, there's recognition and respect goes right back to those points and dignity that we talked about, that there's fairness and equality. People feel that they're being treated not because of age, which, by the way, is really chronological. And I'm going to come back to that in a moment that there's awareness phrasing. Phil, something we haven't talked about is there's an enormous diversity of age, and it's almost a joke to talk about age as a homogeneous, monolithic group. Phil, there are six generations alive today. Gen X is in their fifty's. The millennials are going to hit 50 in 2030.

Phil Wagner

Thanks for that note, Kathy. As a millennial, I appreciate the reminder.

Kathy Black

But the reality is we are so different. Now there are some normative changes with aging that are real, and there are some life circumstances that can just hit us that impact our ability to perform in a work environment. I mean, Phil, not all of us can stand on our feet all day. We can't do those twelve-hour shifts sometimes. Some of us have eyesight or vision issues affecting our ability to do tedious work with our hands, our eyesight, or even perhaps even driving in at different times of the shift. So, there's a lot of considerations when we listen to people in our community. We heard people talk about caregiving responsibilities. They want to work, but they've got people that are counting on them. Again, people have their own health issues, and so there's a whole bunch of circumstances. I'll just tell you a very famous study that was done in Germany with BMW. They found that there was a lot of errors in the various plants, and so they artificially populated one of their plants with older workers. And what they determined was that by changing the workplace, productivity increased. So, to not automatically assume there's nothing inherently wrong with the older worker, but the workplace can be adapted. So just getting back to that, there is this sense of awareness-raising because Phil look aging, and

being older it's social construction. It tends to very negative connotation. It is learned you weren't born associating older with anything negative, but it has been learned. And so, it's going to take some relearning. The truth is we're living longer than ever before. We have much to contribute in social, economic, civic life. And so, we'll have longer working lives as well. And by the way, people need to keep working more, as many people are really unprepared for their extended longevity. And honestly, if you look across many industries, many organizations and industries are really gray, and they are really struggling with how do they encourage more people coming in? So, some of the things that organizations can do, Phil, again, in addition to helping change those attitudes and supporting those relationships. At the level of working with the employee, it's all about growth and development. We need to continue investing in people at all ages. And so, I'm sure you're familiar with the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other attributes. So, we want to utilize those and continue to build on those. Lifelong learning is very important. Phil, our entire educational structure, you and I know this well, is quite linear. And it was built for a different time and space where there was demarcated points in life. You went to school. You worked. You're retired. Well, the nowhere for retirement fills work, and many people will find themselves having to financially support themselves. We can talk about some of the macro policies surrounding that, but the reality is people will be in the workforce longer, and many people want to continue contributing. So how do we invest and support their personal development, career development, manage their mobility across stages, and job enrichment? And remember, because health issues do become increasingly more common with age, how do we continue to work with people to work with their changing health? I was at a career Sun Coast meeting with an older 58 support group. They all were looking for work, and it was unbelievable to be there. And it broke my heart. I wanted to leave there, giving everybody a job. And I remember one woman so desperate and saying to me as I was leaving, I really desperately need to work. And I start dialysis next week.

Phil Wagner

Oh, wow.

Kathy Black

The issues are so real. So how do we help people stay healthy as well and keep them at the level that they want to continue to contribute? And when changes do occur, how can the workforce be redesigned? We heard about nursing stations again, nurses. The nurses are aging. The nursing workforce is continuing to get older. And so again, those twelve-hour shifts are hard on the feet, hard on endurance. And so, how do we redesign those workspaces? So, you're not walking as much, for example, recrafting roles, redeploying. Again, retention is going to be increasingly important. Even the front page of today's New York Times Phil was about China increasing their retirement age because their recognition, and this is very true in the United States as well. We need to continue to utilize older adults in labor because of the changing demographics. And the skilled workforce is not going to be there, and so part of that accommodation, Phil, is flexibility. And by the way, that works for all ages, flexible working, work-life balance, reduced workload. And I also want to share with you, Phil. I know that you will greatly appreciate this. Your listeners may not know this, but you are just such a gift in so

many ways. But you were also very strong in critical thinking. You were all over that because your sense was people don't just learn things and get a degree, but it's the way they think and the value they add. Well, you should know that nearly every top ten list of future important work skills. And again, this is from the World Economic Forum. The Institute for the Future online learning platforms refer to what is needed today as soft skills, hard to quantify abilities, traits, mindsets, empathy, social, emotional intelligence, judgment, sense-making, communication. And, Phil, guess what? These things come with experience, and that's where we're at today. This is a highly prized and valued attribute that only you get with age. So, in fact, older adults add a lot of value to the workforce. And it's very important that organizations wrap their arms around that and really leverage that.

Phil Wagner

You knocked that out of the park, and you covered many of my questions in one because that's where we were going to go next is what are the benefits of having age diversity? And I think you've laid that point well. So, I want to go back to something else that you said, Kathy. Could you talk about changing times? And I think that story of the woman who's getting ready to go on dialysis and seeking a job really reveals the fractured world in which we live right now. Obviously, we're still in the midst of COVID-19. We're conducting this via Zoom, and all the complexities that come with that aside, we know that the world has certainly changed with COVID-19 changing everything we know about the world and the world of work. What changes for older or aging adults do you foresee coming?

Kathy Black

It's already happened. It's already happened. We saw it really during the recession. And it's also happening now. And that is older adults are those who do lose their jobs are far more likely to not return to that level of income or get a job. Again, we're seeing record numbers of people taking early Social Security, claiming disability. And we also have people reinventing themselves and entering into entrepreneur opportunities, really tapping into other ways to and again. Phil, it's about making money and surviving, but it's also about finding a sense of purpose and meaning. You look at the American ethos, and it is very much a very strong work ethic, particularly among boomers and the older age groups as well. And so, people's identities are heavily wrapped up into their ability to contribute and add. And so we want to have a work environments that are conducive to that.

Phil Wagner

That's excellent. I want to shift directions a little bit more and sort of harken back to the dignity framework that you laid out for us earlier. I work with multiple generations across our programs here, and that's one of the great things about our University, and our business school is that we get them from Gen Z to Boomers who come into our executive MBA program. What are some of the things or what are some of the most important things rather than younger employees Gen Z's, maybe young millennials should keep in mind when they're communicating with older employees. It's not just that ethic of respect. There has to be fundamental communication differences. That's why. Ok, Boomer sort of took off a few years

ago. Right. Like, how do we navigate the communication differences between and among generations?

Kathy Black

In some ways, it's useful to look at cohort differences. After all, people were shaped differently. Certainly, Gen Z has grown up quite technologically literate and experienced major life events that have shaped who they are. Every generation has that. But sometimes, generations can be a barrier, and it really comes down to individuals. And some of the most effective things happening out there are really individualizing, personalizing, and pairing people. I'll give you an example. I have students write self-reflection essays what they learned constantly in my course. And I was teaching a sociology of aging course. And of course, we cover everything in their work, etc. And the student wrote that he said, it's because of your class. He must have worked in some environment. There was shift work that every week. I guess there was some shift opportunities that were more prized than others. But he said, Kathy, it's your class that helped me realize there's this older guy that they all didn't like. And it's your class that helped me realize he needed to work because he needed the money, he needed to take the day shift because he couldn't drive at night and that he needed to get out of the house because it was socialization for him and he had something to do. And that level of empathy, by the way, Phil goes both ways. It is not just about, oh, all of these things about the older adult. The older adult needs to also have empathy for that younger worker who's raising a family, who's struggling to put food on the table. So, it's respect. It all goes back to respect Phil and Phil. It doesn't just happen. I mean, sometimes workers just sort of connect, as you know. But what we know is that intentional design is really the way to go with that. And it has to be reciprocal that both are learning from each other. And the gifts are not always apparent. They're really sometimes special insights, but it speaks to our soul Phil when we connect with each other in those ways. And again, I will say that some jobs are just that. They're just a gig for somebody furthers their career. For others, they're a passion. So, again, so much depends on where people are at and what they're wanting in that work environment. But we can all make a difference in the sphere which we interact.

Phil Wagner

I love that. I think intentional design is key here in the Mason School of Business at William & Mary. We recognize sort of what can happen when you bring multiple generations together. And so, we've got a great program that some of our listeners might be familiar with called the Executive Partner Program, where we brought people in back to William & Mary, some alum, some who are just affiliated with the local Williamsburg community who come after serving sometimes decades in the world of work. And they come, mentor, our students work with them, and we create some great synergies across age boundaries. So, we asked some of those executive partners here in the Mason School of Business to provide a question for today, and they all sort of echoed the same themes. But this one was probably the most pointed. And so I want to ask you, one of our executive partners asks, how does the older workforce keep relevant in a world where wisdom has been replaced by data? And by data, they mean Google. Do you have any insight?

Kathy Black

So, we tend to glamorize technology. We are in a technological age. We are the Internet of things, driverless cars, 3D printing, AI. We glamorize technology. And unfortunately, we idolize youth. And I know that the median age at Google and Apple, and Amazon is quite young. But as you know, Phil, there are plenty of people at every age group who can be really great with technology. So, it is just a number. And part of the problem is we are focused on that. And there are some implicit assumptions, even in a statement like that, Phil. And look, Phil, there are no faults here. Technology changes are real. They are in the workflow. And I have a daughter who was working at a hotel, and I stopped in one day to see her, and she was working with an older woman. I said, oh, that's great, Alyssa. How are you doing? And she liked her. And then, a week later, she didn't care for so much. I said, why? She said she can't figure out the computer system, and it's taking her a lot of time to do her work for my daughter to do her work. So, there's an assumption that older people cannot learn. However, that's not really true. And part of it is older adults are sometimes their own worst enemy by being resistant to learning. But the reality is everybody brings gifts. We need to look at how to optimize those gifts and really question those assumptions because there are plenty of listen. There are 20-year-olds who aren't very tech-savvy. So, part of that is really, I think part of the mindset change that does have to occur.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, I love that. And I think that's sort of what I'm hearing in your answer is that relevance doesn't mean going out and learning Snapchat or ticktock, right. I think relevance is sharing the insight you have from your experience and fostering meaningful relationships across the generational span because that's what's going to really get us to the humanity. That's what's going to develop that empathy. That's what's going to get us to dignity. So that's super profound. I've got one more question for you, Kathy. It's like the one we ask everybody on this podcast. And in D&I work, I think we often wish that we just had a magic wand that we could wave and fix all of the problems related to those areas of D&I that we care most about. What is one thing that you'd like to see the world of work do to make itself a more inclusive place for aging and aging individuals?

Kathy Black

Well, I think I would probably say if organizations were able to recognize and promote these are little gems where we have businesses where older employees are valued, nobody really knows about them, or you happen to come upon them. But the more we share that and promote that externally as well, the more we start to change and counter some of those stereotypes that are out there. Remember, stereotypes are the beliefs. Wow. How could that be? I thought that I was starting to challenge that, and then it will affect prejudice it will affect discrimination down the road. And so, I think promoting that and recognizing that it's leadership and changing the narrative.

Phil Wagner

I love that changing the narrative. And that's exactly what we're trying to do through this podcast series, change the narrative by refocusing our D&I efforts back on those real, human-lived experiences. So, Kathy Black, thank you so much for joining and sharing some of your research and your insight. So profound. We so appreciate your time. It's been a pleasure speaking with you.

Kathy Black

Great to speak with you, Phil.

Phil Wagner

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