

INVISIBLE. CAN WE STILL AFFORD AGEISM?

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to analyze the consequences of an aging society for the labor market and to discuss the potential of the Silver Generation in organizations. The following research problems were posed in the work: 1. How will the failure to use the potential of the Silver Generation (50+) today affect the labor market in the future? 2. Is it possible to use the potential of the Silver Generation in modern organizations, and how? Population aging is no longer just a distant economic and social prospect, but a reality with a wide range of challenges. Extremely low birth rates, significant differences in the generations entering and leaving the labor market, and a constantly growing number of retirees whom no one wants to employ today. Where are societies heading, then, that believe in the power of Generations Y and Z, forgetting that they have a vast pool of qualified professionals in the 50+ generation, for whom work can still provide value and encourage active participation in society? Is the labor market ready to pivot and find value among people who, in theory, should disappear?

Keywords: active aging, aging, ageism, population decline, working age

JEL Classification: M51, H55, I15

Introduction

Societal aging, referred to as the third demographic transition, is often called the “Silver Tsunami” and became a global phenomenon in the second half of the 20th century (Bartels & Naslund, 2013). The question is not how long this phenomenon will persist or when we can expect change. The reflection that should resonate today in the socio-economic sphere concerns how to leverage the potential still available in the labor market to close employment gaps that should not exist. This gap largely

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affects the Silver Generation. It includes representatives of the so-called Baby Boom Generation (born between 1946 and 1964) and, to some extent, Generation X (born between 1965 and 1979) (see e.g. Berkup, 2014; Wojtaszczyk, 2016).

Analysis of available literature, research reviews, and practice indicates that, for many organizations, employment-related activities focus on young people. Youth is associated with strength, energy, and motivation. But youth also often means a lack of experience, predictability, reflection, and perspective. The abundance of research on Generations Y (born between 1980-1994) and Z (born between 1995-2010) indicates that representatives of these generations remain the primary focus of employers. How to work with them, motivate them, build engagement, what do they need, and what kind of employers are they looking for? These questions should resonate just as strongly today with those who constitute a powerful bastion of people still capable of working – the Silver Generation – often very experienced, intelligent, independent, and... redundant.

The realities of the modern world show that employers still believe in the power of younger generations. And rightly so. Generations Y and Z represent a value that cannot be dismissed. But an analysis of studies and reports leaves no doubt: the number of young people will decrease. Birth rates clearly show the trends. The phenomenon of population aging is primarily a reflection of the effectiveness of public health measures and medical progress (cf. Chen et al., 2025; Gianfredi et al., 2025). Population aging is closely related to socioeconomic development. The number of people over 65 is projected to increase from 703 million in 2019 to 1.5 billion by the mid-21st century (Chen et al., 2025). Over the next decade, more than 30 Western countries will enter a phase of super-aging, with people aged 65 and over exceeding 20% of the population, generating significant social and economic consequences (Egeland et al., 2025).

Contemporary social, cultural and economic changes are changing the approach of younger generations to parenthood and long-term commitments, as evidenced, among other things, by the increase in informal relationships and family models with few or no children (Szukalski, 2012). Young people do not want children themselves, often feeling like children. Women no longer work at home, but they often pursue many different activities outside of it. Multigenerational homes are nonexistent. Marriages, often seen as a guarantee of childbearing, are also becoming increasingly rare. An individualistic culture forces us to think about ourselves and look only in one direction, our own. The prevailing uncertainty about the times we will soon live in only deepens the fear of taking responsibility for someone more than ourselves. There is a mental health crisis among young people. The world's economies are in crisis. It is difficult to predict whether the social and economic climate will support the fertility that societies so desperately need today. So, isn't it time to eliminate what is actually destroying the labor market – ageism? The article partially fills the research gap by focusing on the Silver Generation's potential for diversity management in organizations.

Methods

The aim of the article is to analyze the consequences of an aging society for the labor market and to discuss the potential of the Silver Generation in organizations.

The following research problems were posed in the work:

1. How will the failure to use the potential of the Silver Generation (50+) today affect the labor market in the future?
2. Is it possible to use the potential of the Silver Generation in modern organizations, and how?

The study used the narrative literature review method. The literature analysis covered theoretical and empirical material from 2000 to 2025, spanning 25 years of research. Databases such as Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar were used. The aim of the review was to provide a synthetic analysis of the state of knowledge on population aging and its labor-market challenges. The review constitutes a qualitative analysis of diverse sources, identifying the main research trends. The following keywords were included: active aging, aging, ageism, population decline, and working age. The collected material was subjected to a qualitative thematic analysis, identifying recurring themes, research approaches, and discrepancies in the research findings.

The method employed also has its limitations. Not all available source databases were utilized. The qualitative synthesis does not account for all available research on the discussed topic. A significant limitation is the inability to quantitatively synthesize the results.

The labor market in the era of generational changes

An aging society is defined as one in which people aged 65 and older constitute at least 7% of the population, while exceeding the 20% threshold constitutes a super-aging society. The main factors in this process include declining fertility and mortality rates, as well as increasing life expectancy, characteristic of developed and stable countries (Cui, 2023). "In nearly twenty countries, 20% of the population is over 65. According to WHO data, the number of people aged 60 worldwide already exceeds that of children under 5. It is estimated that by 2050, the number of people aged 65 will exceed the number of teenagers and young people aged 15-24. The impact of population aging on various social activities will depend on its scale and depth" (Grinin et al., 2023). Harper cites similar data, indicating that by 2050, there will be as many old as young people in the world – 2 billion of those aged 60 and over and another 2 billion under 15. Each of these groups will constitute 21% of the world's population (Harper, 2014). According to the United Nations report "World Population Prospects 2022", the world population will increase to 10 billion by 2058, peaking in 2086. Although significant population growth is projected mainly in Africa, global society will increasingly age, changing the demographic structure (Guillemot et al., 2024). An increasing number of people worldwide are reaching old age. Global life expectancy has more than doubled since 1900, from less than 33 years to over 71 years in 2020 (Roser et al., 2023). Population aging is a global phenomenon with far-reaching consequences that are transforming many areas –

healthcare provision, resource allocation, and social attitudes towards aging. Advances in medicine and technological transformation, combined with improved living standards, have led to longer life expectancy, but the proportion of older people in societies has increased (Woessner et al., 2021).

“Two population giants – China and India – will in the future house approximately 38% of the world's elderly population. Over half a billion older people (65+) worldwide will live in these two countries” (Navaneetham & Arunachalam, 2025). China, one of the world's most populous countries, is rapidly aging, and by 2030, the number of people aged 65 and over in mainland China will reach 258 million (18.23% of the total population) (UN, 2022).

In Japan, population aging is much more advanced than in Southeast Asia, where the number of older people with chronic diseases, dementia, and living alone is growing. Similar challenges may affect most countries in the region in the future, and Japan plays an important role as a source of experience in coping with this process (Sakamoto, 2025). In Japan, the percentage of the elderly population (aged 65 or older) has quadrupled over the past 50 years, from 5.7% in 1960 to 23.1% in 2010. This rate of change is the fastest in the world (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2015). Life expectancy in Japan is the longest in the world, with women living longer than men (86 years for women, 80 for men) (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2014). In response to the effects of demographic change, Japan has implemented measures to support active aging, and the labor shortage since the 1980s and 1990s has led companies to raise the retirement age and offer work opportunities after reaching it (Nomura & Koizumi, 2016). In this context, the key barrier to utilizing the capital of older people is their health, not age. Japan, responding to the decline and aging of its population, is investing in new economic sectors and technologies for the so-called silver market, integrating healthcare with global trends (Nakatani, 2019).

Japan began aging about 30 years earlier than China and is experiencing one of the fastest aging processes in the world, but China is following a similar path. Both countries distinguish four phases of this process: rapid development, rapid growth, deceleration, and sustained high levels of aging (Chen et al., 2019).

Societal aging already has consequences and impacts many important aspects of social life – health, social security, education, socio-cultural activity, family life, and the labor market. Regarding the latter, it is important to note that a decline in the number of young working-age people lowers the labor force participation rate, thereby increasing the percentage of retirees (Ince Yenilmez, 2015). Rapid population aging puts pressure on social and healthcare systems and negatively impacts individuals, even though advances in medicine and living conditions allow seniors to remain active longer (Vilić, 2016). Perspectives on aging influence policies and social attitudes, but they often oversimplify reality, overlooking the diversity of experiences and social context, making the actions undertaken costly and ineffective (Heinonen et al., 2025).

Although the world is aging, the effects of this process remain uncertain, especially for pension systems, which may be threatened by fewer workers and more retirees. This leads to a search for new solutions, such as longer work and increased

productivity (Nyce & Schieber, 2005). Fertility rates are declining in both developed and developing countries. While the lower layers of the population pyramid are stagnating, the upper layers, comprising older generations, are steadily growing. These changes are expected to have a wide-ranging economic impact, both in terms of size and age distribution channels. Population aging will be a force that will decisively impact the structures of industrialized economies in many different ways – through the labor market, the structure of demand, the domestic savings rate, and capital accumulation. In this context, the question arises: Will population aging benefit economic well-being? (Alper et al., 2016).

Currently, the countries that age most rapidly are primarily wealthy and industrialized (Lee et al., 2010). The process of population aging has institutional and individual consequences – with age, the risk of health deterioration increases, and in rich countries these problems are concentrated in old age, which also affects the economic situation of seniors and their higher level of consumption. In high-income countries, consumption is beginning to rise rapidly (Lee et al., 2010). The transition to an aging society poses significant financial challenges for all institutions across economies. Most developed countries, which anticipated these problems for two decades, still struggle to find resources to cover rising retirement incomes and healthcare costs for an aging population (Jakovljevic et al., 2023). The Asian experience indicates that population aging can foster digital transformation and organizational change, leading to a shift from a labor-based to a technology-driven economy (Zhang et al., 2025).

Aging societies face not only economic, financial, or health-related challenges. This ongoing process also forces us to address the problem of prejudice against older people, whose number will continue to grow. Ageism can influence society's attitudes toward older people and their self-esteem (Donizzetti, 2019).

Ageism as a social and organizational problem

Ageism is the result of a natural cognitive tendency to create simplified categories and stereotypes, which facilitate the interpretation of reality but can lead to emotional prejudice (Wirtz et al., 2025). Ageism is a social construct that portrays aging and older people in stereotypical, often negative, ways (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2018). It encompasses beliefs and stereotypes about age, which often manifest themselves in discrimination, particularly in the labor market, in access to professional development, and in employee dismissal processes (see Butrymowicz, 2018). Defined as “a complex social phenomenon that refers to simplified patterns of thinking about people of a given age category – usually older people (stereotypes), feelings toward these individuals (prejudice), and behaviors and decisions made regarding them (discrimination)” (Baszczak et al., 2021). Understood as age discrimination, it most often affects older people, although it can also occur in other age groups. Age has a stratifying nature. According to Szukalski, “age defines an individual through beliefs widespread in society (closely related to norms defining behavior at a given age) about the social roles, position, and prestige that belong to a given person” (Szukalski, 2009). Over 50 years ago, in 1969, ageism was recognized as a “serious

national problem” in a groundbreaking article by Robert N. Butler, who later became the first director of the National Institute on Aging in the United States (Levy & Macdonald, 2016; Jakubowska & Chądzyńska, 2023).

Ageism is currently recognized as a global problem, further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to an increase in hate speech, intergenerational conflicts, and human rights violations (Levy et al., 2022). Despite the passage of time, this problem not only remains relevant but also continues to deepen, raising the question of who and how will supply the labor markets of many societies if we exclude people full of knowledge and experience that can still be used. According to Statistics Poland data (GUS, 2021), in 2020, 85.5% of older people in Poland were outside the labor market, and the 2021 World Health Organization report emphasizes that ageism is a widespread phenomenon that leads, among other things, to poorer health, loneliness, and a reduced quality of life for seniors (WHO, 2021). To date, research on ageism has focused primarily on how the attitudes and beliefs of young people contribute to depriving older people of opportunities and equal treatment (Minichiello et al., 2000). However, this issue should now be considered much more broadly, examining how older people participate in many areas of social life and why they are excluded from others. As Angus and Reeve (2006) in the 21st century, the concepts of “successful” and “resourceful” aging are often used interchangeably and thoughtlessly in a society seeking ways to limit the effects of aging. However, empirical research and public health promotion strategies have not brought about significant change, and negative stereotypes about aging persist. On the one hand, as Richert-Kaźmierska and Stankiewicz (2014) suggest, efforts are being made to extend the professional activity of older people, including by helping those who retired prematurely re-enter the labor market. On the other hand, as the authors point out, society rejects old age and frailty, leading to the development of both gerontophobia and ageism. Among the areas of negative stereotype construction are biological (decreasing physical abilities, changes in appearance), psychological (decreasing body capabilities in regulatory, adaptive, and cognitive systems), and social (changing social roles, lifestyles, and activities) (Tomaszewska-Hołub, 2019). While research on stereotypes has a long tradition, the issue of stereotypes regarding older workers in the workplace has been addressed on a much smaller scale (Mockało, 2015). In the past, older members of society were treated with respect as sources of knowledge and wisdom, but, as Rybowska (2017) points out, modern culture, based on the cult of youth and access to knowledge, has contributed to the negative perception of old age as a stage of withdrawal and poverty, which has intensified the phenomenon of gerontophobia and stereotyping of older people.

Consequences of wasted potential

Eurostat forecasts leave no doubt: by 2060, Poland will be the demographically oldest country in the European Union and one of the oldest in the world (Gajowiak, 2017). Research on intergenerational relations in organizations indicates a need to adapt HRM practices to changing demographic conditions (Skiba, 2024). The question, however, is whether HRM practices themselves truly represent the greatest

opportunity for change in attitudes, beliefs, and actions toward older workers. An analysis of the literature suggests otherwise. Ageism begins much earlier than at work. But often it is the professional environment that activates the problem and highlights its intensity. Attitudes toward older people, regardless of the specific nature of the relationship and bond, are already evident in homes, where perceptions and attitudes are just beginning to form. The way parents treat their parents, grandparents, and other seniors with whom they form relationships often determines how young people perceive them. In this context, the parent, as a key point of reference for the child, will always have a significant influence on the child's association with specific people and situations. William Graham Sumner pointed out that in primitive societies, older people were respected and valued for their experience and knowledge. They helped communities develop or survive in unfavorable conditions. In turn, nomadic groups abandoned older people when conditions threatened the survival of the group (Świdarska, 2015). This approach raises the question of whether mature generations are treated today as a burden or a strength. And whether we are closer to primitive societies or nomadic peoples, who are constantly on the move and unable to build a foundation for functioning in society, in family, in home, and ultimately in organizations. As Szukalski (2015) emphasizes, ageism "reflects the cultural rudiments of a given community" and varies geographically. The study results indicate significant differences in the perception of ageism across Europe – from 68% in France and 17% in Turkey to 52% in Poland, with an average of 44%.

The consequences of ageism in the workplace are not only the loss of knowledge and experience built over the years, but also a change in organizational attitudes and behaviors, which we are currently observing on a large scale. For many members of the Boomer generation, work is a value in itself, where being tied to a single employer is an expression of loyalty to the organization. Generation X, on the other hand, presents itself as a group with a strong work ethic who dislike hierarchy but, importantly, recognize the authority of their bosses (cf. Wojtaszczyk, 2016). These attitudes differ from those observed among young working generations, Generations Y and Z, for whom work, while important, is certainly not the most important element in the hierarchy of values. Their presence in organizations has transformed the functioning of today's enterprises, establishing new models of management, building organizational culture, investing in human capital, development, recruitment, and communication. However, what, on the one hand, raises hopes for a shift towards more sustainable management, fostering well-being, and changing the perception of the employee's role in the organization, is also a source of unprecedented challenges and a basis for pathological behavior. The literature portrays Generation Y as lacking independent decision-making skills. Unrealistic expectations, a lack of responsibility, narcissism, and a lack of patience (Fazlagić, 2008) are just some of the traits that, based on research, characterize today's most active generation. In this context, Generations BB and X, raised in times of scarcity and numerous complex crises (World War II, the communist era in Poland), are disciplined by the times in which they arose.

Research conducted as part of the "Learning Organization 2.0" project, implemented by Interia.pl portal and the Jagiellonian University, shows that Generation Y does not share knowledge. Most respondents, as indicated by the research results,

consider collecting information primarily for their own needs, but respondents also confirm that much of the knowledge they acquire individually could also be useful to others (*Pokolenie Y: potrzeby i nawyki wpływające na dzielenie się wiedzą* Report summarizing research conducted under the project “Organizacja ucząca się 2.0”, cited by Wziątek-Staśko & Kałwa-Rojczyk, 2023). Research indicates that the lowest level of trust in colleagues applies not only to Generation X but also to Generation Z. For Baby Boomers, on the other hand, trust is the foundation of teamwork (Gajda, 2022). Generation Z pays little attention to real-life social interactions (Wojtaszczyk, 2016). So how can they build trust, relationships, and collaboration in the social sphere? Wojtoszek, analyzing the attitudes of the youngest working generation, harshly assesses them as the “NOTHING” generation – contributing nothing to Polish culture, focused on online participation, McDonald's, virtual contacts, and, in conclusion, doing nothing and devoid of worries (Wojtoszek, 2023).

Certainly, the multitude of characteristics related to individual generations is not one-dimensional. Keeping individual differences in mind, it is impossible to make generalizations about the entire population. Nevertheless, an analysis of the literature and research leads to the conclusion that, as societies, we operate in silos: young people are not interested in the problems of their elders, and older people are not interested in the problems of today's young people. This disintegration means that the knowledge capital that could be mutually beneficial to representatives of different generations is largely ignored. In an era of self-centeredness, openness to other perspectives, reflection, and confronting one's own views with reality are at very low levels. So low, in fact, that instead of integrating knowledge and experience, sharing it at various levels and in various dimensions, organizations (especially those employing young people) often dismiss it as outdated, unnecessary, and strongly differentiating teams.

Conclusions

The ongoing aging of societies will mean that employing seniors will no longer be a choice or an alternative, but a necessity. Openness, awareness, and human kindness can significantly help discover value where it seems no longer possible. The realities of today's unpredictable world show that wisdom, reflection, and calm are what society may most need. The question of which competencies, skills, and experiences are particularly valuable in a changing world, and how seniors can potentially fill existing competency gaps, remains controversial. An organizational perspective, based on a literature review, reveals that the problem has a complex, multifaceted basis. It can occur at both the strategic and operational levels, as well as the mental and psychosocial levels. In the context of future research, it is certainly worth exploring areas that are still fragmented and insufficiently analyzed in the literature – primarily how to build a narrative around the employment of seniors in organizations, taking into account their specific advantages (referring, for example, to the specific nature of a given industry, its nature, and its hidden potential).

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NIEWIDZIALNI. CZY STAĆ NAS JESZCZE NA AGEIZM?

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest analiza konsekwencji starzenia się społeczeństw dla rynku pracy oraz omówienie możliwości wykorzystania potencjału pokolenia Silver Generation w organizacjach. W pracy postawiono następujące problemy badawcze: 1. Jak nie-wykorzystanie potencjału pokolenia Silver Generation (50+) dzisiaj wpłynie na rynek pracy w przyszłości? 2. Czy i w jaki sposób możliwe jest wykorzystanie potencjału pokolenia Silver Generation we współczesnych organizacjach? Starzenie się społeczeństwa nie jest już tylko odległą perspektywą ekonomiczną i społeczną, ale rzeczywistością niosącą ze sobą szereg wyzwań. Skrajnie niskie wskaźniki urodzeń, znaczne różnice między pokoleniami wchodzącymi i wychodzącymi z rynku pracy oraz stale rosnąca liczba emerytów, których dziś nikt nie chce zatrudniać. Dokąd zatem zmierzają społeczeństwa, które wierzą w siłę pokoleń Y i Z, zapominając, że dysponują ogromną pulą wykwalifikowanych specjalistów z pokolenia 50+, dla których praca nadal może być wartością i zachętą do aktywnego uczestnictwa w społeczeństwie? Czy rynek pracy jest gotowy na zmianę i znalezienie wartości wśród osób, które teoretycznie powinny z niego zniknąć?

Słowa kluczowe: starzenie, spadek liczby ludności, wiek produkcyjny, ageizm, aktywne starzenie się

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