

GERIATRIC NATION AND REDEFINING THE ELDERLY IN JAPAN

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SUMMARY

Because of declining birth rates and an aging baby boom generation, many developed countries, particularly Japan, are becoming aging societies or so-called “geriatric nations”. The current official definition of aged in Japan is “aged 65 years or older”, and this segment of the population has increased recently to make up substantially more than 20% of the population. These population dynamics will result in soaring health care costs, shrinking work forces, and possible collapsing pension programs. Since many of the elderly around the age of 65–75 years are still able to actively work and contribute to society and the remaining life expectancy is substantial, we have recently proposed redefining aged to “aged 75 or older” in Japan. Older workers can remain productive and stay healthy longer. Work participation is beneficial for maintaining and enhancing quality of life among the elderly. A revised definition of the elderly could make a huge and critical impact in terms of maintaining social and economic integrity in a geriatric nation. Survival of a geriatric nation may depend on redefining the retirement age and on transforming human resources practices to attract, accommodate and retain skilled workers of all ages. [International Journal of Gerontology 2008; 2(4): 154–157]

Key Words: aging, demography, employment, population, retirement

Geriatric Nation

A major demographic shift is about to transform our societies. This unprecedented shift in the age distribution of the global workers' pool is under way. In developed countries, declining birth rates and aging of baby boomers are now leading to a rapidly aging workforce¹. In particular, Japan is an extraordinarily rapidly aging society. The baby boomers are now reaching the retirement age of 65 years in unprecedented and massive numbers. At the same time, the birth rate in Japan has dropped to the lowest on record with a resultant shortage of young workers. Thus, the number of people aged 15–64 is expected to decline by an average of

740,000 per year over the next decade². We call a nation with this major demographic shift a “geriatric nation”.

As the baby boom generation begins to retire in large numbers and fewer skilled workers are available to replace these workers, we will face a skilled labor shortage. However, many companies seem to be ignoring this shift at their peril. As workers get older and retire, workplaces will face significant losses of critical knowledge and skills, as well as decreased productivity¹.

In Japan, this demographic trend has been exacerbated by the cost reduction strategies of many companies, such as hiring part-time rather than full-time workers and limiting external recruitment of younger generations. Thus, in just a few years, those companies may confront severe labor shortages and may be left with an aging workforce. After massive retirement, there may be few people left who know how to operate crucial equipment or manage important issues in workplaces. Most industrialized countries will face similar situations¹. Indeed, the 2006 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, indicated the issue of aging



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of the workforce and the accompanying skills shortage as top of the list of future challenges facing international businesses and economies².

The population change into a geriatric nation will also reduce the proportion of younger age groups available to support the elderly through the national pension and insurance programs. Thus, in addition to a shrinking workforce, the potential consequences of a geriatric nation will include soaring health care costs and collapsing pension programs.

From an international perspective, global aging will result in the slowdown of many nations' economic growth with massive new expenditure for elderly care. This double economic dilemma in most industrialized countries will create such an austere fiscal environment that none of these countries will use the resources necessary to take massive military action, such as the world wars of the previous century. This potential state in international societies, though it is an unexpected consequence, is called "geriatric peace" and is one of a few positive outcomes which we should welcome in the next society³.

Redefining the Elderly

The current definition of elderly as aged 65 years and older in Japan was settled upon about 45 years ago. At that time, the average life span of the Japanese was around 68 years. However, the health and longevity record of Japan is currently the best in the world^{4,5}. Based on the life table data for 2006, the average life expectancy of Japanese newborns is 86 years for females and 79 for males⁶. Moreover, the average remaining life expectancy of the Japanese at age 65 is 23 years for females and 18 years for males⁶.

The notion of retirement at the age of 65 might have been appropriate when those over 65 were a tiny percentage of the population. However, retirement at the age of 65 could soon become unacceptable, as those over 65 would account for well over 20% (20.7% in Japan, 2006) of the population⁷. Recently, we have proposed redefining elderly to "aged 75 and older"^{8,9}. Many of the Japanese elderly around the age of 65–75 years are still able to actively work and contribute to society. Indeed, 78% of Japanese between the ages of 55 and 59 want to keep working beyond the traditional retirement age of around 60–65 years, instead of being taken care of by the younger generations.

Older workers with critical knowledge or skills could be offered the chance to return to their company and work on special projects on a freelance basis after they have formally retired. The freelance-based working could provide multiple benefits, such as reducing shortfalls in a crucial job skills and keeping valuable knowledge and skills in the company, as well as motivating employees near retirement to perform well so that they will be considered for this post-retirement opportunity¹. Indeed, many Japanese corporations, including Mitsubishi and Canon, have already started re-employing their own retirees. Some corporations have started programs in which all employees who wish to work past retirement age are re-employed after 65 at more flexible hours and payment, and often in a different job².

Although some older workers may become less motivated because of fewer career opportunities, companies can try creative age-related performance incentives to counter a potential loss of motivation as workers get older¹. For instance, older workers might serve as "mentors" to new and younger workers and this role could increase motivation and performance¹.

Health of the Geriatric Workforce

Some Japanese companies have introduced health counseling and ergonomic practices that result in less physical and mental strain. A recent epidemiologic study in different prefectures in Japan indicated that a higher proportion of senior workers was significantly associated with longer disability-free life expectancy¹⁰. Studies have also documented that work participation among seniors is beneficial for maintaining autonomy and quality of later life^{11–14}. Moreover, active working among men of retirement age was associated with a greater sense of well-being.

Elderly people with a higher annual personal income are more likely to have a better quality of life¹⁵. In a recent study conducted in elderly Japanese, significant factors associated with a subjective sense of well-being also included annual personal income, in addition to the number of rooms in one's residence, healthy lifestyle, and satisfaction with one's life history¹⁶. In a recent cross-sectional survey of 4,500 Japanese men¹⁷, there was also a significant association between income and quality of life. Since active working could increase personal income well beyond national and private pension programs, engaging in a job

could potentially improve quality of life among the elderly.

In a geriatric nation, health care management for older workers will become important in maintaining and enhancing their productivity. Older workers are more likely to have chronic illnesses than younger workers. In our recent study on a nationally representative sample of aged Japanese, the elderly with a higher number of chronic medical conditions and symptomatic episodes were more likely to exhibit a poor quality of life¹⁵. Similarly, in a Swedish study of the elderly, self-reported health complaints, including pain, fatigue and mobility impairment, also predicted low overall and health-related quality of life¹⁸.

Thus, proactive preventive measures, designed to prevent sickness and injury, will become crucial and can reduce these problem significantly. Intensive preventive measures should be targeted at workers with a high risk of health problems. These high-risk groups also need incentives to encourage active participation in preventive medicine. For instance, the offer of benefits to workers, who regularly engage in exercise, has been shown to reduce sickness-related absences among older workers¹.

In a previous study on Japanese adults¹⁹, stressors at work resulted in lower self-rated health and psychologic health, while having close friends in the workplace provided strong beneficial effects on personal health. It may be necessary to reduce work stressors and to develop close friendships in the workplace to achieve a better health status among the working elderly.

Conclusion

A revised definition of elderly could make a huge and important impact in terms of maintaining the social and economic integrity of a geriatric nation. Recently, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development suggested that the future prosperity of a member country would depend on a growing contribution from the elderly. If the revised definition of elderly is introduced and the retirement age reset in Japan, many senior workers may remain active, stay healthier and be integrated into a rewarding social network. Survival of a geriatric nation may depend on redefining the retirement age and on transforming human resources practices to attract, accommodate and retain skilled workers of all ages and diverse backgrounds.

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