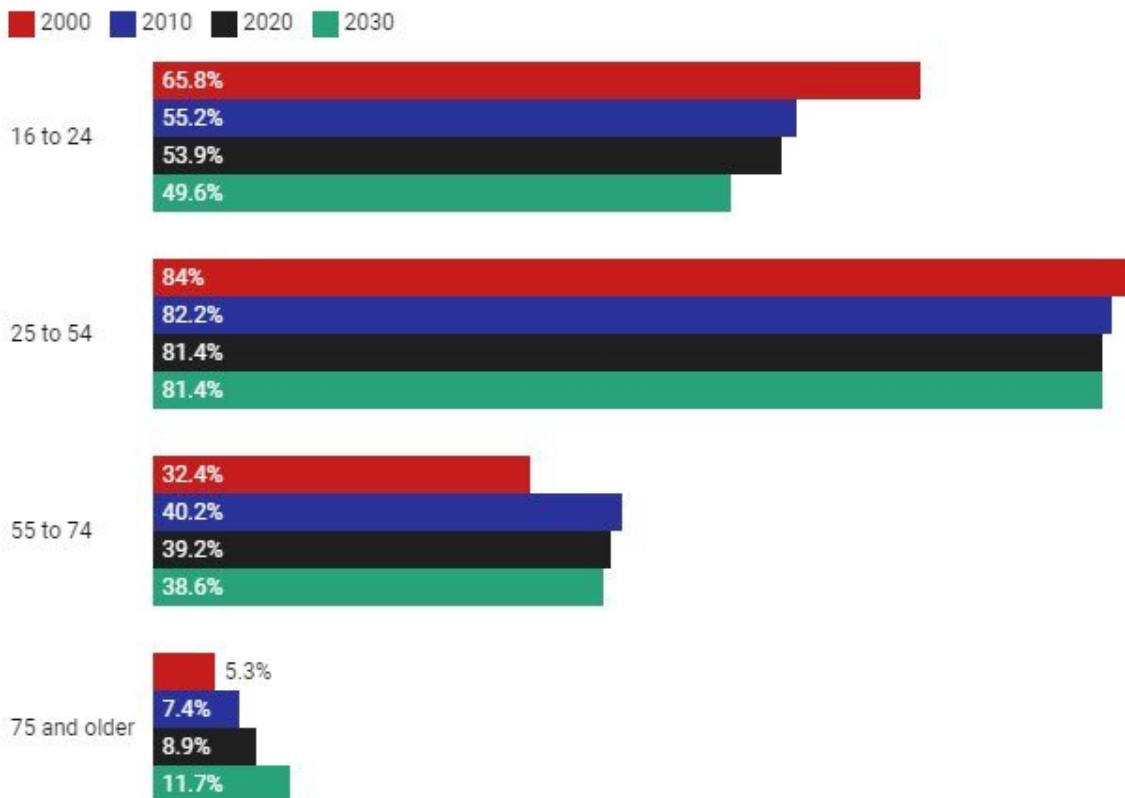


Diversity of US workplaces is growing in terms of race, ethnicity and age, forcing more employers to be flexible

January 6 2023, by Adia Harvey Wingfield

More of the oldest US workers are staying in the workforce

Americans under 24 have become less likely to work while those over 75 have become more likely to remain in the labor force in recent years – a trend the government predicts will continue for the next decade. But the share of Americans who are between 25 and 74 who work is projected to remain stable through 2030.



Credit: Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

Increased immigration, longer life expectancy and a decline in birth rates are [transforming the U.S. workforce](#) in two important ways. The people powering this nation's economy include far more [people of color](#) and [workers over 55](#) than was the case four decades ago.

And this diversity will keep growing in the years ahead, [economists predict](#).

The share of U.S. workers who are [nonwhite, Latino or both nearly doubled to about 40%](#) in 2019 from roughly 23% in 1979, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. With more [older people](#) staying economically active, over [37 million U.S. workers are 55 and up](#) today. They account for nearly 1 in 4 of the [160 million Americans engaged in paid work](#). In 1979, fewer than 1 in 7 U.S. workers were in that age group.

The government's Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that the [ranks of older workers will keep rising](#) in the years ahead—including people who are well into their golden years. The number of Americans 75 and older remaining in the labor force will [nearly double between 2020 and 2030](#), while the number of all workers rises by only 5.5%, according to the bureau.

The share of white workers will have declined to 74.7% by 2031, from 77% in 2021, the bureau predicts.

The agency is also tracking the prevalence of workers of Hispanic origin who can identify as white, Black or mixed race. It says that the share of such workers will [rise during that decade to 21.5% from 18.3%](#) of the workforce—up sharply from 12.1% in 2001.

How are U.S. employers responding to these changes?

I'm a sociologist who studies how [racial and gender inequality persist](#) in professional occupations. One likely consequence I expect to see is employers finding themselves forced to do a better job of attracting and retaining underrepresented and older workers through diversity, equity and inclusion efforts.

Diversity initiatives already widespread

It's already very common for employers to take [diversity, equity and inclusion](#) measures. A 2019 survey of 234 companies found that nearly 2 in 3 employed diversity managers.

Their responsibilities can range widely. Some examples include creating a culture that values and welcomes workers from [diverse backgrounds](#) and increasing the numbers of employees from backgrounds that are underrepresented in a particular field.

In finance this might mean bringing in more female, [Black and Latino analysts](#). In nursing this could mean attracting more men of all races into a profession that's still [dominated by white women](#).

In these fields and others, changing the culture can mean collecting data about which workers are underrepresented, trying to fill any gaps detected, or [revising dress and grooming codes](#) that ban hairstyles more commonly worn by Black workers.

Two common yet ill-advised strategies

Ranks of nonwhite US workers rising

The number of white workers has leveled off in the United States since 2001 at about 125 million, while the number of Black workers has gradually grown to more than 20 million, and the government predicts that it will rise slightly to over 22 million in 2031. The number of other nonwhite workers, which stood at less than 8 million in 2001, is projected to grow sharply to 20.6 million by 2031.



Credit: Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

Unfortunately, many companies are using diversity [strategies that aren't proved to work](#).

These can include [mandatory diversity training](#), often in the form of professional webinars or workshops with interactive exercises.

Diversity training is supposed to make people better at working and interacting with colleagues and customers with cultural backgrounds that differ from their own. But it [often fails to do that](#).

One complication is that employees resent the feeling of being controlled.

Another is that they may see this mandatory training as a waste of their time. And there's evidence suggesting that it [can even be counterproductive](#) by reinforcing rather than debunking stereotypes and [alienating Black workers](#).

The other strategy that's more common than it should be is the [use of skills tests](#) that [job applicants](#) must pass as a condition for hiring. In tech, for instance, a skills test could mean that applicants are asked to solve a particular problem so that hiring managers can objectively assess their skills as well as their ability to work cohesively with a team.

The problem with skills tests is that hiring managers often [weigh the outcome of these tests differently](#) for Black and white workers due to a [range of biases](#), some of which they may not be aware.

Recent research also indicates that neither of these popular approaches is leading companies to make their [workforces more racially diverse](#) through their hiring practices.

I believe that employers use these strategies anyway because they are easy, widespread and popular. Companies may proceed with what they've used in the past rather than trying something new.

Fortunately, new research is pointing to more successful strategies.

What seems to work better

Employers can respond to today's and tomorrow's demographic realities by changing how they handle hiring. They can start by [recruiting more workers from historically Black](#) colleges and universities and Hispanic-serving institutions.

A promising strategy that aids in the retention of workers of color is the [development of mentoring programs](#) that are open to all, rather than by invitation only. That way, implicit biases don't exclude workers of color.

Companies can also implement what's known as "[upskilling](#)."

Swift growth of US workers of Hispanic origin

The number of U.S. workers of Hispanic origin will have more than doubled to 36.4 million in 2031 from 17.3 million in 2001, according to government forecasts. The number of non-Hispanic workers will have grown at a much slower pace during those three decades, rising from 126.4 million in 2001 to an estimated 132.5 million in 2031, the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts.



Credit: Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

Workers in upskilling programs try out a variety of different roles in the organization. This strategy helps develop underrepresented workers' skill sets and connects them to managers who might otherwise overlook them.

Aging workers and those coming of age

The aging of the workforce is especially marked in some sectors of the economy. While the median age of a U.S. [worker](#) was 42.2 in 2022, it was [55.6 for bus drivers and 49.9 for librarians](#).

The prevalence of older workers in these jobs means that some employers will need to heed what these workers need to retain the staff they require.

Those changes could include implementing [phased retirement](#) options—that is, letting employees gradually transition out of full-time

work with the freedom to work part time for several years before exiting the [labor force](#) altogether.

It's also a good idea to strengthen measures that protect these workers from [age-based discrimination](#)—which is a [common occurrence](#) despite its being illegal.

[Older workers](#) often find themselves mocked, harassed and bullied. They also get passed up for raises, promotions and other opportunities.

But employers shouldn't adjust their expectations to accommodate only the needs of older workers. A growing share of employees under 40 are also making demands of their own.

These workers, particularly those in their 20s and 30s, are being more open with their bosses about their [preferences for work-life balance](#) than their colleagues who are 50 and up.

Many workers in their 20s or 30s are rejecting a model of work that requires them to be on call and available at all hours, demands inflexible scheduling and places ever-encroaching demands on employees. They want jobs that allow them to engage more fully with their families and in leisure activities.

Employers may have no alternatives

Ultimately, more workforce diversity in terms of age, race and ethnicity may force employers to change at least some of their ways.

With the aging of workers born after 1990, employers may have to try harder to accommodate their preferences—particularly as they stand to replace those older workers who retire or shift into [part-time employment](#).

Whether it's by design or necessity, I believe employers will hire staffs that are more racially and ethnically diverse. In addition, I foresee that they may have no choice but to let their [workers](#) have more flexibility and freedom.

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