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From the Boston Business Journal:
<https://www.bizjournals.com/boston/news/2017/08/31/viewpoint-new-approaches-needed-to-address.html>

EDITORIAL/OPINION

Viewpoint: New approaches needed to address workforce challenges

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Boston Business Journal’s [article](#), “Gray matters: An aging workforce has Mass. companies scrambling to deal with ‘silver tsunami’ (August 10)” feature highlights real challenges. Changing demographics mean the traditional workforce is shrinking and large numbers of baby boomers are preparing to retire. This is an opportunity, not a natural disaster.

As senior vice president for human resources at Tufts Health Plan and chair of Operation A.B.L.E.’s board, I know we can leverage the experience of older workers to address workforce challenges. And as a board member of Tufts Health Plan Foundation, which focuses on healthy aging and older adults, I know reframing the conversation is a critical step in combatting ageism.

Ageism — or prejudice against our future selves, as author [Ashton Applewhite](#) says — cuts work lives short. As people live longer and healthier lives, we must rethink our approach to working.

In his State of the Commonwealth address Gov. Baker said, “The notion people are fully retired at 65 is inconsistent with what I see every day. Many older adults have ample time, energy and talent to start a second or third career, volunteer in their community, become a mentor or pursue an unfulfilled passion.”



FAYFOTO/BOSTON
Lydia Greene is SVP, chief human resources officer for Tufts Health Plan.

Oxford Economics studied the “Longevity Economy,” the impact of the growing 50-plus population. The report confirms Gov. Baker’s experience. People over 50 make significant contributions to the economy and the workforce. They are a fast-growing contingent of active, productive people working longer and taking the economy in new directions.

Many older adults want to work beyond their 65th birthday. Work gives them a sense of purpose and fulfillment. And older workers deliver business benefits. According to “A Business Case for Workers Age 50+” prepared for [AARP](#) by Aon Hewitt:

Advantages of workers age 50-plus include experience, professionalism, work ethic, lower turnover and knowledge

Contrary to common perception, workers age 50-plus do not cost significantly more than younger workers

Older workers remain the most engaged

65 percent of workers age 55-plus are “engaged”; younger employee engagement averages 58 to 60 percent

An engaged workforce can influence and enhance productivity and generate improved business outcomes. In fact, a 5 percent increase in engagement = 3 percent revenue growth = \$150 million additional revenue for a \$5 billion company.

Our youth-centric society does not acknowledge the benefits of experienced workers. And current employment practices are not well-suited to today’s reality — in fact, they make it hard for us to stay involved and contribute when we get older. But there are models for success.

Age-friendly employers provide telecommuting options, flexible schedules, paid time off and leave-of-absence programs. They offer workplace wellness, ergonomic programs and insurance benefits that encourage healthy behavior. They develop training for older workers, educate managers on managing a multigenerational workforce and tap into experienced workers’ industry knowledge. Not surprisingly, these age-friendly perks and benefits attract the best and brightest employees of all ages. At Tufts Health Plan, people 55-plus comprise 22 percent of our workforce, with several staff still going strong at 78. We were recognized by [AARP](#) as one of the “Best Places to Work for People over 50” in 2013.

Momentum is building for this approach. In Boston, we are surrounded by leaders and innovators in science, technology, medicine and education. As a region, we are known for ingenuity and resourcefulness. Let’s lead the way in establishing age-friendly business practices to help us meet the needs of all generations.

Lydia Greene is SVP, chief human resources officer for Tufts Health Plan.