# 5 Tips to Follow to Upskill Midcareer Workers

## Ensuring that all employees receive professional development opportunities can benefit your business

##### by Heather Tinsley-Fix, AARP, September 17, 2021


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While the shift toward greater automation requires employees with cutting edge technology skills, another skill segment that is growing in demand emphasizes soft skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, relationship building, empathy, coaching and mentoring. These uniquely human capabilities take time to develop and are present in much of the 50-plus segment of the workforce. Due to the high correlation between older workers and soft skills, it’s sensible to build a multigenerational workforce with a culture that facilitates intergenerational learning, knowledge sharing, and mentoring.

While providing training to the younger segments of the workforce seems like a no-brainer, midcareer and late-career workers also can prove to be a [huge boon to organizations that invest in reskilling and redeploying](https://nam02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.aarp.org%2Fwork%2Femployers%2Finfo-2021%2Fage-inclusive-training.html&data=05%7C01%7C%7Cc11da884d124467eea9c08da6db537f4%7Ce468147d05464aba972ffcb53b32830e%7C0%7C0%7C637942922327432467%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=yV2BUdYmNNLeslWixiI80UbGIVmgD69BZsLFoUQlCSk%3D&reserved=0) them based on the wealth of soft skills and institutional knowledge they bring to the table. Given the potential for conversations around upskilling to be perceived as a veiled attempt to sideline or push out experienced workers — particularly if the roles they occupy are becoming obsolete — it’s important to develop an approach that sets the right tone and conveys the information in a nonthreatening way.

Here are five principles to follow when discussing upskilling opportunities with midcareer and late-career workers:

1. **Be respectful**. Start by recognizing the skills, experience and institutional knowledge that many older workers already have. The ability to make sound decisions, think critically and remember how and why things used to be done a certain way are actually helpful in crafting new approaches. Position reskilling and upskilling as chances to add, rather than subtract, skills.
2. **Be collaborative**. Ask midcareer and late-career workers if they are interested in developing any of the new skills the organization most needs. Do they want to move into an adjacent area, or one that is completely different? How much of their existing duties do they want to keep, and what emerging capabilities or roles do they want to grow into? Though you may not always be able to craft the exact career path that every employee wants, approaching the conversation as a process of cocreation helps achieve buy-in, enthusiasm and engagement.
3. **Be transparent**. Be straightforward and up-front with the reasons you are offering these opportunities to reskill. If some or all of the employee’s job tasks are being automated or are simply no longer needed, tell them this and explain that while the tasks or roles are going away, you want to keep them as valuable workers. Or, if you’ve targeted certain employees for their transferrable skills and want to utilize them in new ways, say that, too. Answer their questions with as much information as you can.
4. **Be supportive**. Many midcareer workers are in the busiest life stage in terms of caring for children and elders, managing teams and juggling multiple work priorities. Acknowledge these responsibilities. Practice empathetic leadership, and provide the flexibility busy employees need to take on the task of learning new skills. Can you reassign or lower the priority of some of their current projects? Can you temporarily move them to a different role within the team? Challenge them to take advantage of these opportunities and ask what you can do to give them the greatest chance of success.
5. **Don’t assume**. Despite ample evidence to the contrary, many stereotypes about older workers persist, so it’s important to check your own potential for bias before starting a conversation. Research shows that productivity, engagement and motivation increase with age, as does older workers’ interest in learning new skills. Lead with questions and stay open to what employees say they want or are interested in. Steering them away from the opportunity to join a coding bootcamp, for example, reveals a hidden bias.

The business case for upskilling and reskilling your existing workforce across the age spectrum has never been stronger. The ripple effect in closing your organization’s skills gap empowers your workforce, ensures business continuity, saves your organization on capital costs and meets the evolving needs of your customers. Communicating reskilling and upskilling opportunities to your existing employees with respect, collaboration and transparency will help pave the way for success.