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COMMENTARY

Churchill Wasn't 'Over the Hill' in 1940

His example should prompt us to question ageist assumptions.



Gary Oldman as Winston Churchill in a scene from 'Darkest Hour.' PHOTO: JACK ENGLISH/FOCUS FEATURES VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Paul Irving

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Gary Oldman's Oscar-nominated portrayal of Winston Churchill in "Darkest Hour" has kindled a re-examination of the British prime minister's leadership during the early days of World War II. One fact often missed is that Churchill was 65 when his defining moment arrived. It came only because voters believe in second acts.

Too often, employers do not. Because of the ageist assumptions prevalent in the modern workplace, many people Churchill's age never get their own second shot. Age should never be the sole basis for deciding whether a person is hired or fired, promoted or demoted. The law requires as much. Yet many employers have mastered workarounds that make discrimination difficult to prove.

The tragedy is that age discrimination is based on perception rather than performance. Workers over 50 are burdened by an outdated definition of "old." Despite evidence to the contrary, they are unfairly judged to be costly, less productive and agile, and unable to learn. Yet there are many examples of older adults who have accomplished extraordinary things.

At 87, Warren Buffett remains one of the world's savviest investors. Ray Kroc was 52—over the hill by ageist standards—when he switched careers to turn McDonald's into the world's largest restaurant chain. Anna Moses, better known as Grandma Moses, started painting seriously at 78. Diana Nyad at 64 became the first person to swim from Cuba to Florida without a protective shark cage.

Advances in health are making accomplishments that require mental acuity and physical endurance commonplace among older people. Whatever declines they may experience with age can be offset by their accumulated knowledge, perspective and balance.

While those facing discrimination often turn to government, the record shows that business can shatter cultural barriers more quickly. Companies have contributed to the advancement of women, people of color, and the LGBT community. Yet older workers are rarely represented in corporate diversity and inclusion initiatives.

What might business advocacy for them look like? First, companies should avoid stereotypes in campaigns aimed at older consumers. Second, they should evaluate employees on performance, without any stigma on age. Finally, they should recognize that the tone at the top matters. Executives ought to recognize the contributions of older workers and engage them in planning and product development. Hollywood can harness its power to foster respectful, dignified images of older people. Silicon Valley can shift its youth-obsessed culture.

With the success of “Darkest Hour” keeping conversation about Churchill’s achievements alive, this much is beyond debate: His words and actions in the summer of 1940 were the product of a long life checkered by soaring triumphs and catastrophic failures. Each prepared Churchill for that critical time. Although the challenges of the 21st-century workplace are more benign, the qualities older workers have acquired over their lives are just as important to success.

Mr. Irving is chairman of the Milken Institute Center for the Future of Aging, chairman of Encore.org, and distinguished scholar in residence at the University of Southern California Davis School of Gerontology.

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