

Why Brooks Brothers Is Investing in Veteran Tailors

At a pioneering plant in New York, half the workers are older than 55.

Carol Hymowitz

Bloomberg Businessweek

March 9, 2016 — 10:46 AM EST

Updated on March 9, 2016 — 2:38 PM EST

Reprints



Originally from Sicily, 79-year-old Marianna Aquista has been working at Brooks Brothers for more than 20 years.

Photograph by Carlos Jaramillo for Bloomberg Businessweek

Julia Yeje, who wears her graying hair in a long braid, runs her hand up and down a bolt of striped silk fabric, checking for flaws. Then she turns to her sewing machine and effortlessly shapes a tie, focusing most on the tip, and sews in its lining at a Brooks Brothers plant in Long Island City, N.Y. “I love my work,” says Yeje, 64. “When I have a suggestion for making something better, people here listen.”

So much for the notion that older workers spend part of each day watching the calendar. Yeje has no intention of retiring anytime soon, nor do her employers intend to let her. In today’s fast-paced, transitory workplace, where many companies favor young, inexpensive workers or outsource to low-cost contractors overseas, Brooks Brothers considers senior employees such as Yeje worth the extra cost.

Where Age Is All the Rage

U.S. jobs with high median ages



DATA AS OF 2015: U.S. BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS

Though the factory's 222 employees range in age from 22 to 80, more than half are 55 or older. The average tenure is 30 years. The plant is an example of age diversity, providing a glimpse of where the U.S. workplace may soon be heading as the population ages. Almost 20 percent of Americans 65 or older were employed last year, up from 12 percent a decade ago. More seniors are keeping their jobs beyond traditional retirement age, because they want to continue working and often need the income. At the same time, manufacturers, retailers, and even legacy technology companies are rediscovering the value of older, more seasoned workers and are taking steps to keep them.

"U.S. companies increasingly are heading in the same direction as those in aging countries like Japan and Germany with shortages of skilled workers," says Ruth Finkelstein, associate director of Columbia University's Robert N. Butler Columbia Aging Center. "Brooks Brothers is ahead of the curve and a model for other companies" in tackling the challenges and opportunities of managing multigenerational employees, she says.



Julia Yeje.

Photograph by Carlos Jaramillo for Bloomberg Businessweek

Yeje and her peers can cost more to employ than their younger colleagues. Older sewers in the alterations department—where half the factory’s employees work, altering about 225,000 items of clothing a year from stores with too much work to handle—can earn up to 15 percent more in pay than newbies. But Brooks Brothers considers the veterans a worthwhile investment, because they excel at speed and precision and make few mistakes. The operation is largely automated, but some work is still done by hand, and older, more experienced tailors are more skilled. They can make sample neckties in only 30 minutes—a task a newbie can’t handle. Twenty minutes later those ties are in the hands of Brooks Brothers executives at headquarters in Manhattan.

“You can’t do that from a plant in China,” says Luis Nava, director of operations at the factory, which makes 1.5 million ties annually along with alteration work. Brooks Brothers, the nation’s oldest men’s clothing manufacturer, has outfitted 39 U.S. presidents, including Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama, and is now owned by Italian billionaire Claudio del Vecchio.

At 37, Nava sees himself “right in the middle” of the generations he manages. After taking over the factory three years ago, he hired a few younger employees with computer skills and added an engineer to help

modernize the plant. He quickly realized younger employees sought different ways of doing work and career advancement, while veterans wanted respect for their knowledge and years of service, even as they needed retraining in new methods.

Nava was able to please both groups by consulting closely with older workers every step of the way as he made changes. His mandate was to eliminate “everything that was wasteful,” including unnecessary movements of employees during the tie-making process and excess inventory, while maintaining quality. His younger professionals helped instruct workers about new equipment and introduced computerized planning tools, allowing fabric requirements to be easily estimated and jobs tracked from start to finish.



Rafael Martinez.

Photograph by Carlos Jaramillo for Bloomberg Businessweek

His older workers also played a key role in reimagining the operation, and Nava turned to them for guidance and advice on everything from where to place equipment for easier use to how to better gauge quantities of fabric for specific jobs. “They have a tremendous amount of experience gained over the course of many years in the industry,” he says. “So to be effective, you have to lead from humility.”

Few younger Americans have the sewing and tailoring skills Brooks Brothers relies on, which is why the company recruits through recommendations from current employees, from apparel plants that are closing,

or within immigrant communities that excel in sewing. In the past, many workers came from Italy, Croatia, and other parts of Europe, but increasingly newcomers hail from Central and Latin America and China.

Nava changed some rules to make everyday work-life easier for the older staff. Workers who are ill or need to care for ailing relatives have flexibility to take time off. In addition to vacation, each employee receives 1,400 minutes a year to use for doctor appointments or to go to school events for children or grandchildren. And employees get ergonomic help at their workstations.



Photograph by Carlos Jaramillo for Bloomberg Businessweek

Workers at the factory—an airy, light-filled, open space that resembles a start-up office more than an old plant—churn out ties and bow ties in different fabrics for four seasons and also fill special orders for colleges and other groups. “We do urgent orders, small batches, and big batches, and what we’re making is always changing,” says Nives Mattiasich, a 45-year veteran who started at age 17 working at the plant during summers and now is manufacturing manager of the tie shop.

Retired tailors willing to work are routinely called back during busy times. Paola Posca, a 67-year-old widow who learned to sew when she was 8 years old in Italy, says she wants to keep working as a full-time tailor in alterations until she’s at least 70 and becomes eligible for maximum Social Security benefits. Then she hopes to continue working part-time at Brooks Brothers well into her 70s.

“This place is more my home than my home,” says Posca, who commutes 90 minutes each way to work. “I still walk fast, which means I also work fast, and I wouldn’t want to be sitting in my apartment all day watching television.”

The bottom line: Almost 20 percent of Americans age 65 and older were employed in 2015. A Brooks Brothers factory in New York covets such veterans.

Before it's here, it's on the Bloomberg Terminal.

• Retirement • Work • Job One • Retirement Age