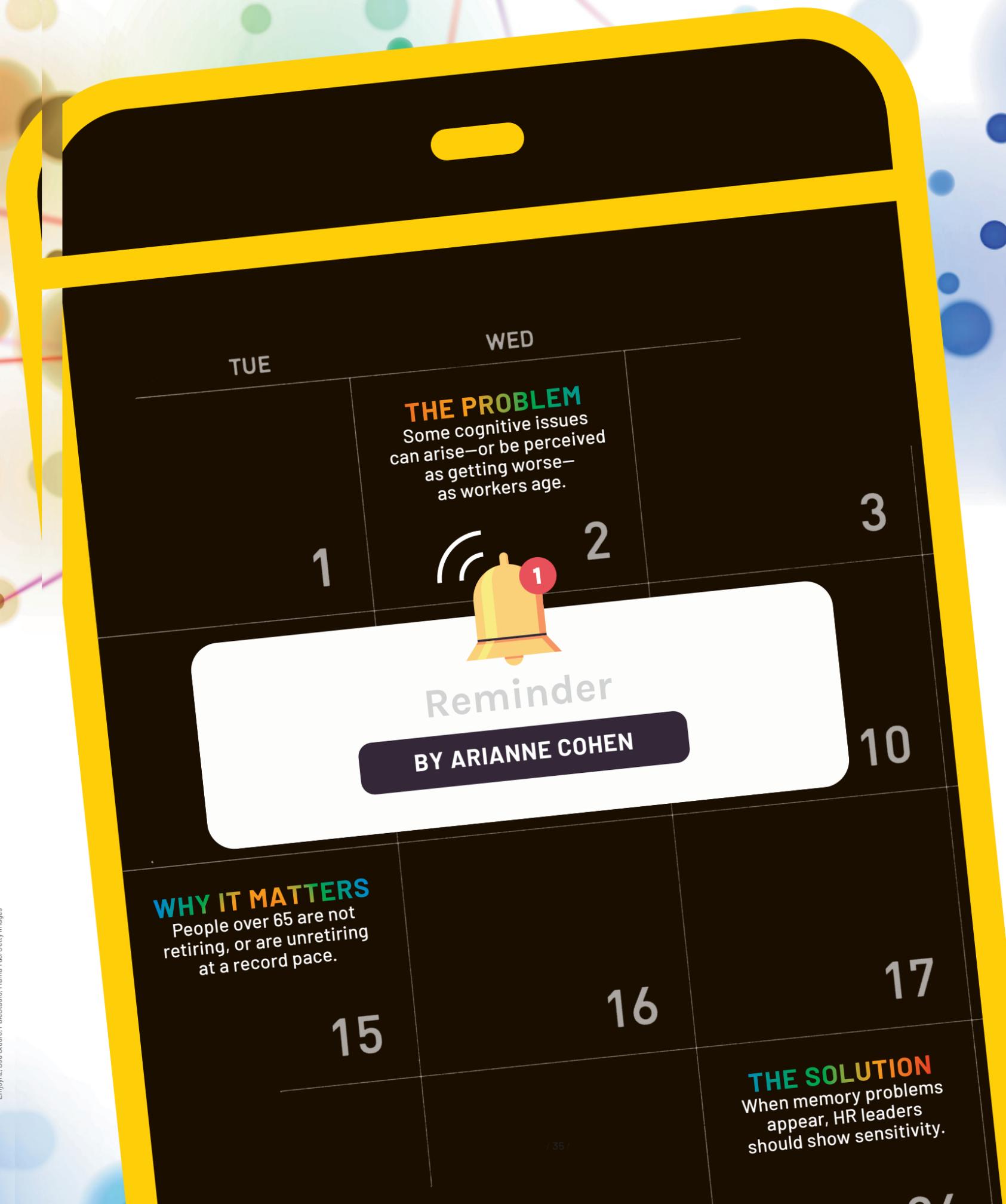


I FORGOT.

Memory is an issue in the US presidential election. With an aging workforce staying on longer, should it be a concern in the workplace too?

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Where's my car? Didn't I park it over there? Or maybe one row over? Huh...

We've all lost a parked car once or 20 times. But for Greg Scott, 66, it's more of a hobby. "I can remember which garage the car is in, but not which slot I parked it in," he says. This can lead him to spend hours walking up and down every ramp and floor of various parking lots and garages—and one time, most of the parking facility at the Minneapolis Convention Center. He's also found himself struggling when traveling for work. "You walk into a downtown building, and while you're inside, the whole downtown turns 180 degrees. I don't know how in the world it does it!"

As you might imagine, Scott brushes this under the rug at his day job, where he runs B2B customer support for large clients at a tech company. He is the oldest employee on his team of mostly thirty- and fortysomethings, and he combats any suggestion of age-related decline by "knowing more than they do." For example, if a problem arises, he'll say, "Oh yeah, I saw that one time back in '83. Let's see how we can fix that."

The cognitive ability of workers like Scott has taken center stage during the current US election cycle, highlighting how difficult it can be to evaluate an employee who consistently can't find their car—or conflates names, or misses meetings, or forgets details. This is not just a struggle of presidential candidates and senators: Every day, 10,000 Americans turn 65, and they are unretiring—or not retiring at all—at record rates. A December survey by ResumeBuilder found that 12 percent of retirees are expected to come out of retirement in 2024. Roughly 80 million Americans will be over the age of 65 by 2040.

In the past, companies simply stashed

older employees in noncritical jobs and waited for them to hit retirement age. But today, as they welcome experienced employees and accommodate them as legally required, companies must balance organizational needs and safety in a workforce that may be facing cognitive decline (or appear that way to younger colleagues). It's a sensitive topic, and difficult to address head-on.

To be sure, the frequency of cognitive problems that negatively impact work functioning is fairly low: Mild cognitive impairment is found in 8.4 percent of people between the ages of 65 and 69, and 10.1 percent of people between the ages of 70 and 74, according to practitioner guidelines published in the journal *Neurology*. And roughly 5 percent of the population experiences cognitive difficulties at a much younger age. Memory lapses, for example, can go hand-in-hand with neurodivergence, ADHD, depression, anxiety, and dementia, and many other conditions. In addition, some research has found that cognition improves among some older adults.

But no matter what the science says, older employees face one challenge that younger employees do not: age discrimination. One-quarter of employees over 50 say they've experienced age-related remarks at work in the last six months, according to 2023 research by the Society for Human Resources Management, and many employees wrongly assume that memory dysfunction is the norm in workers over 60. This, of course, creates a minefield for companies and older employees alike. What's a good company to do?

There's a reason that most people misunderstand the nature of cognitive decline: It's confusing. Some people in their 60s

and 70s appear totally sharp, but are actually compensating for significant defects; others might have frequent verbal gaffes, but are sharp as a tack. "Appearances don't necessarily track with functioning," says Charan Ranganath, author of *Why We Remember: Unlocking Memory's Power to Hold on to What Matters*, and director of the Dynamic Memory Lab at the University of California, Davis, where he is a professor of psychology and neuroscience.

At the workplace, memory skills are often the most visible part of cognition, and one of the most complex. Research says memory abilities peak in our midtwenties, and are already in decline by age 30. "You'd be hard pressed to find someone over age 40 who doesn't complain a bit," says Ranganath. The pace at which this happens varies enormously from person to person, and is hugely influenced by health and lifestyle choices like sleep and exercise, as well as by stressors and ailments like hypertension and vascular disease. While we tend to *expect* gaffes from older workers, such as walking into a supply room and temporarily forgetting what supply they came for, we also often see this behavior in stressed startup founders working endless hours to line up funding for, and launch, a company. Memory issues are common, too, in workers who drink alcohol multiple nights a week,



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their recollection—both primarily functions of the prefrontal cortex. Older people, researchers say, may be less likely to remember when and where a conversation happened, for instance, while still recalling what was discussed (or vice versa)—abilities related mostly to changes in the hippocampus. "Some people seem to be totally solid, and some really decline," says Ranganath.

Researchers still have much to learn about memory, but for colloquial understanding, Ranganath contrasts capital-F *Forgetting* with lowercase-f *forgetting*. We all *forget*, for instance when we fail to pull up a specific word, blank on a name, or miss a video meeting. To Ranganath, this is a failure of retrieval: The information is in the vault, but accessing it can be glitchy. Capital-F *Forgetting* happens when the information is not in the vault at all. Among leaders, *Forgetting* would be drawing a complete blank on who runs another company; *forgetting* would be being able to picture the CEO of a competitor, and recalling that he loves golf and has a kid—but not remembering his name.

The question, of course, is whether this matters at work. And the answer is simple: Capital-F *Forgetting* is likely problematic. Leaders need to understand not only trends, history, and major players, but also how these pieces tie together. But in this day and age, most *forgetting* can be

to see memory lapses in all demographics, and experts say managers should be ready to provide appropriate accommodations. The problem, of course, is that lapses among young people tend to be ignored, while those among older adults are falsely perceived as proof of incompetence.

Evaluating memory abilities is particularly tricky because of how much they vary. Over time, people demonstrate less ability to remember details, and must more carefully evaluate the accuracy of

or parents, who—amid a lifestyle that's low on sleep and high in demands—can easily forget meetings and deadlines. Each of these people might display noticeably sharper memories just a few years later, when sleep and predictability return to their lives. All of which is to say that employers are likely

quickly remedied by a Google search or well-positioned assistant. As long as an employee isn't suffering from significant health ailments or dementia, a few well-placed sticky notes and auto-reminders will make them fully capable of functioning in the workplace.

Performing at a high level despite an increasingly glitchy memory requires a combination of humility and coping skills. "Forgetting things is not just a personal weakness, but an opportunity for systems to improve," says Sophia Tang, the founder of Nako Cosmetic, who once missed a strategy meeting intended to set the upcoming marketing direction. It was a major blunder. "This was not just any meeting; it put our plans on hold," she says. In response, she created a "fail-safe appointment system" that includes a digital calendar with audible meeting alerts, as well as a culture in which team members remind each other of meetings and upcoming deadlines. She says she has not missed a meeting since.

Workers with weak memories are heavily incentivized to build strong coping skills quickly. Take the time a few years ago when Maria Alfano-Huggins, 61, left a laptop at work the night before a big presentation. At the time, she was a managing director at a real-estate investment firm. That night, she had to create the second half of the presentation at home, on her personal computer. "The next morning was a super early trek to the office so that I could consolidate the two presentations," she says. Another afternoon, while carrying her laptop bag, lunch bag, and parcels, she says she forgot her purse in her office—along with her wallet, phone, and building-access card—leaving her with just enough spare change to make it home. These sorts of mistakes

lead to immediate misery and potentially severe consequences; employees who don't quickly develop coping skills will likely find themselves unemployed.

At work, Greg Scott stringently organizes his email folders, so he can easily

pull up conversations with any client. He is adamant that, in aggregate, he is better at his job than he was 20 years ago. Science backs him up: A body of research shows that skills like social insight, knowledge, and verbal ability all peak after age 60.

Scott says that providing quality tech support requires a combination of 50 percent knowledge and 50 percent psychology. "You have to use your diplomacy skills to ferret out information when they don't know how to explain it," he says. And those are the easy calls. He works in enterprise, where callers might be shy about articulating the problem, or be calling for in-house political reasons. For example, calls come in from clients who want to cover themselves by placing blame on the vendor, or from customers who don't know how to fix a problem on their end; others are facing a hacking or ransomware attack, but can't admit it for fear of putting their job at risk. "Once you've seen that stuff before, you can recognize the patterns of behavior," he explains with a shrug. He knows, for example, that if he wants to solve the problem more than the caller does, it's not going to get solved. But does he remind his coworkers that he can't find his car? No.

Don't tell that to HR leaders, who are facing an influx of staffers with longstanding AARP memberships. Experts say their first issue should be to deal with any biases or assumptions younger workers may have about the older set by improving awareness that cognition problems are relatively low in this group. Certainly, when there is a real problem, addressing it correctly can be challenging. "With respect, privacy and dignity," says HR expert Erika Duncan, cofounder of advisory firm People

"PERFORMING AT A HIGH LEVEL DESPITE AN INCREASINGLY GLITCHY MEMORY REQUIRES A COMBINATION OF HUMILITY AND COPING SKILLS."

on Point. "Ideally, the employee comes to a moment of self-awareness. And if not, that's a sensitive conversation to have."

A longtime HR director will have tricks up their sleeve to protect the best interests of the organization and stakeholders; these safeguards are in place well in advance. At large companies, for instance, it's not uncommon for term limits to be actionable for board members; leadership may also insert a hiring clause in contracts that allows them to request a medical assessment—a lever that can be quietly pulled if cognitive decline is suspected, says Duncan. She suggests that succession

planning begin early in an executive's reign.

"You can't wait until someone can no longer fulfill their duties," she says.

Yet for the vast majority of employees, young or old, whose minds slip, these measures will never be necessary, because companies

are chock-full of easy solutions—namely, colleagues. Like the phalanx of staffers that accompanies every member of Congress, teammates and assistants can compensate for mild, run-of-the-mill memory issues. As long as *someone* knows where and when the next meeting is, all is well. "It's about off-loading memory functions to others," says Ranganath. Because at the end of the day, corporate life is the ultimate team sport. ▀

IS IT COGNITIVE DECLINE, OR SOMETHING ELSE?

Even the most esteemed neurology experts can struggle to evaluate the memory capabilities of typical people. But some useful data points can help.

Cognitive impairment jumps sharply among older adults—but not until they reach their ninth decade: Roughly one-quarter of people between the ages of 80 and 84 experience mild cognitive impairment. Even then, the remaining 75 percent show healthy cognitive abilities.

High performers and highly educated people will often test within the normal range on memory evaluations, even if they're experiencing cognitive decline.

Conditions that demand prefrontal-cortex resources, such as managing a stutter or Tourette's syndrome, can make a person stumble over words and falsely present as memory issues.

Tricks people use to avoid forgetfulness include setting up appointments so that the other person calls them; agreeing to "reconfirm the day of"; and declining some meetings or tasks.

Romantic partners will often compensate for each other. "Off-loading" memory tasks to the other partner can enable high functioning for long periods of time.