

Career Builders

By Deborah Spaulding

Workforce Demographics and their Effect on Employers of All Sizes

By 2015, twenty percent of the workforce will be age 55 or older. The baby boomer generation, which officially started in 1946 and ended with those born in 1964, is coming of retirement age.

Many workers aged 55 or older have vested retirement benefits and can retire from the day job at which they worked for 20 years or more. Some of these workers will take time to kick back, travel, take up new hobbies and leisure activities or provide care giving services to family members. However, many of these young retirees will seek part-time employment. "Study after study confirms that older workers' absenteeism and tardiness rates are lower than those of their younger counterparts," cites Marvin Copes of the Shelby County Reporter (Feb 20, 2007).

Mature workers, who have retired from full-time employment, often re-enter the workforce after a brief hiatus, usually 1–3 years. For many, working has become a fiscal necessity. For others, it is a way to remain active and involved in their community. Feeling productive is a good way to retain a healthy self-esteem, no matter what one's age. However, this doesn't mean that the retiree will return to their former employer. Sometimes this is an opportunity for a mature worker to start seeking a new employment environment and/or learn a new career skill set.

As a field representative, employers tell me of their recruitment difficulties on a daily basis. Today an employer cannot afford to ignore twenty-percent of a shrinking workforce. It is imperative that employers develop strategies to retain or to re-attract mature workers who have the experience, skills and work ethic that you need.

"A study unveiled by IBM and the American Society for Training and Development reveals that only 16 percent of organizations have prioritized workforce demographic issues... too few organizations have taken action to meet the challenges, either by addressing the retirement of Baby Boomers, or streamlining the learning curve for new employees." (Elaine Rigoli, [Insiderecruiting](#), October 6, 2006.)

Organizations of all sizes need to ensure the transfer of knowledge from experienced workers to those with less experience. Setting up mentoring programs, teaching leadership skills, providing management development and succession programs can all be beneficial.

Re-employing mature workers as consultants can be a useful tool for employers. Many retirees are happy to return to a former employer as a consultant, in order to train less experienced workers. The increased wage usually commanded by a consultant as an independent contractor can sometimes be offset by the fact that they are not receiving voluntary or statutory benefits. However, a legally binding independent contractor agreement should be put into place.

Businesses should also make sure they incorporate behavioral job interviewing practices. No matter what the age of the interviewee, you must have a legitimate business reason for your hiring decisions. Making sure an applicant can perform the essential functions of the job is the purpose of the employment interview. An interviewer can ask the applicant to demonstrate how they would perform a certain job function. Applicants can be asked how they would conduct themselves in certain scenarios. Listening to what applicants say and *how they say it*, (instead of the job interviewer monopolizing the conversation), is an underutilized interviewing skill.

Many mature workers want flexible work hours. Many employers dismiss this issue off hand, instead of examining their workplace to determine how and in which departments it could work. It may be necessary to develop new human resources policies to address issues that arise out of a desire to accommodate new worker needs.

It may also be time for businesses to look at their organization with new eyes to determine whether their policies, procedures and reputation are attractive, not only to mature workers but the general workforce. For example, are the premises clean and attractive? Are they accessible by public transportation? Do they meet ADA standards? Are health benefits offered? Does the organization sponsor community teams and events? Is the company involved in employee development and training activities? Does the company regularly re-invest in the business? Are wages competitive?

The issue of workforce demographics may be the impetus that organizations need to begin the process of creative self-evaluation. When all is said and done, it is not merely about hiring mature workers, it is about remaining globally competitive in an ever shrinking marketplace.

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