

Retiring or Retooling?

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In the early 1960's when the first wave of baby boomers were twenty-somethings, the average retirement age was 67 for men and 68 for women. Now, as these "flower children" approach the bloom of their "golden years," the median retirement age has dropped to 62 for men and 61 for women, largely due to changes in the regulation of Social Security and private sector benefit plans. Yet, many of this generation are not retiring at all. Rather, they're looking ahead and preparing for the second or perhaps even third stage of their careers. As Beverly Moore of the American Association of Retired People (AARP) said, "The Boomer generation has changed the way we look at retirement."

Money is a motivator.

Recent surveys taken by AARP indicate that 70 percent of working people between the ages of 50 and 70 plan to work past the traditional retirement age of 65. The primary reason most people give for this decision is that they anticipate they'll need additional income to supplement their retirement benefit payments.

In 2000, the U.S. House and Senate voted to lift the limit on how much money an individual could earn while still receiving a full share of social security each month. Since social security recipients are no longer penalized for working, more and more are electing to stay at their old jobs, seek new ones or even go into business for themselves.

Working to live and living to work.

But the change in the social security laws is only one of the reasons that the trend towards early retirement is being "retired." Many workers who are over 50 feel that staying on the job will not only afford them greater financial security but a more emotionally and intellectually satisfying lifestyle as well. They need to be needed and they value the opportunity to be productive, interact with others and stay physically and mentally fit. This is especially true since most people expect to live into their mid-80s or longer.

Writing in his article, “Productive Aging in the 21st Century,” Robert Knechtal noted that while older Americans make up only ten percent of the workforce, they account for twenty-two percent of the nation’s job growth. Furthermore, Knechtal pointed out, this trend will likely increase since by 2010 the number of people approaching retirement age will far exceed that of new workers entering the market.

“Never trust anyone over 30.”

This presents an interesting scenario when placed in the context of corporate hiring attitudes that prevailed during the 1980s and 1990s. Both these decades were marked by rampant discrimination against older workers, particularly in certain industries such as information technology and computers. The downsizing of older workers during these “lean and mean” years was more an issue of profitability than political philosophy. Older middle managers had larger salaries than their lower ranking juniors; from one prospective, it was simply more cost-effective to favor younger over older employees.

This solution, however, was extremely short-sighted. It failed to recognize that mature workers mentored as well as managed others and, in many cases, were the very embodiment of the company’s history, culture and work ethic. But now, more and more employers have come to realize that hiring older workers has many unique advantages for companies and their bottom lines.

The Wisdom of Age – Work Hard

One such employer is John Langestee, Sr., President of Walt’s Food Centers – a third-generation supermarket chain with stores in South Holland, Crete, Homewood, and Tinley Park, Illinois and in Dywer, Indiana. For Langestee, older workers are the ideal employees. As he put it, “I think they’re wonderful. They know what it is to work and they are willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done.”

Out of the 650 people working at Walt's, about one sixth are 55 years or older. The company's commitment to hiring and supporting older employees even earned them an award from Experience Works, Inc., (formerly called Green Thumb). Experience Works, Inc., is a national non-profit group offering training, employment and community service programs for mature workers. Their annual Best Employer and Best Employee of the Year award ceremonies are designed to foster interest and support for seniors who want to work and the companies who are smart enough to hire them.

One of the Experience Works award recipients – 82-year-old Ruth Beven – is a customer service representative who has been working in the Bakery Department of Walt's South Holland Store for eight years. She loves the interaction with people and said she never worries about exercise because she gets plenty of it “moving from one side of the counter to the other, serving my customers.” Beven observed, “Older people make a big difference to a company because we really want to work.” Her boss couldn't agree with her more. Langestee has found that older workers are friendly, open to suggestions and willing to be flexible in terms of assignments and schedules. Currently, seniors are working in all phases of the business at Walt's, from serving customers to unloading stock

Help Wanted. Experience Counts.

Walt's Food Centers is one of many employers who have noticed that the gray-haired set has a strong work ethic and an understanding of the importance of satisfying the customer. Businesses that depend on providing superior customer service – such as retail catalogue companies, credit card companies, insurance agents, or any kind of business offering access to a help line would do well to take note. Compared with younger workers who may view this kind of work as a stopgap on their way to better jobs, older workers have more patience, a subtler understanding of sales and service psychology and a willingness to go that extra mile to turn a problem into an opportunity.

Nevertheless in some industries the attitudes prevalent in the 1990s toward older workers still persist. For example, in companies where use of high technology is paramount, assumptions may be made that older people are resistant to learning new techniques and working with sophisticated equipment. In fact, seniors are as curious about new technology and as open to learning about it as their younger colleagues.

Several organizations such as Experience Works, Inc. are helping older workers break down some of these barriers by teaching them new skills and how to market those they already have in a more effective way. Information about these programs is available at www.experienceworks.org. Operation Able is another group dedicated to helping workers – including those with physical disabilities – prepare themselves for the workforce. And then, of course, there is AARP, which is focused on all kinds of issues affecting the lives of those over 50.

Beverly Moore of AARP feels the success for older people in the workplace begins with a positive attitude and forward-looking approach to life. “It’s vital that everyone, whatever their age, keep up with the industry they’re in and the world in general. AARP can help seniors find resources to learn computer skills and even work on a volunteer basis to get the hands-on experience they need to qualify for various jobs. But above all, older workers need to project a level of confidence about themselves and what they can do. After all, they’ve been working for a half a lifetime and are still going strong!”

Sidebar

Tips for Older Job Hunters

1. Be open to new technology and willing to keep on learning.

It’s the only way to move into the future instead of being left behind in the past. Consider going back to school. Or contact a non-profit agency such as Operation Able to find out more about learning or improving your computer skills.

2. Be Flexible. The more options you offer a potential employer the more likely they are to find a place you’ll fit in.

3. Find out what your strengths are. One way to do this is an assessment test. Or by working with a professional career counselor. If you're a college graduate your alumni association might be able to help you. Your local state office of employment and training may be able to assist you as well.

4. Start networking with people. Join job clubs, become more active in your community, and just keep in touch with all the people you can. Most jobs are gotten through networking so the more people you know the greater your chances of connecting with a job opportunity.

5. Treat finding a job like a job. Take yourself and your search seriously. Read books on how to write your resume, go online to www.AARP.org and monster.com for articles on how to make yourself more marketable.

6. Enjoy what life has to offer. If you have a positive attitude about life, people will have a positive attitude about you.

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