Supervisor’s Guide: Managing Aging Worker

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Managing change and diversity were the prime directives of the 1990’s. **As we enter the next century, managing the aging labor force is an additional imperative**. Retention will be essential, and this requires a change in attitude and management practices.

WHY FOCUS ON AGING WORKERS?

- The labor market is expected to remain tight, and there are fewer young people entering the labor force.

    Birth Dearth:

        72.5 million were born between 1945 and 1965

        56.6 million were born between 1965 and 1985

- The workforce is aging. The numbers of workers 45 years of age and older will swell to approximately 55 million, or about 40 percent of the work force, by 2005.
- Employers consistently find older workers to be experienced, dependable, responsible, and productive.
- Corporations, including Grumman Aerospace, Walt Disney World, The Travelers Corporation, A&P, Honeywell Corporation and Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., have already recognized the value of older workers as a resource.

- The customer base is aging along with the labor force. Older employees are needed to help redesign products and services for this segment of the market.
- Americans are living longer and healthier lives and are capable of working longer, despite the trend toward early retirement.
- Because Americans are living longer, economic necessity may force them to reconsider the work and leisure balance in their later years.
- Older workers are a resource pool that, up to this point, has been largely untapped, and savvy management could benefit both employer and employee.

SUPERVISION ISSUES

Supervisors must recognize that older workers, in general, may have different expectations about the employer-employee relationship. Supervisors must also recognize that different cohorts comprise the classification "older worker." Under the provisions of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, all employees who are 40 years or age and over are older workers; however, the group aged 40-55 has longer work life expectancy and different employment needs than the group aged 55-65, or the group over age 65. It is important that employers make this differentiation when considering an employee's future involvement with the firm. "Career planning," job design, and hours of employment will be of varying importance to each cohort of older workers

Retention tomorrow is dependent upon management practices TODAY. Studies have repeatedly shown that a substantial number of retirees would like to work, but that they are interested in part-time work, and they want interesting, challenging opportunities. They see themselves as having experiences that they would like to share with younger workers. Individuals in their 50's need to consider their long-term association with the organization. They need to given opportunities for change and development that include consideration of their work/leisure mix preferences. Changes in management messages and practices can also be expected to influence the way those in their 40's look at work in their later years.

WHEN MANAGING OLDER WORKERS

1.Communicate, Communicate, Communicate:

- Be clear about your expectations with respect to participation.
- Ask for feedback on a regular basis, and when you use a worker's suggestion make certain you attribute it to the employee.
- Model an open, contribution-based environment.

2.Promote and Support Continuous Learning

- Build on the natural desire to have continuing challenges. Use job rotation and cross training to strengthen your skill base and enrich employees' jobs
- Insist that ALL employees become technologically literate. Don't allow some workers to "opt out" of learning new software or using their computers.
- Require all workers to participate in new and upgrading skill training.

3. Be Flexible

- Changing hours of employment may be key in retention. Consider:
    - Flex-time
    - Part-Time

  - Part Year or Seasonal
  - Telecommuting
  - Phased Retirement
  - Contract Consulting

Be willing to move aging employees to other, and perhaps for them, more interesting or challenging, positions within the firm. Job rotation may reduce boredom and improve cross-departmental communication/cooperation.

5. Re-examine Total Compensation

   Benefits may be more important to older workers than younger workers.

   Identify what is truly important to your employees.

4. Handle Conflicts Openly:

   - Recognize that older workers were not raised in a corporate environment that promoted openness or confrontation.
   - Conflict stimulates creativity and better solutions in problem solving. Older workers need to understand that some conflict is positive and should not be suppressed.
   - Corporate players no longer seek to compromise but rather to work together for a WIN-WIN solution. Older workers may need a reorientation about the role of conflict in the organization.

PLACES TO START

- Feedback is essential.

    Recognize the contributions of your aging workers.

Let all workers know where they stand and what their value to the firm is.

- Let your older employees know that you are willing to discuss job/career changes within your organization, but be clear that they need to be responsible for initiating/directing these discussions.
- Push a learning environment where all employees are expected to contribute creatively and productively. Sidelining an employee or accepting less than full participation sends the wrong message to all employees.
- Create mentoring or liaison positions across departments or subsidiaries or with customer groups; this could give you a communications/competitive edge.
- Be flexible with all your employees, not just those you hire on a contingent basis. Retaining them for 25-30 hours a week is better than losing them completely. Phased retirement and sabbaticals will help with retention.
- Pro-rate health benefits and offer flexible benefits, including elder care.

AGING WORKERS ARE ONE OF YOUR MOST VALUABLE RESOURCES. MANAGE THEM WELL.

*The author wishes to thank Margaret Erickson, Erich Larisch, and Gale Gibson, U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration for their assistance editing this publication. The author may be contacted at the School of Business Administration, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405.