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Who Will Do the Job?

Hiring Older Workers to Fill Library Labor Gaps

Anne Marie Casey

A Changing Workforce

Workforce demographics are expected to change considerably over the next two decades. As baby boomers age and retire, they may leave gaps both in human resources and in job experience that will be difficult to fill. In addition to the baby-boom generation comprising such a large percentage of the population, members of this group are retiring at earlier ages than did workers in previous generations. In 1950 the average retirement for women in the United States was 67.6 years and for men 66.9 years. By 2010 some predictions lower it to 62 years for women and 61.6 years for men.¹ This situation is not unique to the United States. Because of aging workers, workforce participation is expected to decrease in Europe and Japan beginning in 2010.² However, these retirement age forecasts predate the recession beginning in 2007 and may reverse for a time due to economic setbacks suffered by those nearing retirement age.³

In a 2006 workplace forecast, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) stated that the aging of workers and the impending retirement of baby boomers are ongoing themes underlying key developments affecting today's workforce. In addition, this study found that the aging population is the most important demographic trend facing today's workplace and that the shortage of labor at all skill levels is an economic trend likely to have a major impact on and perhaps even cause a radical restructuring of the workplace.⁴

It is obvious that there must be a change in workforce planning to ensure that organizations have sufficient staff in the future. However, only 20 percent of organizations are carrying out projected workforce demographic studies, and only an additional 21 percent are planning to do so.⁵ In a worrisome development, the author who wrote up the SHRM-sponsored study's findings discovered that only 5 percent of small and medium-sized companies and 18 percent of large organizations had implemented policies and practices to prepare for a potential labor shortage.⁶

Another trend that is emerging in conjunction with this projected labor shortage is the increasing number of workers who expect to remain in the labor force beyond the traditional retirement age. In a 2002 survey, 69 percent of workers age 45 and above reported that they plan to work in some capacity during their retirement years.⁷ The

Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that by 2014, workers between the ages of 65 and 74 will increase by 3.5 percent a year and those between the ages of 55 and 64 by 3.1 percent a year.⁸ The percentage of men over the age of 55 in the workforce is expected to increase to 46.3 percent in 2014 and that of women of the same age to 36.8 percent. The median age of all workers in the United States is predicted to be 41.6 years in 2014—the highest ever.⁹

One reason for the increase in older workers is that in 2000 the age for receiving full Social Security retirement benefits was raised; another is that the federal government has passed new legislation and developed policies designed to eliminate mandatory retirement and outlaw age discrimination in the workplace; a third is that restrictions and taxes on the wages of older people have been removed. Other reasons include increased longevity in the United States, the rising cost of health care, a growing skills shortage in many industries, evolving beliefs about the nature and value of work among Baby Boomers, and changes in the level of financial resources needed for a comfortable retirement.¹⁰

Bridge Employment

In recent years, a new practice, known as “bridge employment,” has emerged. It involves older workers negotiating part-time employment as a bridge to reach full retirement after they have attained the requisite age but have compelling reasons to stay in the workforce. Traditionally we think of people in this category as being Wal-Mart greeters or as filling some other staff position held by senior citizens. However, bridge employment is increasingly becoming common for professionals as well.

Among pre-retirees surveyed in 2003, the answer most often given (by 20 percent of the responders) to the question of what kind of work responders planned to do in retirement was professional in nature. Teaching was the job most likely to be considered by this group.¹¹ These results have some interesting implications for education in general and libraries in particular. In libraries, this trend

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could manifest itself in a number of ways. For example, an archivist might return to work in order to assist with special cataloguing projects; a library might hire a retired chemistry professor to work part time in the reference department to assist with users' questions in the hard sciences. Both are examples of Castiglione's idea that "bridge employment, specifically designed to allow older librarians to mentor new librarians, may provide library administrators with a priceless opportunity to capture and transmit important administrative and technical skills—as well as inculcate our 'tradition of service.'"¹²

Obstacles to Recruiting Older Workers

Bridge employment for older workers might seem like an obvious short-term answer to filling the projected labor gap, but it may not be as easy to accomplish as it seems. A recent survey conducted by Manpower, Inc., of more than 28 thousand employers in twenty-five countries revealed that 14 percent had a strategy for recruiting older workers and 21 percent had a strategy for retaining them.¹³ In the field of education in the United States, 8 percent had a strategy for recruitment and 22 percent had one for retention.¹⁴ American workplaces are simply not geared toward recruiting or retaining older workers. According to the National Older Worker Career Center (NOWCC), "many employers follow outdated HR policies developed over the last half century. These policies—crafted at a time when there was a huge cohort of younger workers and few older workers—were designed to push older workers into retirement."¹⁵ The traditional practice in the workplace of predominantly recruiting younger people has led employers to adopt unattractive stereotypes of older workers.

These stereotypes lead employers to believe that older people are not knowledgeable about technology and that they will cost the organization more in terms of both higher salaries and increased medical costs.¹⁶ Other assumptions are that these workers often have decreased physical or mental abilities, including loss of strength, vision, hearing, memory, and cognitive skills, which would prevent them from being productive.¹⁷ In addition, employers think older workers will be absent more often, difficult to retrain, and insufficiently creative.¹⁸ Many employers also think that older workers produce lower-quality work and resist change.¹⁹ There are additional obstacles that hinder engaging and retaining older workers, for example, retirement incentives designed to encourage early retirement.²⁰

Special Workplace Needs of Older Workers

There are many reasons why someone might choose to work after retirement. In a study done by Cornell University, retirees who were still working stated that their primary reason for doing so was to keep active (89 percent). Other top reasons were because they had free

time, because they wanted social contact with others, because they wanted additional income, and because they decided they were not really ready to retire. Only 41 percent indicated that they needed extra income and 10 percent worked to acquire needed health insurance.²¹ In a 2003 survey of workers between the ages of fifty and seventy the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) determined that the major factors most often stated in a decision to work in retirement were to stay both mentally and physically active and to remain productive or useful.²² It is interesting, however, that when the respondents were asked for only one major factor influencing their decision to keep working, 22 percent of pre-retirees and 35 percent of the working retired listed financial need.²³

If the results of these studies are typical, there are many factors that influence the decision to work after retirement. Financial gain is important, but older workers also give other reasons for working. In their study of the factors that most attract older workers, Rau and Adams determined that work arrangements, such as part-time work and flexible hours, coupled with an explicit EEO statement that targets mature workers, are what older workers consider most important.²⁴ The opportunity to mentor younger colleagues is also considered a benefit.²⁵ In a 2006 forum on recruiting and retaining older workers held by the Government Accountability Office, employers stated that many older workers want flexible work schedules in order to provide care for family members, pursue other interests, or spend time in another part of the country (e.g., snow birds, who move to warm climates during the winter). Additionally, some older workers prefer employers to make some accommodation for their physical constraints. They also look for benefits packages that include such items as tuition reimbursement, medical benefits, employee discounts, or modified pension plans.²⁶

Changes in the Organizational Climate

Today's leaders have some work to do to prepare their organizations for a shift from a workplace that assumes workers will be younger and full time to one in which older workers on flexible schedules are valued and recruited. One step in this process will be to combat stereotypical thinking in organizations. Managers and coworkers would benefit from training to help them understand the special issues sometimes faced by older workers. Useful components of an education program designed to help organizations shift to a climate that is friendlier to older workers include encouraging self-assessments about misconceptions and biases and understanding the aging process and its implications in the workplace. It is also important to learn about legal issues and generational differences.²⁷

In addition to training, there are some best practices that administrators can use to prepare an organization for this change and make the workplace more attractive to

older workers. These include constructing an age profile of all employees, determining short- and long-term labor requirements, developing replacement projections for all staff members, creating a master list of critical skills, identifying the available labor pool, developing a culture that is respectful of all age groups, making sure that wellness and preventive health programs are in place, and conducting periodic surveys to assess the needs and concerns of all employees.²⁸ Another important practice is to provide organizational support services for older employees.²⁹ Additionally, organizations can prepare for recruiting older workers by creating an advisory group of their older employees, reviewing promotional materials for age bias, and considering incentives—such as offering 401(k) catch-up contributions, providing time for caregiving, offering flexible spending accounts, and developing networks of active and retired employees through civil engagement.³⁰

Conclusion

The workforce in the United States and in many other countries as well will change in the next twenty years. Aging baby boomers, who comprise a substantial part of the workforce, will begin to retire in the decade beginning in 2010. Although these retirements may not occur as quickly as predicted until the economic climate improves, this generation constitutes a larger group of people than succeeding generations. These retirements, and the smaller number of younger people ready to move into the workforce, will cause gaps in human resources, knowledge, and experience in most employment areas. Even those sectors traditionally considered the domain of the young, such as high-tech firms in Silicon Valley, are beginning to look to older workers to fill knowledge gaps.³¹

Libraries do not appear to be engaged in significant planning for the worker shortage that is predicted to occur in the near future. However, this profession is one that would lend itself well to part-time work after retirement. Many professional activities, such as working on special cataloguing projects, creating displays, assisting with reference questions during peak times, and accepting short-term leadership assignments in interim periods between the appointment of library deans or other administrators are all ways that older workers could be involved in library work. It would be interesting to learn whether libraries are conducting workforce assessments and planning for changes that include hiring older workers. If the majority of libraries are not, a blueprint for doing so may be a valuable addition to library planning literature.

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