

# The Sloan Center for Flexible Work Options and Older Workers at Boston College



## Perspectives: Aligning Business Needs with Older Workers' Preferences and Priorities

An Issue Brief Prepared by Marcie Pitt-Catsoupes and Michael A. Smyer for  
What An Aging Workforce Can Teach Us About Workplace Flexibility  
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### Introduction

Older workers (45 years and older) comprise 37.8% of the U.S. labor force (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Research suggests that many of these Baby Boomers are likely to postpone retirement. Given the sheer size of this population group, it is important to consider:

- How might the aging of the U.S. labor force affect business operations?
- Are employers "getting ready" for this important shift in the demographics of the labor force?

There are a number of examples of innovations at the workplace designed to promote positive employment experiences for older workers. AARP began recognizing the "Best Employers for Workers Over 50" in 2001 (Rappaport & Stevenson, 2004). The employers who have received these awards have developed a range of different approaches for engaging older workers at the workplace. However, they all have one thing in common: these employers offer choices of different work arrangements that simultaneously support work effectiveness and also reflect the preferences of older workers. It is important to remember, of course, that the "Best Employers for Workers Over 50" are the "early adopters" who offer models of some best practices. Many other workplaces have not yet planned specific responses to the aging workforce. Recent survey data indicates that 45% of HR professional in private businesses feel that their workplaces are "just becoming aware" of issues related to the potential labor force shortages due to the retirement of baby boomers (Collinson, 2005: 7).

This Brief outlines the reasons why some employers view the employment of older workers as a business "opportunity," potentially giving them a competitive advance in their industries.

### How can older workers help employers meet important human resource needs?

Some employers who have experienced specific human resource challenges recognize the value of retaining, re-hiring, and recruiting older workers.

#### 1. Addressing Human Resource Priorities:

Employing older workers may help businesses address talent shortages, recruitment challenges, and unwanted turnover. In addition, the presence of older workers may

"Pitney Bowes recognizes that the contributions of talented, seasoned employees are essential to the success of the company. We need to develop and implement innovative ways to retain these individuals and share their knowledge and experience." – Edward Houghton, Director Workforce Effectiveness

help employers to improve workforce performance.

▶ Talent Shortages: Labor market economists anticipate shortages in specific occupations (e.g., engineering), in growth industries (e.g., technology), and in highly specialized fields. Some hospitals with nursing shortages, for instance, have looked to older workers and retirees to help them maintain the number of professional and skilled workers they need.

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) reports that 43% of its members think that the loss of talent associated with the retirement of Baby Boomers is a "potential problem" (Collinson, 2005:8). Small businesses and companies that do not have many opportunities for promotion may find that there are few junior employees in the pipeline when the more senior employees start to retire. Even large companies such as Volkswagen of America and Westinghouse have indicated that they are taking steps to ensure the transfer of knowledge from older workers to those who are next-in-line (Gaynor, 2005).

One group of employers, which includes Procter & Gamble, has developed a collaborative approach for recruiting retirees for short-term assignments. This group has formed an organization, YourEncore, which matches employers' needs for highly skilled workers with experienced retirees (Coombes, 2005).

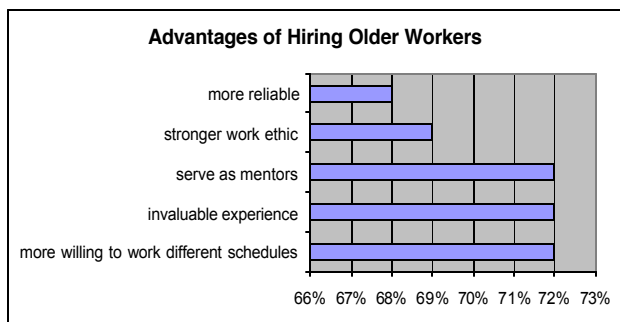
▶ Meeting Retention and Recruitment Challenges: Businesses in some industries, such as retail, as well as organizations in the social services sector, often have relatively high rates of unwanted turnover. Studies have found that turnover rates are lower among older workers when compared to employees of other ages. Borders Group has reported that the turnover rates among its employees 50 and older is just 1/10<sup>th</sup> the rate among employees under 30 years of age (Freudenheim, 2005).

The topics discussed in this Brief reflect conversations that took place during a meeting convened by the Sloan Work & Family Research Network and Workplace Flexibility 2010 in December 2004, "Flexible Work Options: A Pathway to Healthy and Productive Aging." The following individuals were in attendance: Andrina Buffong, Kathleen Christensen, Chai Feldblum, Patti Giglio, Robert Hudson, Robert Hutchens, Jacquelyn James, Jim Lubben, Ellen Mahoney, Tasia McCullough-Johnson, Jean McGuire, Phyllis Moen, Alicia Munnell, Pamela Perun, Marcie Pitt-Catsoupes, Joseph Quinn, Catherine Reynolds, Stephen Sass, and Michael Smyer.

Bill Albright, Director of Quality of Work/Life and Benefits at MITRE, has noted, **"If large numbers of our older workers all left at one time, our company would experience a significant loss of intellectual capital as well as the social capital connected to professional relationships. Furthermore, our experienced workers have institutional knowledge that is critical to our clients."**

Businesses in some regions of the country are experiencing difficulties recruiting enough qualified job candidates to fill open positions. Older workers – including former employees who have retired – might be interested in part-time work, contract work, and temporary work which help employers respond to fluctuations in personnel needs.

► **Performance and Productivity:** HR executives frequently comment that older workers are among their best workers. As indicated by the chart below, the Older Workers Survey conducted by SHRM found that businesses have observed a number of performance-related outcomes associated with the hiring and retention of older workers.



Source: Collinson, 2003: 2

The Family and Work Institute reports that Baby Boomers are more likely to be work-centric and devote more hours to work than younger employees. In addition, the Institute found that job satisfaction among Boomers was higher compared to younger workers (Families and Work Institute, no date: 7). According to Harris Interactive, "Older employees are more likely than younger employees to have positive attitudes toward their work and their employers." (Harris Interactive, 2005).

**2. Aligning Older Workers' Competencies with Business Strategies:** It is common for businesses to articulate key business strategies that leverage "factors for success." There can be a win-win when business strategies (such as reaching out to specific markets, expanding to global business operations, or walking-the-talk of company values) link to the employment of older workers.

► **Market Niche & Customer Satisfaction:** Older workers can add particular value to customer relationships when "experience matters." Businesses providing goods and services to older customers might also find that it is advantageous to have older workers represented in their work forces (Aoki, 2005). AARP notes some financial and health care industries have connected their employment strategies with their marketing to older customers and clients (Rappaport & Stevenson, 2004). CVS, recently recognized by AARP as one of the Best Employers for Workers Over 50, has found a link between customer satisfaction and having a workforce that reflects its customers over 50 years of age.

Stephen Wind, Director of Government Programs for CVS states, "Older workers are important to the development of a diverse workforce, which helps in serving a diverse customer base that includes many older people."

► **Responding to the Global Economy:** The global economy has introduced a number of new challenges to businesses, including the need to move toward a 24/7 work week and an increased demand for travel. These new ways to work might appeal to some older workers. 72% of the HR respondents to the Older Workers Survey indicated that one advantage to hiring older workers was their willingness to work different schedules (Collinson, 2003). In addition, in comparison to mid-career employees, older workers may find it easier than younger employees to travel, as long as they are not the primary caregivers to dependents (such as elderly parents or spouses with medical needs or disabilities).

► **Connecting Business Practices with Company Values:** Companies across the country have made strategic commitments to values such as work-family issues, diversity, and corporate social responsibility. Some of these firms view the employment of older workers as one way to put their values into practice.

**How are businesses responding to the needs and preferences of older workers?**

As discussed in the Brief, "Perspectives: Older Workers' Priorities and Preferences," a majority of older workers want to extend their employment, but most want to have some choice and control over their work schedules, work hours, employment contract, and options for jobs and responsibilities.

**1. Having Some Choice in Work Schedules:** Many companies report that they offer flexible work options to their employees. SHRM found that 40% of the HR professionals responding to its recent Future of the US Labor Pool Survey stated that their companies offer flexible schedules as one step to address possible workforce shortages (Collinson, 2005: 9). The Charles Stark Draper Laboratory has reported that 70% of its employees who use flexible work schedules are older workers (AARP, 2004).

**2. Having Some Choice Over the Number of Hours Worked:** The three most common forms of employment which allow older workers to work on a reduced-hours basis are: part-time positions, job shares, and phased retirement. A recent SHRM survey found that 25% of the employers who participated indicated they offer employees options for reduced hours (Collinson, 2005: 9). Many of the companies recently recognized by AARP offer part-time and/or job share options (AARP, 2004; Rappaport & Stevenson, 2004).

Phased retirement is a special form of part-time work designed for older workers and includes "... any human resources program which allows older workers to reduce

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their work hours without changing employers and eases the transition into retirement..." (Potter, 2005: 1). Hutchens found that approximately three-fourths (73%) of U.S. workplaces indicate that they would allow an older employee to reduce the number of work hours before their official retirement. However, only 14% report having a formal phased retirement policy that applies to all employees. Clerical and professional workers appear to have more access to phased retirement options than managers (Hutchens, 2003). The University of North Carolina established a phased retirement program for full-time tenured faculty and since 1998, 455 faculty members have participated. This program is rated favorably by the faculty members; 93% of those who used it indicating that they would use it again (Giglio, 2005). The Charles Stark Draper Laboratory, Inc. as well as Pinnacle West Capital Corporation, Bon Secours Richmond Health System, SSM Health Care, and St. Mary's Medical Center are companies on the AARP best companies list that offer this option (AARP, 2004; Rappaport & Stevenson, 2004).

**3. Having Options to Work on a Project Basis:** Alternative employment relationships can enable older workers to move in and out of the labor force. These arrangements include contract work, consultant work (where the employee is "self-employed"), and temporary work. The 2005 Future of the U.S. Labor Pool Survey found that 33% of employers offer options for project-based work (Collinson, 2005: 9)

Although project-based work does not meet the needs of all older workers, The Conference Board survey found that among the exempt (or salaried) older workers who indicated an interest in reducing their hours and who wanted to work part-time, more wanted to work either as contractors or consultants (even if that resulted in a loss of benefits) rather than as a part-time employee of the company (Parkinson, 2002: 35). Men older workers (37%) were three times as likely as the women (12%) to indicate an interest in working as a consultant (Parkinson, 2002: 39). Some surveys have found that approximately half of larger corporations have rehired some of their employees as consultants. Adecco Employment Services, is one firm that hires-back its retirees on this basis (Rappaport & Stevenson, 2004).

Survey data indicate that a relatively small percentage (10% - 15%) of employers report that they maintain a pool of temporary workers comprised of retirees (Perun, 2002). Companies that have established retiree temporary pools include Adecco Employment Services, St. Mary's Medical Center and Hoffman-La Roche (Dychwald et al., 2004; Rappaport & Stevenson, 2004). Aerospace Corporation, which hires its retirees as temporary workers for up to 1,000 hours to meet unanticipated staff needs, has adopted the practice of compensating its retirees at the rate of their old base salaries (Dychwald et al., 2004). Companies with temporary pools for retirees typically report that there are many advantages of this practice. Cigna has indicated that it is beneficial for the company to have temporary workers who are familiar with business practices and who may already have relationships with some of the company's employees (Dychwald et al., 2004).

**4. Having Options to Take Career Leaves:** The Family and Medical Leave Act mandates that all eligible employees working at workplaces covered by the provision of the law have access to unpaid family and medical leaves. In addition, some employers have established career leave policies, such as sabbaticals, which allow employees to cycle in and out of work while maintaining a formal status as an employee. Older workers interested in exploring the possibilities of starting their own businesses or pursuing new careers might find this option appealing. The Conference Boards' survey of older workers found that 13% of those who had planned to retire in next 5 years stated that a sabbatical would keep them from retiring (Parkinson, 2002: 32). Older workers at Pitney Bowes can use the company's Retirement Education Assistance Program to explore second career options or other interests (AARP, 2004).

**5. Having Options to Consider Different Jobs and Different Sets of Responsibilities:** Some older workers want to devote their later career years to jobs that either allow them to develop new competencies or are less demanding. These older employees may be interested in making transitions to different jobs within the company. Sometimes, these are either lateral moves or even moves to positions that result in a pay decrease. One recent survey found that 29% of the responding companies indicated they provide such opportunities (Collinson, 2005: 9). Deloitte and Touche, a management consulting firm, has redesigned career paths so that they better fit with the preferences of some of the firm's older workers (Dychwald et al., 2004). Company-sponsored training which emphasizes lifelong learning can help older workers to change jobs. AARP has noted that opportunities for training and job transitions are available at The Principal Financial Group and Deere & Company (Rappaport & Stevenson, 2004).

**6. Having Options to Work from Alternative Locations:** Older workers may prefer to work from a different worksite, oftentimes because they want to reduce commuting time. Telework options enable employees to work from off-site locations (most often the employees' homes). A few workplaces allow workers to periodically switch locations, sometimes on a seasonal basis. Borders Group, which includes the Borders retail book stores, has instituted a "passport" program enabling employees to work at more than a single location during a year. This flexibility can work well for older workers who live for part of the year in one home and reside in a different location for the remaining months but who want to maintain steady employment with a particular company. CVS and Home Depot have adopted similar practices (Fetterman, 2005; Freudenheim, 2005).

### **Conclusions**

In the future, businesses will be more likely to offer employment options to older workers if employers recognize the potential assets of experienced employees. Public policy debates should consider how different incentives could encourage employers to expand the availability of flexible work policies that support the quality-of-work/life of older workers as well as promote business effectiveness.

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**The Sloan Center for Flexible Work Options and Older Workers at Boston College** is a unique academic center established in 2005. The Center works in partnership with decision-makers at the workplace to design and implement research investigations that will help the American business community to prepare for the opportunities and challenges associated with the aging workforce. The Center focuses on flexible work options because these are a particularly important element of innovative employer responses to the aging workforce. The studies conducted by the Center will examine employers' adoption of a range of flexible work options, the implementation of these arrangements at the workplace, and their utilization by older workers.

The Center's multi-disciplinary core research team is comprised of 14 social scientists from disciplines including Economics, Social Work, Finance, Psychology, and Sociology. The investigators have strong expertise in the field of aging – which is increasingly interested in business issues – and the field of workplace research, which has recently started to focus on issues of the aging workforce. The Center's researchers include: Kevin Cahill, Ph.D., Michael Giandrea, Ph.D., John Havens, Ph.D., Jacquelyn B. James, Ph.D., Joanne N. Lahey, Ph.D., Tay McNamara, Ph.D., Marcie Pitt-Catsoupes, Ph.D., Joseph F. Quinn, Ph.D., Natalia Sarkisian, Ph.D., Paul Schervish, Ce Shen, Ph.D., Ph.D, Michael A. Smyer, Ph.D., Jennifer Swanberg, Ph.D., and John Williamson, Ph.D.

The SENIOR Advisors is a group of HR decision makers, representatives of employee groups, and members of

trade and business associations that provides guidance to the Center about all of its core activities, including the identification of key research questions, the assessment of the feasibility of data collection, the interpretation of findings, and the preparation of reports for practitioners

The Center is directed by Marcie Pitt-Catsoupes and Michael Smyer.

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