

Uptime: Our Aging Workforce - It's A War Out There

Written by Bob Williamson, Contributing Editor
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Well, we are here! We're now in the era of the aging Baby Boom Generation. For the next two decades, this generation will be marked by an unprecedented growth of older workers and retirees in the U.S. and most of the world's industrialized nations.

As our workforce ages and reaches the traditional retirement age, tough decisions must be made: first, to accommodate and possibly retain highly skilled older workers, and second, to prepare for an all-out assault in the "war for talent." What can we do? What should we do? Since there's no turning back, employers and older workers must face new challenges head-on and make the right decisions.

Us boomers

I'll admit it: I am an aging baby boomer. Those of us born between 1946 and 1964 make up the largest generation and workforce this country has ever known. Our post-World War II generation was raised and educated in a system and an economy that had much to offer. We acquired skills that gave our nation and industries a huge competitive edge. We mastered advanced technologies in a wide variety of sectors. We learned from our parents, developed a powerful work ethic and became a central part of the most productive workforce on the planet. Over time, however, we subtly allowed the decline of the very values and programs that gave us our skills, knowledge and enthusiasm for working with our hands and our ingenuity. This included public-school career and vocational-technical education programs.

Now, our capital-intensive industries, manufacturing plants, utilities, buildings and vital infrastructure are beginning to show their own signs of age, in the form of premature deterioration. This decline should not be ignored nor permitted. We are seeing signs of accelerated deterioration, failures and errors everywhere: bridge failures, tower cranes collapsing, pipeline leaks and failures, plant and mine explosions, offshore drilling catastrophes, aircraft maintenance issues, power blackouts and brownouts and ever-increasing unplanned downtime of "mission-critical" assets.

There is a crucial need for aging baby boomers in maintenance and manufacturing. Many of the earliest-born boomers are not yet ready to retire. They like working. They like their jobs. They need the income and/or healthcare benefits. Take note, all you employers-in-need: Recognize

the value of "older workers," retain them and encourage their value-adding skills and knowledge.

Beware the perfect storm

The Employment Policy Foundation (EPF) estimates that 80% of the impending labor shortage will involve skills, not the number of workers available. I have written a number of times about the "perfect storm" related to skills shortages in today's workplace—*a storm that even despite recent recessionary times continues to intensify by the day*

! First, a reminder of what has happened to create this perfect storm:

- There's an accelerating rate of retirement among skilled maintenance and manufacturing workers.
- Fewer and fewer young people are entering careers in maintenance and manufacturing.
- There's very little public-school emphasis on industrial careers or "learning a trade."
- In contrast to the 1960s, '70s and '80s, school shop classes and industrial-technology programs have become almost non-existent.
- Capital assets and infrastructure are deteriorating.
- Our nation has had a need to boost capacity and productivity in refining, manufacturing, mining, transportation, heavy construction, utilities, etc.

For at least the next two decades, we will see our experienced senior workforce ease into retirement either by choice or due to physical limitations. The next generation—*a smaller one, born from 1965 to 1985*

—is already at work. (We know who you are!) These employees, aged 25 to 45, are our future leaders, managers, supervisors, technicians and mechanics. Unfortunately, fewer of them have the maintenance and reliability skills, knowledge and experience that our capital-intensive businesses and industries require to be competitive.

The benefits of older workers

Studies of workers aged 55 and older have shown them to be much safer and less accident-prone on the job than their younger counterparts. Those 64 and older have the lowest number of workplace injuries. They're often more loyal to their employers and will put up with a lot more stress and pressures before they push back. Older workers have fewer avoidable absences and tardiness. They offer extensive skills and knowledge of the equipment, systems, processes and facilities—*things that they have been accumulating over the years through experience and training*. They are often respected by their younger peers and well-equipped to serve as technical leaders, managers, supervisors and on-job coaches. The lower turnover rate and work ethic of older workers are seen as positives by their peers and their supervisors.

On the flip side, as we age, our physical abilities change, which can make it harder for us to do our jobs. Another note to employers-in-need: There are some very simple and inexpensive accommodations for the aging workforce that will improve their productivity and job satisfaction.

Boosting boomer productivity

Studies have shown that due to diminishing eyesight, a 60-year-old worker may need eight times more lighting than a younger worker to see clearly. Hearing declines with age as well—*often due to years of working in high-noise workplaces*. We also get shorter and sometimes stockier, and our muscle strength can decrease 20% by age 60. The ability of older workers to adapt to temperature change is reduced, which makes layered clothing worthwhile.

The quality of workmanship and work-life of older employees can be improved by making some relatively simple changes in the way work is performed and in the work environment. The following accommodations and suggestions for improving productivity, safety, ergonomics and job satisfaction of an aging workforce are not just for employers. Workers, too, should be mindful of these approaches to their jobs:

- Improve walkway, area and task-specific lighting by up to 60%.
- Increase the size of type and color contrast of signs and computer screens.
- Eliminate glare on monitors and inspection windows.
- Use visual cues and signals to augment audible alarms, telephones, etc.
- Reduce noise as much as possible. Enclose your high-noise equipment.
- Improve hearing-protection devices and encourage their use.
- Eliminate heavy lifting. Use lifting devices.
- Avoid overhead reaches in work tasks.
- Eliminate working from long/tall ladders.
- Use shallow-angle stairways to replace ladders.
- Avoid bent-over work postures.
- Avoid working in extreme temperatures.
- Install ground-level chain actuators for opening and closing valves.
- Install leveraged, textured and grip-enhanced handles and knobs.
- Install skid-resistant flooring and stair treads.
- Increase the time allotted for analyzing problems and completing tasks.
- Encourage doing tasks RIGHT rather than FAST, i.e. accurately versus quickly.
- Eliminate clutter.
- Improve the quality of sleep. Minimize changes in schedules that alter sleep patterns.
- Maintain a healthy diet with exercise and physical- strength-training workouts.
- **Employees:** Know your limits. Don't attempt a task that exceeds your abilities (even if you

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"used to be able to do it").

- **Employers:** Modify your retirement and pension plans to enable older workers to remain gainfully and productively employed.

War time

In 1997, McKinsey & Company coined the term "the war for talent" as part of its research related to talent management—*research that continued in 2000 to determine the impact and prescriptive actions to address looming skills shortages*. So here we are, roughly 13 years later, still battling for talent in a huge and diverse war. The term "war" aptly describes what is beginning to happen as some companies, industrial sectors and regions search for skilled and knowledgeable employees, only to come up empty-handed. Some fail in their battles to recruit and retain talented workers because of outdated personnel policies and compensation systems. As we are now learning, there is a difference between a "labor shortage" and a "skills" or "talent" shortage in maintenance and reliability job roles. As a nation we cannot afford to lose THIS war!

Because of the perfect storm, it's become extremely challenging to recruit skilled and knowledgeable maintenance and reliability workers. They're just not out there any more! Thus, the war for talent MUST include an employer-led internal quest for talent to further develop. Knowledge transfer, mentoring, coaching and formal training and qualification processes are just a few of the preparations that employers must put in place sooner rather than later.

Plant performance and reliability will suffer without plant- and equipment-specific skills development. To get this done, focus on the most at-risk and critical equipment and processes first. Develop detailed procedures for every aspect of operations and maintenance by tapping the skills and knowledge of your senior workforce. This IS your key to future competitiveness! Remember: In light of our aging workforce and war for talent, knowledge retention and knowledge transfer in our plants and facilities is a matter of survival! MT

RobertMW2@cs.com

Resources used in preparing this column:

Aging Workforce News at www.agingworkforcenews.com

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Dychtwald, Erickson, and Morrison. *Workforce Crisis: How to Beat the Coming Shortage of Skills and Talent*, Harvard Business School Press, 2006.