

Hire an Older Worker

Community Perspective by Tom Howard

Many of us realize that older workers now comprise a substantial part of our Nation's total population. In fact the *Monthly Labor Review 2005* found that the average age of the US population is increasing and will continue to increase until 2020. In 1990, 40 % of the US population was younger than 35 years old; by 2010, only a third will be younger than 35, and in 2010 the majority of the US population will be 45 years and older.

This increase will change the profile of the US labor force. We will see a dramatic surge of older workers coming into the workforce. This will be caused in part by the average age of workers increasing to 45; pension and health benefit worries, the stock market problems of 2001, and delayed retirements. People will work to an older age driven by these financial concerns or just because they want to. There will be a slow but steady shift over the next several years and by 2020, one in five will be an older worker. This represents a 50% increase over the year 2000, in which 13% of the labor force was made up of the older age group.

If you think this is an unsettling reality, you'd be in the majority. Research shows that most managers approach the notion of supervising workers older than themselves with sizeable anxiety. Age is often referred to as the "subtle bias" and older workers run into it at an alarming frequency. And we have all heard the typical stereotypes against hiring an older worker such as; older workers are absent more frequently, older workers are short term employees, and older workers are less productive than younger workers. But in fact there is no substance to these clichés.

As the program manager for the Mature Alaskans Seeking Skills Training (MASST), I have seen first hand the qualities older workers bring into organizations. They are very dependable and their work ethics won't tolerate unjustified absenteeism. Older workers have made a decision to come back to work and that's just what they are going to do. Mature workers realize they don't have the luxury of years and years to work until retirement. Their jobs are their livelihood for the "Golden Years" and they stick with a job for the long term. They bring a spark to many organizations through their extensive experience. They have been around the block a few times and often their inputs add a competitive zing to an agency. Almost daily I hear comments from organizations that support the MASST program and they tell me how much they love having a mature worker as an employee.

Can we really afford to ignore all these positive attributes older workers have to offer? There really are no valid arguments that older workers perform less effectively in my opinion. I encourage businesses and employers to consider older workers for positions they have. They are great workers and they *want* to work. Hire an Older Worker!

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