

'Golden' Opportunities

Older Workers Can Improve Their Skills

By Symone C. Skrzycki

“

f opportunity doesn't knock, build a door.” – comedian Milton Berle

The growing worker shortage is no laughing matter, but Berle's words hold true for Baby Boomers attempting to boost their workplace skills. A popular avenue? Collaborating with higher education institutions providing on-the-job training and degree/credential programs.

One industry hit particularly hard by the recession is manufacturing.

“There are a lot of people in the state who have had good positions over the years, but now that they're dislocated they're struggling (to find comparable salaries),” asserts Rebecca Nickoli, vice president for workforce and economic development at Ivy Tech Community College. “Many don't have GEDs, good writing skills or any knowledge of computers because they never used one in their job.

“There is lots of basic skills training going on – especially when we're working with big employers, maybe dislocating hundreds of employees at once.”

Employees' efforts to acquire new skills and overcome challenges, of course, extend beyond manufacturing. And, while it's true that businesses often overlook the talents of senior workers (discussed in the opening of this Workforce Wise series in the January/February issue of *BizVoice*®), there are notable exceptions.

Take French Lick Resort, for instance. A memorable conversation on a short shuttle ride made a lasting impression on Katrinka Schroeder.

Behind the wheel was an older gentleman.

“During my 10 to 15 minutes on the shuttle, I learned so much about the history of the resort because he had grown up in the area,” she recalls. Schroeder, program manager for workforce and economic development at Ivy Tech-Bloomington, was visiting the site in preparation for upcoming staff-wide training sessions.

“That's something French Lick Resort management appreciates; there's so much you learn as a guest when you run into these people. I think they're unusual in that they value that.”



Workforce Wise: Up Next

This special series of stories will continue throughout the first five *BizVoice*® issues of 2011. Below are the general topics for upcoming editions:

- **May-June:** best places to work for older adults; employees turned entrepreneurs
- **July-August:** workplace wellness; communities that embrace older residents
- **September-October:** what's next; employer, employee perspectives

Hands-on training is an integral part of adult education offerings at Ivy Tech.



First things first

When it comes to training tactics, there is a theme common for all age groups: Start with the basics.

Ivy Tech, for example, considers each person's abilities in terms of reading, writing and math to help prepare them for job-specific training.

“Many of those people are older workers,” Nickoli explains. “A lot of times, we're either working closely with the company that's letting them go or are working closely with the WorkOne (local offices).”

Seniors also pursue training to “better themselves” at a current employer or to advance elsewhere.

In mapping out goals, individuals are encouraged to ask, “Do I want to stay in this sector? If so, what type of training do I need to become more valuable to an employer? Or, do I want to make a huge change?”

“A lot of people have that conversation

with us,” Nickoli affirms.

Experience Works – a national organization that delivers training and employment assistance to low-income, unemployed individuals age 55 and older – takes a similar approach.

Participants spend up to 12 weeks gaining hands-on experience at non-profit or government training sites after completing a skills assessment covering reading comprehension, interviewing, customer service and more.

Allan Rifkind contacted Experience Works after relocating to Indiana from Texas to be near his daughter, who lives in Rockville. The 57-year-old’s background included customer service, with the majority devoted to ministry work.

Experience Works assigned him to a local sheriff’s office as a greeter and soon after suggested he apply for an open position at Alorica – a California-based global leader in the call center industry. Rifkind now works as a customer care agent at its Terre Haute location.

“It was a culture shock,” he reveals. “It had been so long since I had been in the workplace.”

As Rifkind familiarized himself with the company’s technology through a nine-week training period, he began to feel more comfortable in his new role.

“Everything is computer based. Without the training program, even though I’ve been working with computers since probably 1992, it would have been impossible for me to just start working,” he confides.

Karen Clay, vice president of marketing at Alorica, suggests that call center work is ideal for mature workers, “especially those who may not want to have positions where they’ll have to be on their feet all day, but who have great, experienced people skills.”



Linda Huff, a cook in the banquets department at French Lick Resort, has been with the organization for over 44 years.

Back to school

While some older workers explore training as an avenue to enhance employability, others, like 59-year-old Lindsay Ziegler, “hit the books” to earn a degree.

Ziegler built a career working in information technology (IT) management. Concerned that her employer planned to relocate its IT division, she left her position and enrolled in the global executive MBA program at Duke University. It combines residency and distance learning.

“It’s a very broad-based program,” she comments. “I wanted an understanding of finance. I wanted to learn more about management and leadership. I had been interested (in obtaining an MBA) for a long time, but really didn’t have the time to devote to it, especially with my career.”

Experienced Professionals Share Knowledge With Students

By Symone C. Skrzycki

You’re a high school student eagerly considering future careers. Would you rather read about your options in a book (or online) or spend time with someone who has firsthand experience?

Students at several Northwest Indiana high schools are teaming up with local professionals (most of whom are retired) to explore various occupations and build business networks as part of the Encore Career Advisors initiative.

Launched in August 2010, the AmeriCorps program draws upon members’ experience in fields such as banking, marketing and management. During the year-long project, they will serve as informal mentors. Fourteen high schools and 11 volunteers are participating.

“Volunteers spend time in the school every week,” explains Linda Woloshansky, president and CEO of The Center of Workforce Innovations, which is leading the program. “We’ve got individuals who are talking to all of the students about careers and career interests, and sharing

all types of ideas about what their futures could hold. We’ve got other folks who are working on finding internships for the students, (and) we’ve got some of the career advisors who are really preparing students for their college experiences.”

She says the emphasis is on making connections and sharing information, “bringing people in (to the schools) and taking the kids into businesses.

“I think the key to all of this is that these advisors all have various years of experience outside the educational world,” Woloshansky asserts. “We’re very fortunate that they’re able to share their skill sets, experiences and career networks with students.”

Much of the training relates to work ethics.

“It’s all about their future employment and what path they need to take,” Woloshansky stresses.

Resource: Linda Woloshansky, The Center of Workforce Innovations, at www.innovativeworkforce.com



According to a spring 2009 survey, older students (ages 45 to 79) represented 8.7% of the total Ivy Tech student population.

Recession Realigns Retirement Realities

The Great Recession of 2008-2009, as it has come to be known, certainly wasn't kind to individuals and their retirement plans. That's especially true for older workers.

A late 2010 study released by Nyhart, the nation's largest independent actuarial and employee benefits consulting company, focused on 401(k)s and retirement readiness. It contains these sobering nuggets:

- 81% of adults 18 or older will not be able to afford to retire by the age of 65
- Employees above the age of 55 on average need to contribute more than 45% of income going forward to retire by the age of 65
- Employees between ages 45 and 55 must contribute on average 19% to make retirement possible by 65
- The average employee relying on the 401(k) as a primary retirement vehicle will not be able to retire until 73 years of age

The study notes that "employees who are 65+ were most dramatically impacted by the economic recession and should expect to work 10 or more years to afford retirement unless they significantly increase their percent of income contribution immediately."

Finance 101 (and the Nyhart study), of course, tells us that early contributions and the power of compounding interest are critical to meeting retirement goals. Again, this eye-opener from Nyhart: "If employees under the age of 30 increased their 401(k) contribution by just 4%, twice as many would be able to retire at the age of 65."

That doesn't help today's older workers, including many who find themselves seeking the education and/or training to remain in the workforce – whether out of desire or necessity.

Resource: Nyhart, 401(k) Retirement Readiness Study, at www.nyhart.com

"It's going to be a big shift. (At the same time), what I'm learning I believe I can combine with my IT experience."

While Ziegler embraces distance learning, the majority of older students who took part in a survey at Ivy Tech a few years ago had mixed feelings about that education option.

"It solved their desire for things to be flexible, but they were a little put off by the technology requirements," Nickoli observes. "I would say some of the trepidation has to do with technology, unless they had used it in their job before."

The statewide survey of Ivy Tech students (ages 45 and above), published in 2009, found that the No. 1 reason for attending college was to change careers.

Ability to adapt

Multi-million dollar renovations at French Lick Resort prompted employees to receive an upgrade of their own. The focus: customer service training. Lessons centered on professionalism, teamwork, problem solving and guest interaction. Computer skills were heavily emphasized.

Employees over age 60 comprise nearly 9% of the workforce. Among them are 32 workers who are at least 70 years old. Two members of the banquet staff joined the organization as teenagers and have 93 years of combined service. A pastry cook in his early 70s has been with the company for nearly 30 years.

Older workers hold positions ranging from stewarding and housekeeping to banquet servers, bell staff and transportation drivers.

"We put a lot of effort into training people over age 50," Ivy Tech's Schroeder remarks. "Many didn't have computer skills. We did a lot of hands-on training."

"One of the things I think was phenomenal was that (management) appreciated the experience of people who had been at the resort for many, many years," she declares. "Instead of hiring all new employees, they looked at what they could do to develop the skills of the older workforce along with the younger workforce."

Ivy Tech conducted additional training in 2009.

The focus, Schroeder explains, was, "Now that the resort is up and running, how do you improve yourself even further?"

According to Nickoli, an ongoing commitment to improvement goes both ways, as Ivy Tech continuously strives to better serve all of its students – including the aging population.

"We've paid attention to our older students, and we like to think that we're meeting their needs," Nickoli stresses, "but we're always listening if they say we're not in some way. It's such an important thing for them to believe they have a supportive environment to study in and that there will be an outcome at the end of it."

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Rebecca Nickoli and Katrinka Schroeder, Ivy Tech Community College, at www.ivytech.edu

Experience Works at www.experienceworks.org

French Lick Resort at www.frenchlick.com