

Back in the Game

Programs in Place to Assist Mature Workers

By Matt L. Ottinger

Today's work environment, in many instances, barely resembles that of years gone by. That doesn't mean employees have less of a desire to remain on the job. Perceived norms, however, have yet to catch up with those realities.

"Our country is set up on a paradigm that has shifted, but we haven't changed our way of thinking to accommodate it," contends Roger Feldhaus, executive director of the Tecumseh Area Partnership (TAP), a Lafayette-based workforce intermediary that provides enhancement and resources to improve economic development.

He says many are falsely expected to work 35 to 40 years and retire in their mid-60s, clearing the way for the next generation.

"Our public retirement system and corporations and smaller employers set up their personnel management structures based on those assumptions," he notes. "However, what we're finding is that's not what's happening. People want to stay longer, either because they'd rather work than pursue leisure activity, or they've lost significant retirement savings and need to work longer than they'd planned."

Feldhaus believes great opportunity exists for older workers with relevant skills, which is why TAP strives to help those individuals prepare for an extended stay in the workforce.

Feldhaus is also operator for the Region 4 Workforce Board (12 counties focused around Lafayette and Kokomo) and oversees the Aging Workforce Initiative (AWI) and Maturity Matters program to aid older workers (the programs are funded by a grant from the Department of Labor). The region includes a workforce of roughly 250,000.

Addressing the issues

According to Feldhaus, TAP conducted a study in 2009 concluding that older workers were an underdeveloped resource in the region. He says efforts have since catered to those employees to keep them in the workforce, noting that some employers – especially in the manufacturing sector – expressed concerns about the void when those skilled workers retire.

"We wanted to recognize their value and encourage them to remain in the workforce longer than they initially intended to," he says, "and work with employers to make it easier for them (older workers) to remain by modifying work schedules, job sharing and being used in mentoring or training capacities so newer employees could be shadowed."

Another component is working with human resources professionals so they're aware of intergenerational workforce issues and understand the differences between older and younger workers.

"A main (difference) is communication," notes Susie Perkins, AWI program manager. "Many mature and aging workers have learned to communicate on the job through face to face interaction or meetings, so communicating through our media that we now embrace – Internet, inter-office (instant messaging) and social networks – have not been a part of their work experience."

Making the connections

Bridging such gaps are key components in the Connecting Generations seminar offered by ETI Performance Improvement, an Indianapolis-based consulting agency and training provider.

"One glaring difference is that the older generation tends to have a loyalty to organizations; sometimes it can be a blind loyalty," offers ETI consultant Lisa Rike. "Sometimes they feel like, 'I've been in this organization for 40 years – because that's what I do. That's what my parents did.'"

ETI Performance Improvement offers seminars and consulting on intergenerational relations to companies around the country and beyond.



She says the younger generation needs to have a variety of needs served, or they are more likely to leave the organization.

"They're more likely to ask, 'What does my job enable me to do outside of work to maintain a work/life balance?'" Rike qualifies. "I'm a Baby Boomer and I live to work; that really defines me. Younger generations work to live."

Perkins explains that with training to fill in knowledge gaps, some older workers become ideal candidates for positions that vary from their previous careers.

"Many mature workers have for so long thought about job title and getting the job done, they didn't think about skills they developed along the way that might be transferable to other jobs in the region," she offers. "As part of this, we help them identify those marketable skills."

She contends there can be a hesitation among degreed older workers to pursue further training in their fields, which is a manner of thinking that TAP strives to change.

"People may be reluctant to take a course like green engineering, for example, to update their skills," Perkins asserts. "In the older generation, when you got a degree, the concept was you were set for life. They have to overcome that barrier."

Rike adds that technological training is critical, but there is a false perception that older workers are averse to learning new technology.

On course

TAP offers many programs and resources, including a stipend internship.

"The idea of a mature intern is rather new; (people typically) think of the traditional student coming in at little or no pay during summer," Perkins reports. "What we're promoting to employers is a chance to have a worker with valuable experience. You can use this time to train the person for a specific job free of charge."

The internship is free to the employer. AWI pays the individual at market rates for up to three months on the job.

Additionally, AWI financially provides training support for courses that result in credentials in advanced manufacturing technology, health care services, and transportation and logistics.

"Those are the areas in our previous studies that are most



Seminars and educational events through various groups help employer representatives learn about generational differences, allowing them to take that knowledge back to their offices.

likely to have jobs in this region," Perkins states. "So we're willing to help underwrite any training in those areas."

TAP also provides a Career Hub, allowing mature workers a space to gather and offer each other support in their search.

"We try to offer a 'Cheers' without alcohol," she relays. "We also bring in speakers and provide job leads and resumé training. The most important part is interacting with each other and giving moral support. When a mature worker is laid off, it takes that person almost twice as long to find another job as someone not in that age bracket (55 and older)."

ETI's Connecting Generations course features a 30-minute webinar focused on improving communication and minimizing intergenerational conflicts. The company will also go on-site to consult, having traveled as far as Switzerland to provide assistance.

"We can bring to an organization anything it needs," Rike notes. "(Training) can be customized. We'll always ask, 'What are you trying to gain and in what context? Are you hiring a lot of millennials?'"

She explains that understanding the framework of a company's workforce enhancement efforts is imperative, and what's most critical is that all generations learn to work together. ETI workshops on re-entering the workforce have included participants up to 82 years of age.

"For the first time in history, we have four generations in the workplace," Rike adds. "In a few years, we'll have five."

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Roger Feldhaus and Susie Perkins, Tecumseh Area Partnership, at www.maturity matters.org

Lisa Rike, ETI Performance Improvement, at www.etindy.com

Indiana's Older Workers

- By 2030, 28.6% of Indiana's population will be age 55 and over, compared to 22.4% in 2005
- 33% of Hoosiers age 55 and over are part of Indiana's labor force, ranking Indiana 22nd of the 50 states
- Indiana ranks 42nd in economic contribution by total personal income of people over age 55
- Indiana ranks 46th with only 11% of its 65+ population holding a bachelor's degree or higher and ranks 42nd for residents age 55-79 in high-skill occupations
- Only 0.3% of older Hoosiers pursue advanced training or college-level education, placing Indiana last among the states

Source: Gray Matters I report (2006), from The Center of Aging and Community at the University of Indianapolis