

## The Aging Maintenance Workforce and the War for Talent

Well, here it is! We have just stepped into the era of the aging Baby Boom Generation. For the next two decades, this generation will signal an unprecedented growth of older workers and retirees in the United States 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 the 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? Employers and older workers must face new challenges head on and make the right decisions for there is no turning back.

### Baby Boomers

Ok, I admit it: I am an aging Baby Boomer. Those of us born between 1946 and 1964 make up the largest generation, the largest workforce we have ever seen. This post World War II generation was raised and educated in a system and an economy that had much to offer. We learned and mastered skills that gave our nation and industry a huge competitive edge. We mastered advanced technologies in a wide variety of businesses and industries. We developed a powerful work ethic, learned from our parents, and became a central part of the most productive workforce in the world. But we subtly allowed the decline of the very values and programs that gave us our skills, our knowledge, and our enthusiasm for working with our hands and our ingenuity – public school career and vocational-technical education programs.

Now, our capital-intensive industries, our manufacturing plants, our utilities, buildings, and infrastructure are beginning to show signs of aging, of premature deterioration. This decline should not be ignored or permitted. We are already seeing signs of accelerated deterioration, failures, and errors in the form of bridge failures, tower cranes collapsing, pipeline leaks and failures, plant explosions, off-shore drilling accidents, aircraft maintenance issues, power distribution failures, and ever-increasing unplanned downtime of mission-critical assets in our plants, facilities, and utilities.

There is a critical need for the aging Baby Boomers in maintenance and manufacturing. And 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 they need the healthcare benefits. **Note to employers-in-need: Recognize the value of the “older workers,” retain them, and encourage their value-adding skills and knowledge.**

### Manpower, Skills Shortages & a Perfect Storm

The Employment Policy Foundation (EPF) estimates that 80 percent 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 on today's workplace. And that that storm is intensifying! First, here's a reminder of what has happened to create this perfect storm:

- An accelerating retirement of skilled maintenance and manufacturing workers
- Fewer and fewer young people entering careers in maintenance and manufacturing
- Very little public school emphasis on learning a trade or industrial careers
- School shop classes and industrial technology programs are virtually non-existent compared to the 1960s, '70s and '80s.
- Deteriorating capital assets and infrastructure
- Our nation's need to boost capacity and productivity in manufacturing, mining, transportation, heavy construction, utilities, refineries, etc.

For the next two decades and possibly longer, we will see the experienced, senior workforce ease into retirement by choice or due to physical limitations. The next generation (born 1965 to 1985) is a smaller generation and is already at work. (We know who you are!) These employees between 25 and 45 years old are our future leaders, supervisors, managers, 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 Benefit of Older Workers in Today's Workplace**

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

But, as we age our physical abilities change and some times work becomes more difficult. **Note to the employers-in-need: There are some very simple and inexpensive accommodations for the aging workforce that will improve their productivity and their job satisfaction.**

### **Workplace Changes to Boost Productivity**

The eyesight of a worker age 60 diminishes, and eight times more lighting is needed to see clearly, according to studies. Hearing declines often result from years of working in high-noise workplaces. We also get shorter and sometimes stockier, and our muscle strength decreases by about 20 percent by age 60. The ability of older workers to adapt to temperature change is reduced which makes layered clothing worthwhile.

The employer as well as the aging worker can improve their quality of workmanship and their quality of work life by making some relatively simple changes in the way work is performed and in the work environment. Here is a list of accommodations and suggestions for improving productivity, safety, ergonomics and job satisfaction of an aging workforce:

- Improve walkway, area, and task-specific lighting by up to 60 percent.
- Increase size of type and color contrast of signs and of 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 high-noise equipment.
- Improve hearing protection devices and their use.
- Eliminate heavy lifting. Use lifting devices.
- Avoid overhead, reaching work tasks.
- Eliminate working from long 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 leverage, textured, and grip-enhanced handles and knobs.

- Install skid-resistant flooring and stair treads.
- Increase time allotted for analyzing problems and completing tasks.
- Encourage doing tasks right rather than fast (accuracy versus speed).
- 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 personal limits. Don't attempt tasks that exceed your abilities (even if you "used to be able to do it").
- Employers: Modify retirement and pension plans to enable older workers to remain gainfully and productively employed.

### **The War for Talent**

In 1997, McKinsey & Company coined the term "the war for talent" as part of their research related to talent management. Their research continued in 2000 to determine the impact and prescriptive actions to address looming skills shortages. Here we are some 13 years later, and we are 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 has become extremely challenging to recruit skilled and knowledgeable maintenance and reliability workers. They're not out there any more! So, 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. 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 the senior workforce. This is your key to future competitiveness! Knowledge retention and knowledge transfer in our plants and facilities is a matter of survival because of the aging of our workforce and the war for talent.

### **Resources used in preparing this column:**

- *Aging Workforce News* at [www.agingworkforcenews.com](http://www.agingworkforcenews.com)
- Dychtwald, Erickson, and Morrison: *Workforce Crisis: How to beat the coming shortage of skills and talent*, 2006. Harvard Business School Press.

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