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Hiring older workers

Stop believing the myths about older workers. they're experienced, reliable — and affordable

By **Susanne Baille-Ruder**
PROFIT, December 2004

Richard Evin couldn't be happier. For 13 years, his head shipper has delivered dependable results, tossing boxes with the energy of a young man and earning rave reviews for his customer service. But this star employee is no spring chicken-Israel Levine is 76. Evin, president of Evin Industries Ltd., a uniform manufacturer in Montreal, didn't think twice about hiring the then-63-year-old with 40-odd years of industry experience. Evin says ignoring a candidate because of age "is like seeing a man in his prime going out into the pasture."

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Finding great staff is tough. So why do so many employers overlook the 50-plus set at hiring time? Often, it's because they believe the many myths that surround older workers. Subscribe to such misconceptions, and you, too, will miss out on valuable talent. As boomers start to retire, we may well be headed for an unprecedented human-resources crisis. Statistics Canada says the qualified workforce will soon shrink dramatically, leaving fewer young workers to fill the gap. Yet downsizing and early- or mandatory-retirement packages are still common.

Ten years ago, Norman Abbott was downsized at age 55. Financially unable to retire and feeling he still had a lot to offer, he began job hunting, but was rejected for jobs he was well qualified for. "Age discrimination was alive and well, that was obvious," he says. So he

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founded OE Quality Friction Inc., a Mississauga, Ont.-based manufacturer of brake pads. Now 65, Abbott has run the 120-employee firm for seven years, growing it by about 55% a year.

He sees the value of older workers-especially since hiring a 60-year-old to take over the front office. After employing a string of unreliable office staff, he needed someone energetic and self-motivated-whom he found through Seniors 4 Business, a Toronto-based employment agency. That was a year ago. "She's still here and doing a great job for us," says Abbott. Now she's set to take over accounts payable, a task previously outsourced.

Why don't more employers leverage the skills that mature workers can bring? Perceptions about older workers need correcting, says Barry Witkin, founder of Toronto-based Prime50 Employment Services:

Myth No. 1: Older workers are hard to train. Reality: "Seasoned employees are accustomed to changing work philosophies and environments, and understand the importance of updating their skills, image and education," says Witkin. "They tend to have the degrees required, either recently acquired or updated, and offer hands-on knowledge that is more valuable than textbook learning."

Myth No. 2: You'll pay more for their experience. Reality: Witkin's firm surveyed 900 50-plus managerial-level job seekers and found 82% would take a pay cut of as much as 25% of previous earnings, and 78% would work on contract without benefits.

Myth No. 3: Older workers are sick more often. Reality: Younger workers, especially those with young children, take more sick days, reports Witkin. Today's older workers also plan to stick around longer than traditional retirement age and tend to stay at one company longer than young workers.

Firms big and small appreciate grey power. RBC Financial Group's Global Banking Service Centre (GBSC) recruits people in and close to retirement from across RBC to work part-time or on special projects. This practice recently won the firm a Best Employers for 50-Plus Canadians Award by Canada's Association for the Fifty-Plus. GBSC is loaded with best practices for leveraging older workers that can be used in firms of any size. It tries to accommodate workers who request part-time, full-time, seasonal employment or flex hours. It provides education opportunities. It offers resources to overcome physical limitations, such as special chairs or equipment. And it uses older workers as mentors to help train less experienced staff.

Your biggest challenge in hiring older workers might be battling younger workers' negative perceptions about seniors and handling generational conflicts, which may be on the rise, says a recent poll of human-resources professionals. Age-bias training isn't widely available yet, so helping managers appreciate the value of older workers will be up to you or your HR director.

Richard Evin, for one, believes that grey-haired workers are an opportunity not to be overlooked. "That's not to say you can't make a mistake and hire the wrong person," he says. "But isn't that the case whether you're hiring someone who's 70, 60, 30 or 20?"

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