

The Human Element...

A SPECIAL FEATURE FROM HRP AO

HUMAN RESOURCES PROFESSIONALS ASSOCIATION OF ONTARIO

Demographic change will favour older workers



"Human Resources Professionals Association of Ontario (HRPAO) shapes organizational excellence. Our vision is to be the premier HR association in Canada sought out for knowledge, innovation and leadership"

Fifty-seven year-old John Doe may soon find himself a winner in the job-seeking race instead of being a traditional underdog, thanks to changing demographics.

Experts point to a huge demographic change in the workplace — a shortage of young people in the workforce, due to a decline in the birthrate since 1965. This shortage will have to be filled in large part by skilled and experienced people 50 years of age and older. However, most firms presently have no strategies for recruiting people in this age bracket. A recent survey of U.S. employers by the Society for Human Resource Management found that 65 percent did not actively recruit older workers.

In the eyes of many 50+ Canadians, job hunting and age discrimination go hand in hand. Findings from several Canadian polls show that 50 percent of respondents have experienced age discrimination while 64 percent said that on at least one occasion, discrimination was a primary or contributing reason for being turned down for a position.

In actual fact, there are many compelling reasons why older workers do make excellent job candidates. According to Human Resources and Social Development Canada, there is no significant difference between the job performance of older and younger workers. Dispelling the myth that older workers demand too much money, is the fact that

more than 78 percent of 50+ jobseekers surveyed in Ontario say they're prepared to take a pay cut and work on contract with no benefits and pension obligations.

Once on the job, older workers also have a good performance record. A Harris poll of 774 corporate human resources directors showed that 80 percent think that employees ages 55 and up have less turnover than younger ones. Seventy-one percent of the same directors said employees 55 and up learn new skills as well as younger ones.

Employers have started to recognize the positive attributes of older workers. General Electric and Prudential Insurance are making special accommodations to retain older workers and some firms such as The Royal Bank, have launched efforts to bring back their own retirees for special projects and to act as mentors to help train less experienced staff.

Deborah Russell, Director of Economic Security for the AARP, the largest seniors advocacy group in the United States, says many companies are changing their policies and procedures to attract and retain older workers by offering them more flexible work options and helping them to better balance work with family life. Other firms are adopting the practice of phased retirement where employees stay on and scale back their work hours. This allows employers to keep experienced, skilled employees longer and helps them make the transition to full retirement easier.

The need for and the value of older workers has attracted the attention of Toronto-based Prime50 Employment Services, the first such service to specialize in matching people over 50 years of age with new employers and jobs.

Prime50 President Barry Witkin told delegates at last year's Annual Conference of the Human Resources Professionals of Ontario that awareness of the demographic change and the value of older workers is



Prime50 President Barry Witkin (left) and Bill Hozy of Workforce Solutions plan career seminars for 50+ job seekers. Labour experts forecast an increasing demand for older workers.

beginning to build.

"Employers are starting to place more importance on experience. They're realizing that to hire inexperienced, less costly people and to spend the time to train and educate them with the risk of them leaving early, may not always be the best course of action. Employers will begin turning to experienced personnel, pay more but know their payback is faster and this will auger well for the 50+ age group."

Another advocate for change is The British North American Committee (BNAC), a group of business leaders, union officials and academics. In their report, Aging Populations and the Workforce, written by William Robson of the C.D. Howe Institute (Canada) for the BNAC, the committee concluded that: "Employers who tend to focus on recruiting and retraining younger workers

while letting older ones go should examine the longer term implications of their actions."

"Human resources recruitment practices," the committee said, "need to change to attract older workers and that employers should avoid practices that inappropriately or inadvertently screen out older job candidates. At the same time, labour markets must be flexible so that fixed costs and other regulations do not deter employers from hiring older workers." The study is recognized by Canadian business leaders from a wide range of companies that includes Inco, Bombardier, The Bank of Nova Scotia and Ontario Power Generation.

For more information on this issue log on to the HRP AO web site at www.hrpaio.org and the Knowledge Centre, an excellent source of HR and business background studies.

Balance, flexibility and respect key to employee retention in small firms

When it comes to attracting, retaining and supporting employees, it's often the less tangible things that count. Keeping employees happy and productive can be done in even the smaller firms and often for very little money.

Toronto-based Carswell Professional Publishing (a division of Thomson Canada Ltd.) and White Oaks Conference Resort and Spa in Niagara-on-the-Lake are two cases in point. Both are on this year's Top Fifty Employers in Canada list, compiled by the Report on Business magazine. An organization only earns a place on the list if its employees think it's a great place to work.

Making the workplace great is a question of balance, according to Barbara Conway, Vice-President of Human Resources at Carswell. "We strive to be professional yet friendly, hard working yet fun, and focused yet flexible," explains Conway, who has been with the information and solutions provider for twelve years.

White Oaks, with its 220 hotel rooms, conference centre, two restaurants, spa and 5,000-member fitness facility is a pure service-based business. "It's the positive attitude of our employees towards their work and the way they interact with guests that makes White Oaks a quality place," explains Julia Sebastian, Manager of Human Resources. "Our philosophy is to create a balanced approach to work — to create the most fair work environment possible for all employees, yet be very realistic in our goals and objectives."

When it comes to flexibility, Carswell employees enjoy the option of working at home and setting their own hours. "The

notion of flexible working hours stems in large part from a value of trust," says Conway. "Employers have to ask themselves do we want our employees to be productive or do we just want to look at the time they're clocking?"

At White Oaks, employees are given ample leeway to take time off for family matters and the whole facility shuts down over Christmas. "We think it's very important that families can be together at that special time of year," says Sebastian. "It's been our policy for 26 years."

Flexibility is Number One on an employee's want list, according to the Guelph-based Centre for Families, Work and Well-Being. Employees who enjoy flexible work arrangements have lower absenteeism and show greater motivation and initiative on the job. As well, flexible work arrangements are related to higher levels of job satisfaction, according to the Centre. Flexible work arrangements can also include compressed work weeks, job-sharing and reduced hours.

Both firms place a very high value on employee recognition, a key ingredient to fostering high morale and productivity. Carswell has both formal and informal recognition programs. Three formal ones provide managers with tools and funding to recognize employees who perform above and beyond normal expectations.

One of the programs, called the VIP Program (Very Important Peer) lets employees recognize the accomplishments of each other with a small gift (there were 900 of them last year). Informal programs include ice cream truck visits to the company parking lot and The Top 50 Employers honour was

celebrated with an afternoon at the movies.

On each anniversary of their hiring, White Oaks employees enjoy a complementary stay in the hotel with breakfast for two at the facility's award-winning restaurant. They also get a membership at the gym which White Oaks offers to promote employee health and wellness.

Both Conway and Sebastian agree that making the workplace a great one has to start at the top of the company and work its way down. In Conway's words, "Carswell's senior management team, working with employees, set out on a journey to create a great place to work by surveying employee groups first to find out what they thought about work. We went back to them to share the results and to ask them what we as a

company could do to make things better. From those discussions we made a 'Top Five' list and it became the basis for some of our programs."

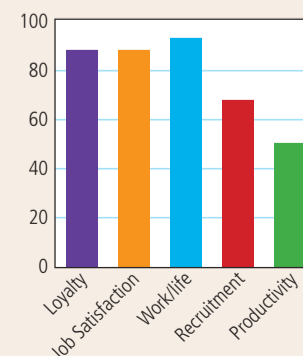
Sebastian credits the COO's positive attitude towards employees that makes the difference. "He knows everyone's name and a little bit about each one of them. He walks the floor and asks how things are going and he's very accessible to everybody. As well, our management team take a very hands-on and open door approach to their work," she says.

As it turns out, Carswell has booked facilities at White Oaks on several occasions and gives the conference-resort a high approval rating. When it comes to top employers, it really takes one to know one!

Common Practices in Employee-Friendly Firms

- A wide range of creative, flexible practices
- Supportive manager attitudes
- Mutual employer/employee flexibility
- Relationships based on trust over policy
- Supportive practices as the "right" thing to do

Perceived Benefits of Flexible Work Hours



SOURCE: Survey of 2,200 small businesses owners by The Centre for Families, Work & Well-Being (2000)