

■ RICK BRIMEYER

In praise of older workers

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of workers 55 to 64 years old currently working is almost 4 percent higher than it was prior to the Great Recession. The number of 65 and older workers is also up, but under 1 percent. Meanwhile, the number of younger workers is still trying to recover to pre-recession employment levels with 35 to 44 year-old workers down 3.6 percent and 45 to 54-year-olds down 2.3 percent.

Some of the growth of older workers can be explained by the huge Baby Boomer pool holding on to their jobs and simply aging into the 55+ category over the past seven years. In addition, Boomers are tending to work longer than prior generations, due to improved health, longer life expectancies, fewer traditional pension plans and perhaps less-than-stellar retirement planning.

This demographic phenomenon is being used to explain various economic trends:

- Tepid employment growth and underemployment among younger workers.
- Stagnant wages due to the larger labor pool and older workers being less likely to leave a job for higher pay.
- Continued low bond yields despite the Fed reducing its aggressive bond buying program as older investors pick up the slack in the bond market as a means of paring risk in their portfolios.

The intent of this column, however, is not to debate the impact of senior workers on the economy. Rather, it is to discuss the intangibles which they can bring to your work team.

Too often, especially in organizations where pay

is calculated primarily as a function of seniority, management sees experienced workers' premium pay as a prime target for cost cutting. That may be justified in cases where a low-performance issue has been allowed to fester for years or if someone is coasting towards retirement. But it's a mistake in cases where highly experienced employees are still engaged, learning and performing.

By definition, experienced workers bring experience. They've ate, slept, lived and dreamed about the technical aspects of the job. They are able to differentiate between the few vital aspects needed to make things run smoothly and all the myriad of other factors which are simply noise.

Long-term employees personify loyalty. As young employees attend the 25-year work anniversary for an admired co-worker they're likely to be thinking, "Wow! She's been working here longer than I've been alive. She's talented and certainly has other options. I made a good decision by joining this organization."

Senior employees also bring perspective. During the tumultuous times of my career, I searched out respected, gray-haired colleagues to help make sense of things. Their experience with inevitable economic cycles, career highs and lows was invaluable in helping me see the bigger picture.



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Thus, experienced employees can also bring a sense of stability to the team. They tend to ride a smoother roller coaster than their younger counterparts. That steadiness and consistency can be a welcome attribute in a work environment that is constantly changing.

Here's a few thoughts for my fellow Boomers on how to be that valuable resource for younger workers:

- When seeking advice, others usually aren't looking for an answer. Rather, they're looking for someone to listen and ask probing questions they haven't yet considered.

- While younger workers may appreciate your ability to learn from the past, they don't need you to replay it. Share the lessons, not the detailed war stories.

- Keep learning and applying new knowledge. You're not likely to be sought out if you're still talking about "the plant expansion project that I led back in '85."

As 2014 grows long in the tooth, it seems an appropriate time to personally recognize those senior co-workers that have played a significant role in your career or within your organization through their dedicated service.

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