

Successful Business Owners Weigh in on How to Keep Older Employees in Workforce

A March 5, 2007 article in the *L.A. Times* entitled "U.S. Looking for Ways to Retain Older Workers" highlights a critical issue not just for employers, but for our country's economic welfare. The article explains that recent expert testimony before the U.S. Senate's Special Committee on Aging concluded that "A wave of retiring workers will weigh down U.S. economic growth in the coming years, unless ... employers take steps to hang on to more older employees."

In response, the article says, the chairman of the committee has introduced legislation that would give employers a tax credit for putting into place flexible scheduling that would enable older workers to stay in the workplace and maintain their benefits. Javon Bea, an executive at a network of medical facilities in Illinois and Wisconsin, thinks this is a step in the right direction. "I think that the mature workers can actually relate to [our] patients better than our more impatient, younger workers," he told the *Times*. "As a business ... we benefit."

With this issue on the minds of everyone from business owners and leaders to Al Gore – who in his Academy Award-winning documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth," warns that the world is set to swell in population from two billion to around nine billion people in the next 40 to 50 years – we decided to survey owners and leaders of successful small businesses, our Best Bosses. Here are a few of their thoughts on best practices for attracting and retaining mature employees.

Demographers predict an impending shortage of employees in traditional age ranges. A number of economic forces are converging to encourage workers to extend their years or employment. Are either of these factors affecting your business? If so, how?

2006 Best Boss Richard Caturano, President, Vitale, Caturano & Company (marketing services): Yes. There are a number of Baby Boomer CPAs approaching retirement, so the shortage of CPAs becomes more acute.

2006 Best Boss Timothy P. Keenan, President and Founder, High Performance Technologies, Inc. (information technology): We provide our services predominantly to the federal government and see the Baby Boomer retirement wave happening. This has created a significant change in our business, as the government can no longer staff their own positions and key expertise is retiring. Our firm is being asked to step into the breach and fill these needs.

President of a Midwest-based management and technology consulting firm: No. The technology industry is constantly changing. Therefore, the technology we work with [was developed] within the last 10 years and typically our employees are younger working on the ever-changing technologies. The average age of our employees would be mid 30s.

Does your organization have a particular interest in hiring "mature" employees? If so, what measures do you have in place to do so?

2005 Best Boss Trish Karter, President, Dancing Deer Baking Co. (consumer goods): We *always* look for maturity – in many interpretations. Typically in the professional staff we, as a growing and small company, have a hard time hiring "gray hair" because we can't afford it. But we value wisdom and experience. We often substitute raw potential.

Keenan: Yes, we do. We are looking at job sharing and specialty positions to account for [this] personnel need for less hours and more flexibility.

What do you see as the benefits that mature employees offer your organization?

2004 Best Boss Georgia Berner, President and CEO, Berner International Corp. (manufacturing): Skills, experience, wisdom. They bring an understanding of how people work together, and of how to get things done. I would say that their emotional intelligence level is much higher than that of younger employees. We try to avoid hiring individuals who are rigid and not open to new ideas – who have their minds made up before they walk in the door. We find that this mindset is ageless – [it can be found in employees who are] 20 years old or 60 years old.

2006 Best Boss Megan Glasheen, Managing Member, Reno & Cavanaugh, PLLC (professional services): The "mature" workers that we have employed have always been flexible and creative thinkers.

Keenan: Their experience base is unquestioned and it offers my workforce ready access to [a] knowledge base.