

## Workers About 55

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I'm a contractor, with a growing business. This is, of course, our busy season, and I'm looking to add to my field crew. I think I will also need someone with experience to be my eyes and ears in the field. But I'm not sure I need someone full time, yet. I know need someone to help my newer, less experienced people build their skills on the job. Someone had suggested I look for an older, semi-retired person. What do you think?

This question comes from a home builder, who expects to have 1-2 more crews in the field this year, as compared to last year. As he expands his operation this summer, he'll be challenged with the need to supervise and ensure the quality of the work, while bringing on several new employees. He will have to sort out who he can count on to deliver his standards, and who needs help. And, he is probably going to need to add one supervisor/trainer, although I agree, he may not need someone full time, and will probably have to think about laying that person off in the winter, if business drops off as usual.

Where to look? What to look for? Let's talk about the advantages of our aging workforce, and how this owner might put those advantages to work in his business.

We all know that age discrimination is illegal. It is not

appropriate to search for an employee based on demographics such as age or sex. However, it is perfectly appropriate to search for an employee based on experience and demonstrated fit to the job. So, let's start by describing the job we're looking to fill.

We're talking about a part time job, probably 20 – 30 hours / week. The work hours need to flex, from starting early and ending early when a job is kicked off, to starting late and ending once the day's work has been fully inspected. This position is all about skill and experience working in the construction field, managing a variety of sub contractors and trades people. This means that the candidate has to know what constitutes good work, based on having worked in the field, trained on the job, with a track record of delivering a high standard of quality in construction.

Our ideal candidate has to have experience scheduling crews, monitoring productivity, and training personnel to work quickly and accurately. Since the candidate won't be directly managing each crew, but rather overseeing the output of all crews, he or she will have to have experience as a mentor or teacher. Finally, our ideal candidate will have to have computer skills, since much of the job tracking and analysis in today's work takes place on

computers. Finally, our candidate will have to be okay with a potential layoff in the winter.

Sounds like a hard job to fill? Not so hard. In fact, there are many candidates who might fit the bill. I'll bet our business owner will find exactly what he needs.

My answer to our business owner's question, whether he look for someone who is semi-retired, is yes! Drop the word, "older". You can't use it, you can't refer to age. You can look for someone who is more likely to be at the late stage of his or her career. You can advertise for someone who is both experienced and looking for part time work. Look for someone who wants to keep his or her hand in the game, while having the time flexibility to pursue personal interests.

There are lots of ways to describe experienced workers at the end stage of their careers. Here are some descriptions that are worth considering: strong work ethic, maturity, leadership, broad perspective, experienced, practical, loyal, detail oriented and reliable. Older workers have honed their skills over a lifetime of work, and know what it means to show up on time, do a good job, and respect their peers. These attributes are ideal for what our business owner is looking for – someone to oversee and develop his crews, working

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hand in hand with each crew supervisor.

Why would an older person consider such an opportunity? Many people in our workforce have crossed into new territory. They aren't ready to retire completely, but they do want to have more flexibility to travel, visit with family and friends, pursue personal interests. The grind of a 40+ hour work week is no longer attractive, or necessary, as they start to transition into retirement.

At the same time, many of the people in our workforce who are approaching, or have crossed over into senior citizen status, are not financially or emotionally ready to retire completely. They recognize that they may have another 30+ years to live. They are healthy, active, and intellectually competent. And they are not interested in devoting 365 days/ year to perfecting a tennis or golf game, or pursuing other leisure activities full time.

Seniors, in general, are used to working hard, being productive contributors to our society. In fact, they have been participants in one of the biggest productivity booms our economy has experienced. They have participated in the transition from manual tracking, hierarchy bound, strict chain-of-command, to a flattened, empowered, computer literate workforce. That is a wealth of experience that can be tapped into, which can

become a competitive advantage for the business owners of the next generation.

What does the research say about the advantages of employing seniors? Employing senior citizens will make it easier to solve the problems of Social Security and Medicare. Employing seniors keeps people on the contributing side of the ledger, paying taxes to fund Social Security and Medicare. Seniors who remain active and productive in the workforce, are likely to have fewer financial demands for retirement support. Medical costs are often supported by employers through company insurance plans, rather than placed solely on the Medicare system and other public services. And, it is generally found that people who remain active and productive slow their pace of physical and mental deterioration which translates into lower costs for society at large.

Creating opportunities for seniors to work means we can fill upcoming gaps in our workforce. For example, did you know that 1/2 of the federal civilian workforce will be eligible to retire in 5 years? The tip of the baby boom generation is now at retirement age, and there aren't enough younger workers to replace them all.

Unemployment numbers are low, and expected to go lower as more baby boomers retire. A

labor shortage means higher costs, or more pressure to offshore labor. If we can keep our labor costs at a manageable level, and keep jobs onshore because we have qualified, affordable labor to fill those jobs, that translates into competitive advantage for the US economy.

One of the big challenges in employing workers in the last 1/3 of their careers is that they are often perceived as high cost workers. They have a lifetime of experience, and expect to get paid for it. They are supporting families, putting children through college, and saving for retirement, all of which requires a significant paycheck. As workers transition into senior citizen status, the paradigm begins to change. Many workers come to value fewer work hours, and availability of bigger blocks of time off. Other seniors are looking to fill in retirement fund gaps, or have access to more medical coverage than they find available with Medicare. Still others are looking to remain useful; they want to be perceived as contributors, doing meaningful work. Seniors still expect to be paid for their experience, but they are willing to make trade-offs: lower income for more flexibility, cash flow, medical care, and/or respect.

Senior citizens are also at a stage of maturity in their careers. They are no longer climbing the corporate ladder. They are less

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likely to jump ship for a great offer. They are more skilled at passing on knowledge and skills to younger workers, and less protective of turf. They are looking for a contract of respect with their employers, whereby their skills and experience are valued. Many value the opportunity to pass along to the next generation some of what they have learned through a lifetime of work.

Where do you find employees who fit the bill? Networking, online job boards, all the usual places. Check with community and religious organizations. Put the word out that you're seeking experienced, qualified, flexible workers, and you'll probably start to attract what you're looking for. Let other business owners in your industry know you're interested in talking to people they have who are getting ready to retire.

What advice do I have for senior citizens about to go out on a job interview? Be enthusiastic. Realistically assess your experience, ability, and desire to work. Know your financial needs, and figure out how many hours, at what rate of pay, over how many years, you still want or need to work. Treat your desire for time off as an advantage to an employer – highly skilled work at part time costs. If you are okay with layoffs in the winter, so you can travel, tell the interviewer that. Look for the right situation, on that fits your requirements.

Continue to learn new skills, to stay at the top of your field of expertise. Build computer skills if you don't already have them. Hone your skills at collaboration, mentoring, and teaching. Show that you know how to learn from your mistakes and move on. Look for work that will help to keep you mentally and physically fit, in a company that you can take pride in representing.

When you go out on interviews, have passion for what you do. Tell the prospective employer about your experience and life lessons. Dress well for an interview, and focus on finding out if this is the right situation for you. If you find the interview or description of the job situation isn't right for you, don't be afraid to say so, and move on to look for a better one. Don't panic or be a victim. Show how you have learned to adapt, and take on increasing amounts of responsibility through your career. Portray your skills at being a steady, competent influence. Know that you have a wealth of experience which the right employer is likely to value. Be flexible in your approach, piecing together the right job, with the right amount of work hours and income, to meet your needs.

Looking for a good book? For employers, try *Lost Knowledge: Confronting the Threat of an Aging Workforce* by David DeLong, or *The Aging Workforce: Realities, Myths, And Implications for Organizations* by Jerry Hedge.

For employees, try *From Work to Retirement* by Marion E. Haynes.

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