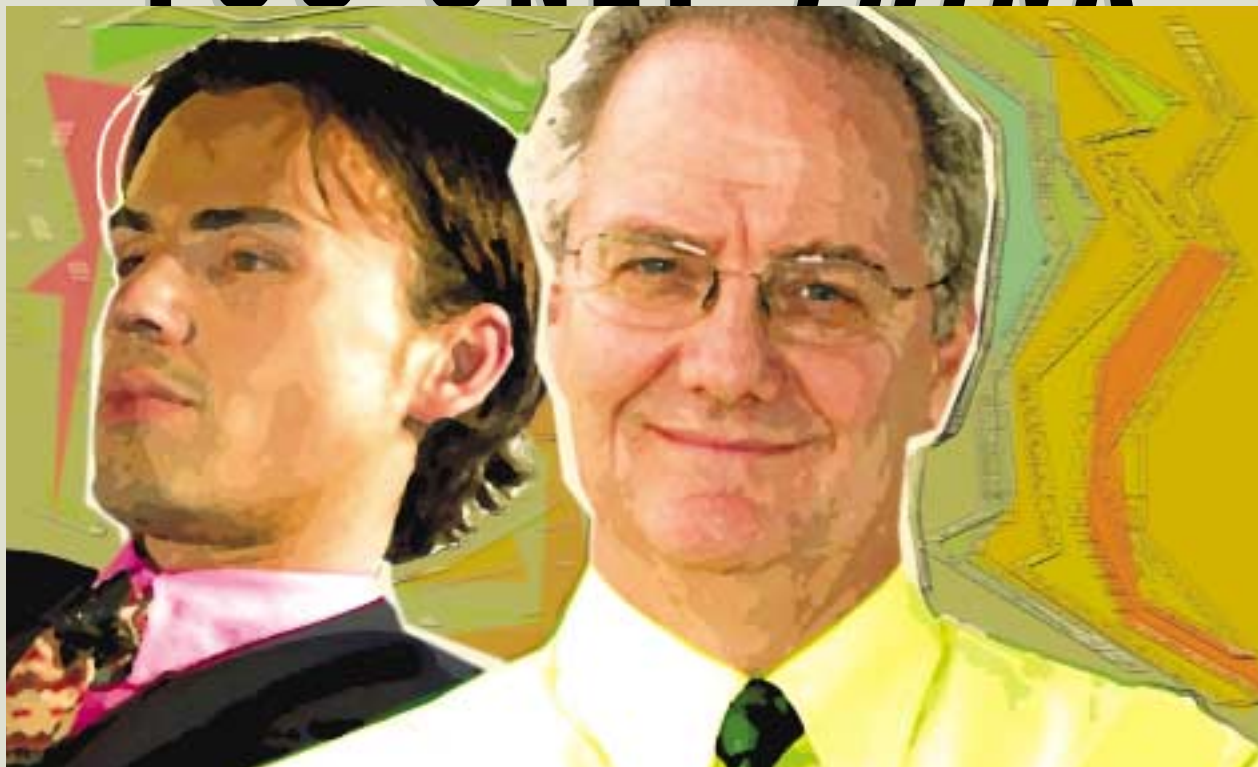


YOU ONLY THINK



YOU WANT A 25-YEAR-OLD

Companies have a tendency to choose younger workers over older ones. Their reasoning may be flawed.

BY JAMIE SWEDBERG

Workers today are forever starting over. People used to lock themselves into a career straight out of school, then faithfully slog away until retirement. Today they may switch careers several times, or take a break to raise a family or pursue another interest. Sometimes their career-change choices are made for them when they're laid off.

At the same time, baby boomers are growing older, and most have entered the over-50 bracket. Historically they've been the trendsetters, the center of the cultural universe. But now, somehow, the workplace hasn't quite caught up with them.

Many executive recruiters say that their client companies consistently pass over older candidates to pick younger ones, even for executive positions. In a recent poll conducted by the Virginia-based

Society of Human Resource Management, more than half the respondents surveyed say their organizations don't actively recruit older workers, and two-thirds say that their organizations don't target such workers for retention. By "older," most meant 55 and up; some were referring to workers younger than that. Aren't these employers passing up workers in their prime? Don't they understand what experience is worth?

"They're not hiring like that yet," says Karen Oman, president of Certes Financial Pros, a St. Louis Park employment agency that places accountants and others in financial services jobs. "My opinion on the reason is that baby boomers are the bosses right now, and they're trying to look for what they were [when they were climbing the corporate ladder]. But the demographics don't support that anymore, because 75 percent of the workers

are in their 30s and 40s. And they're getting older all the time."

Oman says that 10 years ago, her firm took on a man who was having trouble finding a desirable job at age 48. He's still working for Certes's clients, but "when he interviews at companies, it's sometimes hard to get him on the next job for a few weeks," Oman says. "Then a company recognizes his talent, because he used to be the controller of a major corporation in town. They hire him and keep him. He's spent the majority of 10 years with just three clients, and he's even been sent to China to do things for them."

This employee is the rule, not the exception, Oman says. Older workers can be wise, loyal, and an all-around asset to a company. So what keeps human resources departments from hiring them more often?

ASKING TOO MUCH?

Age discrimination is at its most blatant and pernicious when employers look at employees as statistics rather than as people. Tim Doherty, CEO and co-owner of Doherty Employment Group in Edina, says that most of his clients are open minded about age. But he acknowledges that there are cynical employers out there who would prefer to weed out the over-50 set.

"There is certainly the whole health care issue," he points out. "Everyone knows that older employees tend to use the health care system more than the younger employees. You can even see the bad PR Wal-Mart recently received from that internal memo [that said] to make sure that anybody they hired was in good health, which means eliminate overweight people and older people."

But most discrimination against older workers is more subtle. It may even be unintentional. A great deal of it is based on a myth that older employees have higher salary expectations. Employers assume, straight out of the gate, that they can't afford 55-year-olds. And if they can afford them, isn't something wrong with them?

"Most employers don't want to be the rebound employer for an individual that, for instance, has just been laid off from a \$75,000 job and, unfortunately, the skill set that they have is only making them available for jobs in the \$30,000 to 35,000 range," Doherty says. Employers are wary of the financial and emotional adjustments such an employee must make. In addition, they worry that their new hire may continue to search for another job.

But there's more to the situation than meets the eye. Yes, some older workers are taking pay cuts, but it doesn't mean they're going to be malcontents. Many are realistic about the fact that their old jobs don't exist anymore in the post-dot-com market. Still others have made a conscious decision to downshift from the high-pressure, high-pay positions they used to hold. Their financial needs are less than they used to be, because their children have left the nest and completed school. And oftentimes, they really are a better fit for the job; it's just that employers are afraid to ask for the qualifications they want because they think it'll cost too much.

"It's a big jump for a 28-year-old in the human resources department to allow a 45-year-old to interview for a job," Oman says. "A lot of times, the reason is that the 45-year-old is going to make less on this job than they did before. But we see that after their kids graduate from college, they are more than willing to go back down in salary to have a good fit. They better understand that fit because they've been there. They're looking for a place to work for quite a while. They are after quality of life. They don't think they are capable of being CEO of GE anymore, whereas kids in their 20s do."

The fear of paying too much has created a culture of low-experience hiring. "When I look at the list of 80 high-end permanent financial jobs we have available, 85 percent of them are looking for people with less than 10 years of experience," Oman says. "And most of those are looking for only two, three, or four years."

As a result, many older workers with 15-plus years of experience are weeded out. But the problem is, there aren't enough inexperienced younger workers to go around. "We've got 20 percent of our applicants in their 20s, so basically 80 percent of the jobs are chasing 20 percent of the applicants," she says.

Dave Gavin, president of Northland Employment Services, Inc., in St. Louis Park, says that many employers don't like to hire people with more experience because of fear or insecurity. "It may be an inferiority thing, or it may be a [cover your posterior] thing," he says. "They don't want to hire anyone that is more competent than they are. So typically, even though there are older workers available, they get passed over. We see that a lot."

WARPED EXPECTATIONS

For every myth about older workers, there's a misconception about younger workers, too. Employers tend to be unrealistically starry-eyed about the goals, habits, and values of potential hires in their 20s.

For instance, many believe that younger workers will be willing or able to work longer hours than their older counterparts. But members of so-called Generation Y have tended to resist working extremely long hours. They don't necessarily buy into the concept of "paying their dues."

"From my observation, there is certainly not the work ethic in them that was instilled in the older generation," Gavin says. "No question about it. It could be the fact that they're several generations removed from the Great Depression. They haven't experienced the lack of creature comforts and the lack of an ability to make a living."

Cindy Chandler, president of Chandler Group Executive Search, a Spring Park executive search firm, says she sees generational differences in work style, but the differences average out. "Are some of the under-40-year-olds working fewer hours?" she asks. "Yes, but perhaps they've been given the tools, the education, the training around technology to work smarter. In today's competitive, good organizations, it doesn't matter if you work fewer hours or more hours—it's just that you are an effective contributor."

Chandler feels that employers who are looking for a particular level of experience or a particular number of hours per week are missing the larger picture. "Number one should be raw talent," she says. "Number two, behavioral and collaborative style. Number three is the ability to motivate and effectively lead diverse organizations. And the meaning of 'diverse' should include age."

Another prevalent myth is that younger workers are more energetic and technically savvy. Gavin says he does give a little credence to that one. "I don't know that that's a myth, is it?" he postulates. "Being over 50 myself, I understand where that's coming from, because honestly, I'm slowing down. I can't run with the young guys like I used to."

Oman doesn't buy into that idea, though. "Older workers have already proven themselves," she says. "It's not like they're going to sit on their laurels. A person who is productive at 35 is also productive at 55. A person who is not productive at 35 is also not productive at 55. It's the person."

Faith Williamson, vice president and director of staffing at Wayzata-based Professional Alternatives, an HR staffing firm, agrees. Energy isn't always an age issue, she says—it's individual, too. "If you are a person who is high energy and has passion for your work—if you are aligned with the skills of your job—you are going to be a better contributor. We employ people in their 50s, 60s, and even a couple in their 70s who are very high energy and are in high demand."

Technical savvy isn't an issue, she adds, because most organizations have used PCs for 15 to 20 years. Executives used to have administrative staffers type up everything for them, but nowadays almost all of them create their own documents and put together their own PowerPoints.

Regardless, staffing professionals emphasize the benefits that come with experience. "The biggest [advantage] is that they know what is required of the job and what they need to do to perform at or above the expected level," Doherty says. "I think individuals who have been in the work force for a while know what it takes to get ahead. Showing up on time, paying attention to what your supervisors are saying—all the things that make for a good employee. Younger employees come into it without the experience, yet at the same time they have a much higher expectation in terms of how quickly they should be able to move up the ladder."

THE LOYALTY QUESTION

Now that the one-job-for-life generation is retired, many employers may secretly feel that the sole advantage of hiring older workers has vanished. Baby boomers can't be counted on to stick around for the long term. Or can they?

Oman says that many of her firm's contract workers fall into the 35-to-49 bracket, and she's learned that they are extremely loyal. "These people are very high value," she says. "Typically they ask for less because they are through paying for their kids' college. They want a nice fit and don't care about maximizing their salary. They are hard workers. They are looking for a place to spend the next 10 to 15 years of their career. They may need a reasonable work life, but then again, everyone age 29 and up is looking for that, what with dual careers and children. So there's just no reason not to hire them."

Meanwhile, there may be a good and valid reason to think twice about hiring 20-somethings exclusively. "Everybody is chasing after them, and they are getting calls every day at your office to leave," Oman warns. "Someone is headhunting them every single day. It's gotten to the point that they're sick of it. We can't

even say we are recruiters if we're around 20-year-olds, because they get a fearful look in their eyes and they want to run."

Gavin says that as a result, 20-somethings are not wired for loyalty. "Why should they be?" he asks. "The Internet job boards make it so easy to look. And companies are not loyal to them. Everyone knows somebody who's been laid off. It's a real two-edged sword: I'm going to lay you off at any minute, but I expect you to be loyal to me."

Chandler says that the only way to ensure loyalty in employees of any age is to provide them with challenging and rewarding work and a positive company culture. In the days of youthful Internet start-ups, older workers might have felt shut out. But now age diversity is an integral part of a healthy firm, and wise employers will make 50-plus workers feel valued.

Ironically, Gavin believes that older workers are sometimes more loyal out of sheer necessity, simply because they experience age discrimination. "Because it is harder for them to find a job, they may be more willing to put up with the crap that some 30-year-old manager is going to throw at them," he says. "They don't have as many options."

ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

If employers continue to overlook the depth of experience in older workers, they will be setting themselves up for trouble. Experts agree that there's a looming labor shortage. Who can afford to overlook a large, valuable part of the human resources pool?

"You can't play with demographics," Doherty warns. "It is very clear that over the next 10 years, there's going to be a major shift in the work force, and the baby boom generation will be either scaling back or completely retiring. That's going to leave a major gap in the work force, because the groups following the baby boomers are not large enough to replace them. The new entrants in the work force are not going to be able to replace them in number, nor come anywhere close in skills."

Joe Reardon, executive recruiter at Pro Staff Finance & Accounting in Minneapolis, says he's glad his clients seem

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to have figured that out. "For more than the past year, the market for finance and accounting has been very candidate driven, and I anticipate this trend to continue," he says. "[There's an] overall increase in finance and accounting department head counts due to the continued gradual improvement trend in the economy and new regulations. If employers overlook the experience of older workers, they may find it difficult to meet these increasing and critical needs."

Oman says that age discrimination is a mistake that begets more and more problems as time goes on. When employers pursue the youngest 20 percent of applicants for 85 percent of the jobs, they're forced to pay those younger workers more. That creates inequities that cause stress in the workplace. And stress in the workplace leads to even more vacant positions, which means that the remaining employees will have too much work on their desks and will become even more stressed. It's a downward spiral.

Gavin says that his firm is busy now, and he thinks the labor shortage will continue to get more and more critical. "Employers are going to have to throw off the shackles of their prejudices," he says. "I think that is just going to be a natural occurrence, irrespective of peoples' changing attitudes. They are just going to be forced to change, or have the jobs go unfilled."

It sounds a little like a threat, but it's really a promise: A promise of fairer employment practices and a wiser, more diverse work force. ■

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