

## Generational divide

### As baby boomers retire, companies adjust to new wave of workers

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By **DAVID SHAROS** Special to The Sun

The workforce in this country stands on the brink of a revolution, given the ongoing exodus of baby boomers who already are beginning to retire.

Issues about this massive number of workers, estimated to be in excess of 80 million people, run the gambit from how to replace these staggering numbers to passing their lifelong skills on to the next generation.



**Workers at Human Resource Management Systems in Naperville range in age from their 20s to their 70s. Here, Michael Savegnago of Wheaton, director of administration and account manager, takes a call in his office Wednesday afternoon. Savegnago, 49, says the skill set of the younger generation is quite useful in his office.**

*(Danielle Gardner/Staff Photographer)*

Employment agencies and human resource professionals say restocking the future workforce is both challenging as well as frustrating. Angelo Ippolito, owner and manager of PrideStaff offices in Lisle and Joliet, says the expectations of the so-called "X" and "Y" generations after the baby boomers are far different than those of the people they are replacing.

"One of the things that stands out about the 'X' and 'Y' groups is the issue of loyalty," Ippolito said. "When the baby boomers got a job, they often stayed there. A lot has changed since then. People now look at a job and ask: how can this further my career? And in addition, folks don't want to start at the bottom and work their way up."

Renee Podpora, 38, lives and works here in Naperville as a consultant for Human Resource Management Systems and says that in relation to the widening void of experienced employees, "companies will address the issue individually, based on their needs or restructuring."

"I work to assist companies in their recruiting, and some of the positions that are vacated are filled internally, while in other cases, those already working there are assigned some of the tasks from the retiring person," Podpora said.

### **Growing disconnect**

Many baby boomers, like Glenn Bushong, director of marketing for Human Resource Management Systems, believe there is another problem besides replacing retiring veteran workers - the growing disconnect of passing on a veteran's knowledge and skills, and the unwillingness for companies or their younger employees to absorb it.

"Boomers like to fix things and talk about fixing things. That is their orientation," Bushong said. "They took the world and their mission seriously as young people. They got into the work world and took that seriously. They may use computers, BlackBerrys and iPods, but they grew up before these devices were around, and their approach is different."

Bushong admits that young people entering the workforce may have similar dreams, expectations and core work ethics, but they also bring a different life ethic.

"It's no wonder a 20-something may not want to take 'boomer advice' and a boomer might not think a 20-something 'gets it' the way he or she does. Both are right and both are wrong," Bushong adds. "HR departments need to be ready to facilitate conversation, communication and cooperation if a business is going to fully leverage the talent and knowledge of all its employees. They need to hold open brainstorm sessions that cut across age lines."

### **Bridging gap**

Naperville Chamber of Commerce CEO Richard Greene agrees that the companies can bridge the gap by "communicating across the generations," given that many companies could have as many as three or four generations in their workforce.

"One of the biggest things I see is getting the younger generation to slow down," Greene said. "The X and Y generation are quick learners, but I'm constantly stressing the need to slow down, look and adjust, and be patient."

Podpora said she has not really observed the "disconnect" as a consultant, and describes new or replacement employees as "willing to listen and be proactive."

"But there definitely is something to the 'loyalty' issue, because, unlike the baby boomers, the 'new' worker seems much more concerned about making money and sees moving from company to company as a way to get pay increases," she said. "But this may be a two-way street. I'm not sure companies are as loyal to their employees as they used to be either."

Margaret Brennan of Naperville's Brennan & Brosnan accounting firm is a 56-year-old baby boomer who believes the typical idealism of youth and the harsh realities of business today have added new pressures to melding the veteran and the rookie.

"The challenges of remaining competitive in the business world today have probably made companies less loyal to employees, but at the same time, younger workers often look at short-term benefits and not at longer-term consequences," Brennan said. "On top of that, businesses are competing for these workers that all come out of the same pool. There needs to be a mutual respect between the older and the younger worker, and acknowledge what each brings. People perform better the more involved they are, and it gives them a sense of ownership."