

More Help Wanted: Older Workers Please Apply

The New York Times, March 23, 2005

In a push to recruit older workers, Home Depot, the hardware chain, now offers "snowbird specials" - winter work in Florida and summers in Maine.

Borders bookstores lure retired teachers to sales jobs with discounts and the promise of reading and discussion groups. Pitney Bowes, the business services company, pays tuition for courses in computer programming as well as spare-time skills like golf and flower arranging.

After years of encouraging workers to take early retirement as a way to cut jobs, a growing number of companies are hunting for older workers because they have lower turnover rates and, in many cases, better work performance.

Some companies like Wal-Mart are making their pitches at senior centers and others are sending company brochures to churches and community libraries and posting their attractions on Web sites.

AARP, the advocacy group for older people, recently put on its Web site links to 13 "featured employers" - including MetLife, Pitney Bowes, Borders, Home Depot, Principal Financial and Walgreens - that are recruiting older workers with offers of health benefits, training and flexible work schedules. More than 71,000 people have used the Web site this month to seek job information.

At Home Depot, Ed Wright, 71, a retired electrical contractor, works the early shift from October to May in the electrical products department at the store in Lake Wales, Fla. Then, when the weather changes, he heads north and works part time from June to September in the Home Depot in Tullytown, Pa.

"I had heard you could do that, so I applied for a job here in Florida," he said. "It's the best of both worlds." Mr. Wright is not the only north-south commuter at the Lake Wales store. He said he had colleagues who went to Maine, Connecticut and Colorado in the summer.

Cindy Milburn, senior director of staffing at Home Depot, said the company was looking to older workers to fill a labor shortage a decade from now. "We wanted to plant seeds early on," she said, to build relationships with groups like AARP and government agencies that help people, including military retirees, find jobs.

Conventional wisdom has long held that workers become more costly as they grow older, with more medical problems and more missed workdays. But "overall costs are not much different based on the age of employees," said Dan Smith, senior vice president for human resources at the Borders Group. "Training and recruitment costs are much lower than for younger workers. It all evens out."

Mr. Smith said nearly 16 percent of Borders's current 32,000 employees were 50 or older, compared with only 6 percent six years ago.

For one thing, the older workers are much less likely to depart after a few years. The turnover rate for employees 50 and older was one-tenth that of workers under 30, according to Mr. Smith. "Costs of training, recruitment and learning the job routine," he said, "are all much lower than for younger workers."

That is no small matter, especially in retailing, where 60 percent annual turnover, not counting part-time help, is the norm for specialty stores, according to the National Retail Federation, an industry trade group. If part-timers and temporary workers are covered, the turnover rate soars to 110 percent. (The group's survey did not cover department stores and outlet stores.)

Even with its loyal older people and a low turnover rate by retailing standards, Home Depot, which has 325,000 employees, hires 160,000 people each year, including part-time and seasonal workers and 20,000 for new jobs as the company adds stores, Ms. Milburn said.

Eileen Applebaum, a labor economist at Rutgers University, said the cost of turnover per worker was \$2,335, on average, in a survey of representative California employers last year conducted by researchers at Rutgers and U.C.L.A. Simply holding down the turnover rate could mean annual savings in the millions of dollars for large employers.

The recruitment efforts for the elderly are reaching a willing audience, as more older people seek work because they need extra cash and health benefits and sometimes because they miss having a 9-to-5 routine with other workers.

In the 65-to-69 age group, "about one-third of men and almost one-fourth of women were working in 2004," said Joseph F. Quinn, a labor economist and dean at Boston College. "Already, there has been a dramatic change since the mid-1980's in the labor force participation of older workers."

The percentage of men in that age group still working rose to 33 percent in 2004 from 27 percent in 1994; the percentage of women in that age group working rose to 23 percent from 18 percent. According to AARP, almost one in three workers will be 50 or older within five years.

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