



print edition

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PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS: AGING WORKFORCE

Too old for long-term plans ...too young to be put out to pasture

SUSAN PINKER

Dear Susan,

I'm in my mid-fifties, as are many of my fellow employees. Management appears to have an unwritten policy of pushing older employees out well before 65, not by firing them but by making it clear that they are no longer valued members of the team (as reflected in the pay level, bonuses and assignment of work).

I cannot prove age discrimination and do not want to sue anyone. However, I believe the policy is not sound because it deprives the business of experienced people who have a great deal to contribute, notwithstanding their age. I want to express this feeling to management, but I am not comfortable doing so. Any suggestions?

-- Grey Matter

Print Edition - Section Front



Dear Grey Matter,

Your forbearance is remarkable, considering that you're a baby boomer. I sense a lack of stridency from a member of the generation that once proudly wore buttons urging people to "Question authority" and "Do Not Fold, Bend, Spindle or Mutilate."

Still a force to be reckoned with, this generation is not easily disposable. There should be a way for those who want to keep working to feel their contribution is still valued.

Just last week, Statistics Canada released census data suggesting there will not be enough young people entering the work force to replace the glut of workers about to retire.

If those moving along in your population bubble could just hang on to their BlackBerrys a few years longer, they could forestall an expected halving of labour force growth after 2011, when boomers begin to reach retirement age.

According to Laurent Martel, a senior analyst at Statscan, keeping baby boomers on the job would provide a "window of opportunity" lasting several years that could stave off the labour shortage that's expected to hit after most boomers will have turned 65.

But that forecast is optimistic, contends Chris Higgins, a professor at the University of Western Ontario's Ivey School of Business, who says that most Canadians are retired by the age of 58.

That's the backdrop to two problems here.

First, your company seems to be whittling down its highest earners by design - apparently blind to the demographics and to the loss of talent, good will and institutional memory that will be walking out the door.

Sure, the company is saving money in the short run.

But it will have no one left to train and support the most competitive rank - those now in their mid-40s who will step into the breach. If these folks feel stranded, they'll walk, too. And they may well move to a competitor that is more progressive in its vision of their future.

Research on the highest achievers - the innovators and highest earners - shows that it takes at least 10 years to build an area of expertise, while a mentor needs about 30 years of experience to be able to groom a protégé.

Policies such as your employer's toss all that accumulated knowledge into the trash.

The second problem is that you're doing nothing to push your agenda.

If you think you're a valuable employee who merits better assignments and bonuses, and who should keep working to the max, then marshal the data and present it to someone who cares about the bottom line. What's good and right will not be persuasive. Instead, show that your presence is profitable.

This is the tack that Amory Lovins, a resource analyst and co-founder of the Rocky Mountain Institute in Colorado, took when convincing companies that reducing their use of fossil fuels could help them be competitive. Instead of pushing the pollution-is-bad-for-mother-earth line, Mr. Lovins urges businesses to become super-efficient by recognizing hidden resources.

For instance, he urged Wal-Mart Stores Inc. to increase the fuel efficiency of its 6,800 trucks, which cut 125 million gallons of diesel fuel it uses a year by half.

That's a lot less diesel that it would otherwise buy, not to mention the reduction in emissions.

Applying the same model means adding up the ways you add value: the profit the company will lose if you are not there, and the money it will spend if it has to replace you. Include the invisible, such as the cost to train a recruit and the toll in errors or client confidence while this newbie learns the ropes.

Meanwhile, start casting your eye around for other opportunities.

You'll learn about your market value, and whether the expected dearth of talent is just one of many dire forecasts or really apocalypse now.

Dear Susan,

I work for a non-profit agency geared to immigrant, refugee, single-parent and low-income families.

Although we get operating grants, we are not self-supporting and so charge a small registration fee. We do not publicize our services as free but, when someone volunteers that they are unable to pay, we waive the fee without asking questions.

Proud people who may be struggling but who do not want to be considered "poor" are therefore at a disadvantage compared with those who ask.

Should we say that our fees are negotiable? Should we bring it up only with families whom we deem might need to know?

-- The Handout Lady

Dear Lady,

It's a squeaky-wheel world. That said, most community organizations have stock phrases that tell their needy clientele that they are flexible.

The words "sliding scale" or "no one will be turned away for financial reasons" are communicated somehow, and who gets a subsidy and who pays full fare is supposed to be locked away in a file - or in someone's memory - and remain confidential forever.

Still, those new to this country and who don't know its customs can hardly be expected to know the secret codes. The mavens referring them to you in the first place - neighbours, friends, social workers - should be cluing them in.

Your paperwork should also state your policy clearly and so should your referral sources - instead of hiding the fact that people whose incomes fall below a certain threshold can be eligible for assistance.

It's better to have a filter that lets in too many instead of screening out too many, says Daniel Weionstock, director of the Ethics Research Centre at the University of Montreal.

In that spirit more transparency is key. Flexibility can be built in by evaluating each case as it comes up. It would still be up to your clientele to ask - and preferably to pay something to show their commitment and good will - but then you won't be discriminating by default against those too proud to ask.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*, to be published in February.

Are you having interpersonal problems at work? Send your queries (100 words maximum, no attachments please) to: spinker@globeandmail.com

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