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By Cassandra Kania

The New Face Of Your Workforce

BSCs are taking advantage of the influx of retiree workers

At the age of 71, Gail Heikkinen has the energy and acuity of a woman in her 20s. So when she retired from her job as a hostess cashier in Laughlin, Nev., followed by a six-month stint working in the kitchen of a convalescent center, she found that having time on her hands wasn't the blessing she'd expected.

"I don't have hobbies. I don't knit or crochet," she says. "I just couldn't sit still anymore."

Heikkinen saw an ad in the paper for a janitorial position with C&H Janitorial Service in La Grande, Ore., and decided to apply. Today, she works for C&H, cleaning a bank after hours five days a week. She loves the work and being her own boss.

Like Heikkinen, an increasing number of seniors are opting to return to work or continue working well into their golden years. Many choose to do so because they need to stay active; they enjoy both the physical and mental stimulation that a job offers. Others work because they need the money. According to an AARP survey in May 2008, nearly one in five people ages 55 to 64 and about one in four ages 45 to 54 said they planned to delay retirement due to the economic downturn. For building service contractors, seniors who continue working past retirement age are often model employees.

Good, cleaning fun

Team Clean in Philadelphia actively recruits older workers.

"They come to work every day, they're enthusiastic about their work, and they're dependable, reliable, and passionate about what they do," says Donna Allie, president. "It works out very well for us."

BSCs are impressed with seniors' honesty and integrity, something not always seen with younger employees.

"Sometimes we run into issues with theft," admits Terry Woodley, vice president, Woodley Building Maintenance in Kansas City, Mo. "You just don't see that with the retired set."

With age comes wisdom and well-honed social skills. Retired workers are great communicators, which can be an important asset for the cleaning business, say BSCs.

"Older workers are very social and have good communication skills," says Mark Klein, senior vice president, Sunshine Cleaning Systems Inc., Ft. Lauderdale, Fla. "They're polite people. During the day, your cleaners are mingling with building facilities people, so their communication skills are very important. That's where they're a major asset."

BSCs also find their retired workers get along well with their younger coworkers and don't have problems taking direction from managers who are considerably younger than they are.

"We tend to bond with them, and when you need someone to come through for you, they're always the ones that will do a favor for you while someone else might make an excuse," says Merri Williams, president of C&H Janitorial Service.

“Many of them have been in management positions themselves, and they understand how hard it can be.”

In addition to bringing life experience and pleasant personalities to the job, retirees’ schedules are usually flexible, allowing BSCs to fill part-time positions that might otherwise prove difficult to fill. A number of retirees are willing to work evenings and weekends.

“We’ve talked about looking at the elderly as a workforce,” says Klein. “We would tap them for part-time daytime work. There’s a huge need for that because most people in the janitorial business have a full-time job during the day and they want to supplement their full-time salary with a part-time one.”

Seniors with stamina

When discussions turn to the disadvantages of hiring retirees, most BSCs are in agreement: There aren’t many minuses. Seniors are able to handle the physical demands of the job as well as — and in some cases better than — workers half their age, they say. Nevertheless, BSCs should be up front about the physical demands of the job and determine during the interview process whether or not their older applicants can handle the workload before they make a job offer.

“Make sure you have a clear understanding of their limitations, and be careful not to discriminate when asking questions,” says Bob Merkt, owner, Kettle Moraine Professional Cleaners, West Bend, Wis. Usually, Merkt’s managers will list the job requirements and then ask applicants if there are any they feel they are unable to perform.

While most BSCs interviewed for this article do not make any concessions for their older workers, Merkt admits that his company is very accommodating to all employees’ needs.

“For some accounts that require a vacuum to be lifted up a flight of stairs, we’ll provide two vacuum cleaners so that [older workers] won’t have to haul them up and down stairs,” he says. “Some employees are also uncomfortable using backpack vacuums because of strain or exertion, so they bring their eight-pound Oreck from home because it’s so light-weight.”

The company has also switched from heavy string mops to microfiber mops, which is less fatiguing for their senior workers. Furthermore, Merkt sometimes allows older workers extra time to complete their work.

“If they need a day off, or need to switch nights, or tweak their start time, we’re very accommodating to their requests,” he says. “We feel those requests are less expensive to implement than the costs associated with recruiting, hiring and turnover. We’ve gone so far as to ask them what part of the job is too physically demanding. Then we have our project relief crew help that person so he can stay on that account until we either get a permanent helper or find a replacement.”

BSCs cited time off for illness or surgery as another disadvantage of hiring older workers; however, due to seniors’ strong work ethic, they are more likely to give their employers ample warning before taking time off.

Recruiting retirees

Many BSCs actively recruit retired workers. Williams of C&H Janitorial Service distributes flyers at senior centers. About 25 percent of her employees are retired workers.

“In a janitorial service when you need to hire someone, you need to hire them fast because our turnover rate is pretty high,” she says. “Oftentimes, seniors are your best bet.”

Merkt used to distribute help-wanted ads on bulletin boards of churches, community centers and senior homes. But he no longer needs to target that age group, he says, because the company’s regular advertising brings in enough senior applicants.

For the past six years, Allie of Team Clean has been actively recruiting retirees as well.

“There seems to be an older population of folks looking for work,” she notes. Allie estimates 5 percent of her employees are 55 and older. The company works with the Mayor’s Commission on Services to the Aging, a city agency that provides opportunities and services for Philadelphia residents age 55 and older (see sidebar).

“From time to time, we get resumes from their agency,” she says, “and when we hire these applicants, they’re some of our best employees.” Allie will also call the agency when she has vacancies to fill.

Even companies that don’t actively seek out seniors often find that retirees respond to their employment ads or walk in looking for a position. In fact, according to an Urban Institute study, janitors and building cleaners came in forth on a list of top 10 jobs with the most employees ages 65 and older.

Whereas other industries may view older workers as a detriment to their business, BSCs see them as an asset. Thankfully, retirees view the job just as positively.

“I’d just as soon be doing something, as long as I’m healthy,” says Heikkinen. “I like my job and the hours. It keeps me out of trouble.”

Helping Hands for Aging Residents

In Philadelphia as well as other cities across the country, seniors 55 and older who are seeking employment can get help through the senior community service employment program (SCSEP). Debbie Merlin, project director, SCSEP, works for the Mayor’s Commission on Services to the Aging in Philadelphia.

“The purpose of the program is to provide a work training experience for people 55 and over,” she says. “We pay them minimum wage through a federally funded grant to work and train 20 hours a week, and during this period of time we help them find a job.”

Older residents learn new skills or hone old ones in a variety of fields, including janitorial and maintenance work. Training takes place at different government agencies and not-for-profits. The program also helps people who walk in find employment without training them first.

“The employers we place people with find overall that older workers are reliable, dependable, and have a good work ethic. They want to work and will work part time,” says Merlin. “Often they have medical benefits, and if they’re working part-time, they’re amenable to not having sick time or vacation time.”

Merlin has also found that the elderly are more flexible regarding their hours and are often willing to work weekends or be available on call if someone calls in sick.

“Older workers can and do learn new skills, improve skills they have, and are amenable to learning,” she says. “They take direction from younger people and respect them as much as older workers.”

Companies that are interested in hiring retirees should contact their city’s agency on aging, advises Merlin.

“Every city has one,” she says. “Ask to speak to the director of the senior community service employment program. Establish a relationship with that person and find out if they would be able to refer appropriate people.”

Merlin also urges employers to consider a person’s skills and background and give them a chance regardless of age.

“Our best receptionist left when she was 82 years old,” she says. “I know that’s not a cleaning position, but it’s still giving someone a chance to work regardless of age and considering what they can contribute.”