

Personnel consultant offers different approach to finding staff

In *WJI's* first *Industry Hotshots* feature, Peter Carino, Wire Resources, Inc., discussed the challenges manufacturers have getting and keeping younger staffers. That situation, he notes, has not improved much since then, but below he proposes a different direction, one that he believes some manufacturers might find helpful.

Two years ago, I wrote about young people working in the cable industry and the challenges associated with both hiring and retaining them as long-term employees. This time, I want to discuss hiring again, but by approaching it from a different direction, a topic that borders on taboo: employees of an older age.

A major portion of cable industry technical expertise, tribal knowledge, and overall manufacturing wherewithal lies in industry veterans in the late 50s bracket. Although this fact seemingly makes this generation marketable, I find in my work that employers sometimes will either shy away from or not be as receptive to considering an older candidate. Now obviously they can't verbalize this for fear of legal backlash, but it's a concern easily gleaned from the subtext of our conversations.

A pretty typical call for me to receive, especially from small to mid-size cable manufacturers, sounds like this: "Pete, our VP of Manufacturing (or sales or engineering) is retiring. There are several people on our executive staff over 60 years old, so we need to hire someone who will be here when the rest of us retire over the next four to six years."

Is this a conversation about age discrimination or good succession planning and common sense? In a small company in particular, it's essential to have employees of various ages throughout the organization. Even in a scenario like this, I often find myself advocating for the advantages that come from hiring, or at least considering, a long-time industry veteran.

As an employer, it's obviously important to obtain a deep understanding of a candidate's past performance and abilities. However, equally important is understanding where they are with regards to their career and work-life aspirations. Usually an older candidate will bring this up when I'm speaking with them initially about a particular opportunity. Everyone knows conversations about age are taboo, but self-disclosing your desire to continue working can only help. If a candidate has the work ethic and energy level required to proficiently fulfill a role and can dedicate another eight to ten years, does it really matter how old he or she is?

Following are four real-world, practical reasons I believe companies should consider before ruling out older candidates.

- **Availability.** They probably are "empty nesters." This means there are no afterschool activities to attend, sick children to pick up in the middle of the day, or any of the other numerous duties of being a good parent that can

potentially take away from a regular work day.

- **Relocations.** This is less of an issue as they may have or want to downsize their home. Renting is also a common option these days. Home ownership is not seen as the Holy Grail like it once was. Relocating a young family with children is never easy or inexpensive.
- **Corporate ambitions.** An older candidate is probably not as interested in climbing the career ladder. The desire to "enjoy what I do and who I do it with" is echoed in the conversations I have with older candidates all of the time. They also won't be jumping ship or looking to use a position as a stepping stone.
- **Experience.** They possess a vast amount of knowledge and typically are willing to share it more freely. Older candidates come with a maturity and wisdom that can benefit those around them as they act as mentors for younger generations.

Diversity of all kinds, including age, can only benefit a company. These differences ensure that ideas are fresh and solutions to problems are varied as it provides a collection of voices with a variety of backgrounds and points-of-view.

I've seen this first-hand. I think back to a placement I made eight years ago for a director of engineering position. He was a 39-year-old engineer with a Ph.D. (let's call him Tom) from a prestigious university who came with previous cable industry experience. His new employer was a small, niche cable manufacturer that was recently purchased by a large global manufacturer.

Tom had a long-time cable engineer as one of his direct reports. I had placed this engineer at the same company 25 years earlier. After Tom was on the job a couple months, I called to see how things were going, and specifically, asked about his relationship with this older engineer. He said, "I tell him all the time, 'Please don't retire because I learn something from you every day.'"

Tom saw this engineer as a valuable resource, and he was. He had a wealth of knowledge accumulated over years of in-the-trenches experience. That veteran engineer never had to look for another job but if he had, a reference from his boss would quickly neutralize any bias that might be associated with age. Yet having the "tools" is only part of the equation, so here's some specific guidance I give older candidates to help make themselves as marketable as possible.



Peter Carino

- *Be upfront.* Don't try to hide your age on the resume by leaving dates off education or previous places of employment.
- *Be vetted.* Get a few references from the last 10 years of work history who can speak specifically about your accomplishments, people skills and energy level. Nothing is more important!
- *Be tech savvy.* You want to do reports or use the CRM with skill and ease. We live in an age where you can learn any program for free with the help of the internet and YouTube.
- *Be flexible.* Just because you are bringing years to the table doesn't mean you corner the market on knowledge. Be receptive to other's ideas and ways of doing things.
- *Take care of yourself.* Aesthetics aren't the motivation here. Being fit gives us the energy we need to do our jobs and maintain a healthy work-life balance. And, if we're being candid, a physically fit, older person who is well groomed and smartly dressed will have an edge over a candidate that fits the ageist stereotypes people have in their heads.

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AARP: older people *want* to work

Per an American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) survey, more than two-thirds of older workers indicate that they wish to work either full-time or part-time after age 65.

AARP surveyed 3,900 people over age 45 who were either employed or looking for work. Of those, 61% reported seeing age bias, with 91% saying that they believe that such discrimination is common. More than half said they believe it starts when workers are in their 50s. The irony, the association notes, is that the nation's collective workforce continues to age, and that projections call for nearly 35% of workers to be more than 50 years old by 2022.

The Sloan Center at Boston College detailed in their report, "Working in Retirement: a 21st Century Phenomenon," that older workers are more (rather than less) engaged and satisfied with their jobs. Older workers frequently say they want to change the way they work, not stop working altogether. "

The reality is that older workers are appreciated by many employers for their commitment to being on the job," said Kathleen Christensen, director of the Sloan Foundation's Working Longer program.



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