

**Beware
of the
Boomer
Brain
Drain!**

As organizations everywhere struggle to capture the knowledge of their aging workforces before retirement, many are discovering an unexpected supply of capable workers eager to replace those exiting baby boomers—boomers themselves.

It turns out that many boomers eligible for retirement aren't yet ready for the rocking chair. They are seeking ways to remain active, viable, and income producing, but they want to do it on a schedule that suits them. In many cases, those personal concerns are being accommodated by savvy and grateful employers, who are turning those experts into trainers and coaches.

Yet as comforting as this scenario may be for employers, it doesn't address the larger crisis within the workplace. Organizations around the world are faced with an aging (and sometimes declining) workforce, and they are operating in crisis mode because of it.

The Raytheon Corp. is experiencing that uncertain future and has pronounced it ugly. The giant aerospace firm with 80,000 employees worldwide has an extremely bipolar workforce. The accumulated effect of periodic hiring freezes and layoffs, combined with normal industry trends, has left the company with a huge population of elderly workers, a new influx of 20-something echo boomers, and an enormous gulf in between.

"The profile looks like two humps on a camel's back since we have essentially skipped Generation X entirely," says executive Tracy Cox, referring to the 30-somethings typically entering management ranks. Helping bridge this generation gap and preparing for the future is Cox' job as Raytheon's director of enterprise integration. He also helps other organizations address their aging workforce challenges via Raytheon Professional Services, the company's training outsourcing unit.

He says Raytheon is taking both long- and short-term approaches to the challenge. The former addresses the fundamental crisis affecting the high-tech world—the lack of capable engineers and scientists entering the workplace. To help increase the pipeline, Raytheon has mounted a nationwide program called "Math-Moves You," which is aimed at whetting the mathematics appetite of middle and high school students.

The latter approach seeks to transfer the tacit knowledge of senior employees to those who will carry the mantle. A method called Catalyst Engagement is based on network analysis and social capital. This method identifies key individuals within informal networks throughout the organization who are responsible for generating ideas and communicating them to others. It then enlists their help to accelerate communications, problem solving, growth, and innovation.

The process includes extensive follow-up aimed at carefully evaluating input and ensuring that the efforts are tied to business values reflected on the balance sheet, says Cox. Lastly, Raytheon's Six Sigma process executes projects identified from the network analysis. In addition, he says, Raytheon employs a multi-tiered knowledge and learning architecture that can span enterprise and program levels, embrace communities of practice, and integrate people across boundaries.

Other activities underway include bridging that profound generation gap between its senior and junior workers. "We have to be the bridge between two generations that don't talk the same language and don't have the same learning preferences or styles," says Cox. "It means blending a generation accustomed to classroom learning with the Xbox learning style." [See "Boomer vs. Echo Boomer: The Work War," *T+D*, May 2005.]

Organizations are rushing to capture the knowledge of key employees before the retirement floodgates open. But they must first determine where they're at risk and then develop a strategy for transferring that expertise.

By Paul Harris

Knowledge context is key

Capturing the tacit knowledge of veterans is also a priority for training company Global Knowledge. “Too often, people try to abstract this type of information into a best practice,” says Jerry Gschwind, vice president of Enterprise Solutions. “But in doing so, they lose the richness of the context.”

Gschwind urges companies to capture the precious stories of their vital people in a video archive so that context is preserved. He says Global Knowledge is doing just that with one client, a large industrial control systems manufacturer.

“What makes an expert an expert is they don’t need to think about what they know,” says Gschwind. He says the challenge for trainers is to explain what makes them good at what they do.

General Physics Corp., a large business process outsourcing company, is working with a growing list of clients to stem the loss of knowledge assets. “As organizations lean themselves out to remain competitive, they are reducing their size beyond what they are actually prepared for,” says Eric Rodgers, vice president of GP’s Knowledge Exchange Group. Heavy industries are especially affected, which makes knowledge transfer even more critical, he says. The phenomenon is occurring worldwide, not just in the United States, Rodgers reports.

GP is helping Allegheny Ludlum capture and transfer the skills and knowledge of its senior employees. GP is providing infrastructure, design, and development services. Rodgers says it is important to obtain a clear picture of the company’s needs through front-end analysis, such as job skilling, gap analysis, competency matrixing, and mapping. “We have created a repository of content ranging from engineering to technical, sales, and other categories,” says Rodgers.

Helping to create this repository is a cadre of “re-tired” employees who have agreed to work flexible

schedules for the specialty materials manufacturer. Some are employed as trainers and coaches, assigned to impart their skills to others. The arrangement is working well for all parties, according to Rodgers. “Not only do they know the organization and its dynamics, but their participation helps achieve buy-in from other senior employees,” he says.

Other large corporations working with GP in a similar capacity include Federal Express, U.S. Steel, and Timken Steel.

From ROI to ROX

When it comes to imparting knowledge to younger generations or bridging the intergenerational knowledge gap, the services of a success coach can help. Two such coaches have combined their experience to create a novel approach to transferring knowledge between generations by adding a new element: “experience transfer.”

A typical problem in capturing the expertise of veteran employees is that their expertise is so engrained that they may not recognize what is special about their personal knowledge. And sadly, the interviewer assigned to extract that information usually doesn’t know what questions to ask or how to make the information useful. As a result, an organization’s effort to capture knowledge before it walks out the door ends in failure.

Brenda A. Benedet, president of Benedet Performance Group in Toronto, says it’s crucial, when interviewing senior employees, to begin with a full understanding of the organization’s business drivers, and the necessary skills and experience required to move it forward. To enable that, she says, organizations must first have a strategy in place to determine the skills and knowledge they will need in the future, as well as a culture for coaching and change.

Benedet, former global vice president of the support division for Smartforce (now SkillSoft), says

Slowing Workforce Growth

Several converging trends are creating near-term challenges for business. The worldwide elderly population is growing significantly in number and in share while workforce growth is slowing:

Over the past half century (1950–2000), the civilian United States labor force grew 1.6 percent per year. Over the next decade, the annual growth rate is projected to drop by one-third to 1.1 percent per year.

By 2010, the number of 35- to 44-year-olds, those normally expected to move into senior management ranks, will not grow but will decline by 10 percent.

By 2010, the number of United States workers ages 45 to 54 will grow by 21 percent; the number of 55- to 64-year-olds will grow by 52 percent.

In Europe, the pool of workers ages 35 to 44 is expected to shrink by 19 percent in the United Kingdom, 27 percent in Germany, and 9 percent in Italy.

Source: “Managing the Mature Workforce” by The Conference Group

most organizations are ill-prepared for such an exercise. She predicts that “intergenerational learning will be the next hot training challenge or product to hit the marketplace.”

Benedet has teamed up with Carol Goldsmith, a peak performance coach based in Reston, Virginia, to help organizations transfer institutional knowledge and experience to younger employees. Based on her experience coaching corporate executives, HR professionals, and trainers, Goldsmith has developed a new coaching model called The Direct Success Method that helps clients discover their innate best practices, and provides a systematic method of codifying and communicating their experience.

Direct Success is a coaching technique that helps individuals bring unconscious competencies that are generally regarded as natural talents or skills up to a state of conscious awareness. There, they can be studied, adapted, and applied to achieve what Goldsmith calls an “intelligent” outcome.

“Every workforce training executive wants to offer programs that generate a high return-on-investment and return-on-expectations,” says Goldsmith. “But now, with the experience drain of retiring boomers reaching critical levels, companies demand an entirely new performance measurement—return-on-experience or ROX.”

The key to direct success is modeling a client’s direct experience. “Rather than having clients describe how they think they succeeded before,” says Goldsmith, “they actually re-experience the past success. Then, working together, the coach and client can put that experience into a step-by-step strategy that others can study and use.”

The result, when paired with Benedet’s training model, is “success learning,” a method of bringing a desired performance change to an individual or an organization. The model can be used to coach either the expert baby boomer, the inexperienced echo boomer, or both generations, according to the two coaches.

Another route to transferring crucial knowledge between generations is to set up mentor programs that pair retiring boomers with echo boomers in learning-based teams, suggests training consultant Dianne Durkin. Durkin is president and founder of The Loyalty Factor, a Portsmouth, New Hampshire-based training and consulting firm that specializes in change management, employee loyalty, and customer loyalty programs.

Durkin works with clients to establish mentor programs so that managers can grow tomorrow’s leaders. Loyalty Factor also coaches managers on how to retain star performers, attract talented applicants, create a culture that honors experience, and create loyalty.

Gray matter matters

Not surprisingly, IBM is another consulting company on the forefront of this training and HR trend. Its activities include helping client companies capture knowledge of senior employees and disseminating that knowledge to large numbers of workers, says Eric Lesser, associate partner of the IBM Institute for Business Value.

IBM begins by helping clients understand the problem, and then giving them a variety of knowledge elicitation and exchange techniques to address it. These techniques include expert systems, subject matter expert interviews, after-action reviews, and knowledge mapping. “Most companies don’t have a sense for where they are at risk in terms of critical knowledge going out the door,” says Lesser. IBM’s strategy is described in the white paper, “Gray Matter Matters: Preserving Critical Knowledge in the 21st Century.”

The consultant says that from the standpoint of knowledge exchange, a challenge faced by large companies is to increase the visibility of the knowledge preservation

effort throughout the company. The answer is to conduct a comprehensive stakeholder analysis for each knowledge preservation initiative chosen, and then create a coalition of project champions to fund and offer support.

In addition, several initiatives within IBM’s Human Capital Management practice address the aging workforce, including IT accessibility features for people with impairments.

Such accessibility advances will no doubt come in handy in light of a recent survey by IBM of its boomer employees. It found that 50 percent of them wish to continue working in some fashion well into retirement.

Raytheon’s Cox says the prospect of boomers continuing in the workplace for 10 more years presents another daunting scenario. “If you think there is a chasm now between boomers and echo boomers, imagine what it will be like in another decade,” he says. “There will be a whole new generation entering the workforce that hasn’t even been named yet!” **TD**

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