



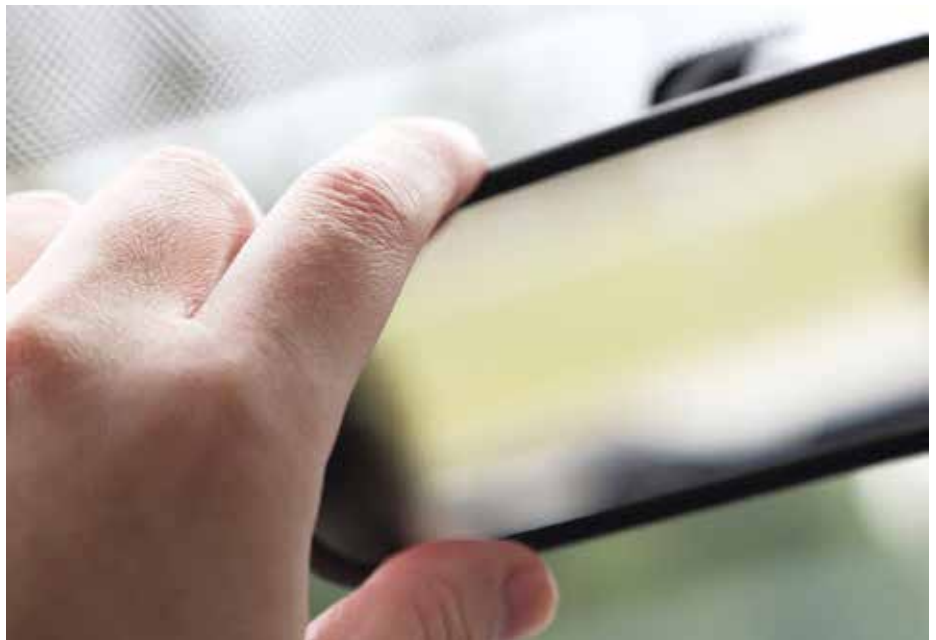
Look Behind You

New Issues with Workforce Aging are Coming on Fast

By Joe Whitefield

Have you looked in the rearview mirror of your facilities organization lately? A quick glance may show many objects gaining on you that could have a dramatic impact on your business. And these objects are, most likely, closer than they appear.

We are all familiar with issues associated with aging facilities: budget limitations, energy and environmental stewardship, and shifting customer expectations. But by now you have also noticed a growing number of new challenges (i.e., problems) joining the chase. I want to dedicate this space to one of these formidable challenges that has actually caught up with most educational institutions—the aging of the workforce.



WORKFORCE AGING

Like most issues, this one has the potential to be quite disruptive in and of itself. However, it also has the added potential of combining with other problems and compounding their effects. Consider the following:

The baby boomer generation has had quite an impact on every facet of life. Their contributions to business in terms of innovation, productivity, and achievement are historic. They have really put the “force” in workforce. This is also true in higher education. In case you missed it, 2014 is the year in which the youngest baby boomers—those born in 1964—turn 50. *The Wall Street Journal* reports that 12,500 Americans are turning 50 every day. That means the rest of the boomers are between 50 and 68. With that,

this generation has now begun retiring. Given the sheer number of boomers in the workforce, their retirements will be as impactful to business as was their entry. Estimates on the current retirement rate tend to be approximately 10,000 per day nationally. Many organizations are beginning to experience an accelerated retirement rate. Keep in mind; this is only the beginning of the mass retirement phenomenon. Barring radical changes in the work-life expectancies, this trend will continue for a decade and a half.

TURNING OVER THE ORGANIZATION CHART

We have all dealt with replacing key personnel who leave our organizations for retirement or other reasons. This

churning of personnel often creates a knowledge or experience gap, at least on a short term basis, as new personnel ride the requisite learning curves.

While inconvenient for a time, these gaps often bring about fresh thinking, innovative practices, organizational restructuring, and opportunities for others to move up professionally—sort of a healthy turnover. Effective succession planning has long been the key to these transitions. These transitions are aided when new personnel (or personnel in new positions) receive the support of colleagues, at all levels, to assist with their knowledge/experience gaps.

Mass retirements, however, require a different calculus for organizational turnover. While some of the oppor-

tunities for a healthy turnover are still present, fewer colleagues are in place to assist new personnel with the transition because they are experiencing turnover themselves. This condition permeates the knowledge and experience gaps to a larger section of the organization. Learning curves are extended and important history can be lost—both in terms of what was done and why it was important. Unaccounted for, these affects can compound the problems of turnover and diminish the benefits.

AN EMERGING DIFFICULTY


A new trend that seems to be emerging in higher education is the difficulty in hiring qualified people to replace those who leave our organizations. There are potentially many reasons for this trend. Reasoning aside, the impacts are problematic. Extended positional vacancies require a lot of work-arounds. Loaded employees get overloaded and some work must be deferred. Our employees can suffer from added stress and our customers can suffer from reduced service. In moderation, these problems are normal to most business. However, if hiring problems persist for a long period of time, they will combine with the mass retirement wave to extend, deepen, and compound the normal personnel problems.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

From a personnel perspective, rebuilding an organization is more challenging than replacing or reloading. The retirement trek that has begun for the baby boomers means more rebuilding will be required.

Make the time, while you can, to discover the new calculus for your organization. This should lead to activities that focus on and invest in the people remaining in your organization. Think succession planning on steroids. Prioritize your services and simplify the processes. Eliminate waste. Make sure there is an understanding as to what it takes to keep the lights on.

Finally, learn about any hiring difficulties that are emerging in your area. There is a lot of good information available on these subjects. Study up and network with your colleagues for answers. None of that is effective unless you take the important first steps of understanding your organization's workforce profile and forecasting the impacts

of the impending turnover. The sooner you understand the issues, the sooner your answers can be found. 

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