

We can act now to soften blow of retirement crunch

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BY PAUL HERBERT

The Chicago area is poised for one of the largest employment turnovers in history. According to a recently announced study from the Chicago Jobs Council, an estimated 41 percent of the city's work force will retire within the next 15 years. The ripple effect of this monumental attrition could be staggering to our economy.

Nationally, 76 million baby boomers are expected to retire within the next 10 years and there are only 46 million Americans positioned to replace them. A gap of 30 million people is something we're not going to overcome overnight. Even more troubling locally, according to the jobs study, is that 46 percent of students in Chicago Public Schools system do not complete high school, let alone attend college or some form of secondary education.

While it's easy to point out these unbelievable numbers to demonstrate the impending employment gap, it's nearly impossible to quantify the level of expertise that will begin retiring in the next decade. With about 565,000 people preparing for retirement in Chicago alone, each of whom worked for an average of 30 years, we need to prepare ourselves with the undeniable reality that nearly 17 million years of experience is getting ready to walk out the door.

It's paramount that we begin addressing this today and bridge the knowledge gap that's just around the corner. While there isn't a magic wand we can wave to lessen the impact, there are a number of initiatives that can create the foundation for minimizing the effects.

First, attract and retain older workers through part-time and other alternative working arrangements. A retired worker could serve as a consultant, helping the company on a part-time basis by training a new employee or serving as a mentor. In addition, they could serve as subject matter experts and be available for interviews when a specific project or challenge arises.

We need to preserve knowledge before it walks out the door. Tools like corporate directories must do more than simply provide titles and contact information. They must serve a newfound resource for an employee's expertise. In providing employees with a window into a company's vast skill sets that have been honed with decades of experience, workers new to the business decision process will have an invaluable directory of subject matter experts to help guide them. In creating an innovative environment such as this, companies can reduce costs and drastically improve efficiency because new employees will spend far less time trying to figure out how to do something and more time actually doing it.

Providing re-training opportunities for workers who are changing careers can lessen the impact. Conduct annual dialogues with employees to identify individuals who would like to move to other positions and provide training as needed. By proactively identifying people who may leave a position, the company can begin preparing for a replacement. In addition, it is important to be aware of specific business units that are vulnerable to high turnover and plan accordingly.

From the start, encourage the work force -- both young and old -- to collaborate on projects. Make sure every department is well integrated with a diverse demographic and encourage cross-team work. When new employees join a company, have them participate in an orientation program with

an older employee to engage them in the company, and educate them on specific job functions and their role in the department.

Finally, ensure that mature workers are both comfortable with, and are able to use, new technologies in the workplace. When the younger generation enters the work force, they will expect to use high-technology tools. A company can ease the transition period if retiring workers have been using the same tools.

By no means do the initiatives outlined above alone hold the key to solving the employment challenges we will face over the next 15 years, but they provide the steppingstones for us to begin tackling this issue. If we don't find innovative ways to marry our experienced work force with the next generation of workers, Chicago's in for a long ride.

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