

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY:
EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR OLDER ADULTS
Summary, September Meeting, Vital Aging Network (VAN)
10 to noon, Tuesday, September 9, Fridley Community Center

INTRODUCTIONS

The facilitator, Jan Hively, asked the attendees to introduce themselves and also mention characteristics of the best and worst jobs that they've had. The characteristics tend to be universal, applying for young and old workers alike, but more significant for older adults who are deciding whether or not they wish to remain employed.

What factors contributed to the "best job"? Here are some responses:
Challenging...invigorating...all-consuming...flexible schedule...used my skills...helped people...allowed independence...exciting challenge...follow through from start to finish...generated positive outcomes...solved problems...saw things happen...team effort...endless opportunity...room for creativity...always new things...social relationships...risk...diversity of people...everyone a teacher...used imagination...connected with my passion...global connections...performed valuable service...learned a lot

What factors contributed to the "worst job"? Too much detail...workplace politics...negativity...no respect for people...scut work...no authority to follow through...super controlling boss.

THE BIG PICTURE, Jan Hively, VAN Senior Advisor

Using handouts from a power point presentation, Jan talked about how "older workers" are defined – by age, patterns of age discrimination, changes in health, and patterns of retirement. Older workers will grow as a proportion of all workers, for several reasons:

1. Demographic pattern: the population bulge of baby boomers are now "older workers."
2. New "young-old" generation. Over 3/4ths of older adults report that they are active and feeling healthy into their 80s
3. Retirement pattern. Although the average retirement age has gone down over the years (the national average is now at 62), expectations are changing. Over 80% of the baby boomers now say that they plan to work past traditional retirement age.
4. Economy. A higher cost of living, lower rate of savings, and lower rate of returns on savings are reducing the capacity of older adults to be retired.

THE "BAD" referred to in the title for meeting refers to the current dislocation of older workers. Older workers, particularly middle managers, tend to be laid off first, and this is a time when we have been seeing many layoffs due to the economy. Older worker layoffs can be called early retirements. The savings

from laying off an older worker tends to be greater because he/she is earning a higher wage than starters.

THE “UGLY” refers to age discrimination. Four times Although supervisors say that older workers tend to have a good work ethic and provide experience, knowledge and stability in the workplace, they also say that older workers are inflexible, averse to change, and resistant to learning and understanding new technologies. “Inflexible” is the word most often used by supervisors to describe the deficiencies of an older worker. It’s important to analyze the nature of the inflexibility described by the supervisor. Does it mean that the employee is resisting the new way that things are being done? Or that there is a mismatch between the employee’s skills and the demands of new tasks? Or that there are intergenerational tensions? The fact that making negative judgments based exclusively on age is shown by the recent upsurge of age discrimination complaints.

THE GOOD news is that major employers have not yet changed their policies but retirees are moving around the barriers to fill non-traditional jobs. It is ironic that “flexible” is the word used by older adults to describe their most desirable work arrangements, while at the same time they are being described as “inflexible” in the workplace. The retirees have found flexibility in jobs as independent contractors, on-call workers, temporary workers, and workers provided by contract firms.

WHAT’S BAD?

DAN SEGURA, DISLOCATED WORKER PROGRAM, MN DEPT OF EMPLOYMENT, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (DEED)

Layoffs, mandatory “early retirement,” and the dislocation of older workers fit in this category of “what’s bad.” Dan was himself a dislocated worker 15 years ago. As an interim job, he worked through the Lake Street employment center (now called workforce center) with dislocated workers when Sears closed. He started a job club for older workers in south Minneapolis and became an advisor to other job clubs in the area. Then he started to work statewide on dislocated worker programs.

For the last four years, he’s been a member of the MN Board on Aging, and is now looking for a reappointment. The board has concentrated on health and human services for the frail elderly. He hopes to turn its emphasis around to look at ways of supporting the productivity and active involvement of older adults. This perspective would take account of extended work life.

The economy needs trained people. Employers have not focused on the upcoming labor shortage due to the aging of the population. When Dan has talked with employers, asking them, “How are you planning to respond to the upcoming labor shortage?” they tend to respond, “We’ll just bring them in.” “Them” means “immigrants.” But it takes a minimum of seven years for a new

immigrant to achieve fluency in the English language, 7 – 10 years to understand the subtleties of the language. We have to get the message to workers, employers, and government policy makers. WE ARE FACING A SHORTAGE OF SKILLS. Each of those attending the VAN meeting has from 200 to 800 separate and specific work skills. The economy demands that we grow and nurture and apply all of the skills of all of our people.

Looking at it from the point of view of older adults, the U.S. Department of Labor has reported that the average longevity of white males who retire and do not have a meaningful interest will be 7 to 18 months. Many people think that they are used up when they quit their employment. People who don't stay active, die. Can we afford to waste their skills? We've got to get the message out, "You are valuable!!" Dan hears employers talk about the absenteeism of older workers. But the facts show that older workers are more loyal and have lower rates of absenteeism.

Dan would like to see a couple of companies in Minnesota do what was done by a Massachusetts high-tech company that set up a Florida branch. They recruited a "gold collar workforce." They went after retirees to work 20 hours a week for going rate wages. They offer unpaid time off with the right to return to the job after three months on the job. They provide health coverage that supplements Medicare.

"WHAT'S UGLY?"

PAUL SEARS, MN WORKFORCE CENTER, SOUTH MINNEAPOLIS

Age discrimination is real. Paul recognized that early in his career when he took over from Dan as the support staff for the South Minneapolis experienced workers' job club. Unfortunately, the job club has been disbanded because the staff support was cut. Fortunately, Paul's supervisor gives him the flexibility to advise a variety of job clubs. Paul mentioned that worker flexibility is the A#1 in most demand employment skill, out of the thousands that have been identified.

A video has been prepared that documents the before-and-after experiences of two actors who first dressed up for a job interview and later went as themselves. The first actor was 37 years old, and got the job offer as himself. When he dressed as a person in his late 50s, he got the response, "We'll call you." The second actor was padded to look a candidate in his mid-40s and 60 pounds heavier, "Thank you, we'll call you." Two days later, going as himself, he received a job offer. Age discrimination and all of the other kinds of bias are real in the job market and workplace.

Paul reviewed "Tips to Combat Age Discrimination." As the St. Paul-based consultant, Amy Lindgren, says, "Count your strengths, not just your years. Do NOT be passive."

- Stay physically fit.
- Look up-to-date

- Be current in your field
- Have new ideas and not dwell on the past
- Being computer literate is a given requirement
- Find creative ways to introduce yourself to managers. You may need to abandon a habit of using your resume to make first contact. Help them to get to know you.
- Address employers' fears.
- Seek honest feedback.
- Avoid rigid career goals.
- Consider self employment
- Be willing to compromise on position or salary expectations

Managers hire people who are confident and show they not only look good on paper, but know what's important in the job they are applying for.

If you want to have an ongoing subscription to "Career Connection," the Workforce Center's bimonthly employment news for those in career transition, e-mail Careerconnection2003@yahoo.com.

"WHAT'S GOOD?"

KAREN GREER, RETIREMENT CONSULTANT

What's "good" is the positive message that a lot of people who have been laid off have changed occupations and ended up in satisfying jobs that fit their current interests and skills. People often don't see a range of possibilities for themselves when they are first unemployed. It's important to veg out for a year or 18 months, and debrief. Then, in a relaxed mode, you can work through your story, looking for the lifework themes, finding a sense of purpose, hooking into what life is about.

Our options are limited by our thinking. Networking is important, and hearing the stories of others. If we define ourselves as what we have done in the past, we are stuck. The task is exploring, at your own pace, the full range of what's out there. The answer, ultimately, is inside. "What gives me a charge?" We need the sense that we are making a positive difference and being productive. We need to learn to be reflective – the skills of self-observation. We need to go through the steps of analyzing the elements of what initially seems exciting. Life is a learning laboratory in which we learn as much from our mistakes as our successes.

DISCUSSION

- How do I get in touch with a job club? Bruce Hanson coordinates the Minnesota Job Club Consortium. You can reach him through BruceHanson@e-folio.com.
- Will I be punished with a reduced Social Security check if I work part-time in my last years before collecting Social Security? Isn't the SS check based on your last year of earnings? No. The Social Security Administration averages

your wage over your last 20-30 years of history. You can see the projections through the Social Security Administration's Web site.

- Is there a Skills Assessment Tool so that I could complete a skills assessment? There are some self-assessment tools. The best bet might be to come to one of our weekly "Skills. Skills. Skills" seminars, presented at the Lake Street Workforce Center every Monday afternoon from 1:30 to 4:00. It's open to everyone.
- Is it true that HR people don't like skills resumes, even though jobs counselors tell us to do it that way? Paul responded: Give them the chronological resume that they want, but add in a brief summary of skills in a box below the address, at the beginning of the resume. Karen responded: Take a risk and let them know that you are not "ordinary" but presenting the resume that you think tells the story best. Both commented: It may be better to make your connection to the employer without a resume, first.

Paul Sears said that he is available for questions or interviews at Paul.Sears@state.mn.us

Dan is available for questions at: Dan.Segura@state.mn.us

Karen is available for questions or consultation at: KGCareer@cs.com

HANDOUTS

GENERAL

- Dethmers, R. "Number of worker older Americans up 50%." Minnesota Future Work Scan #4369. June 3, 2003
- Hively, J.M. "The big picture: Employment opportunities for older adults." Powerpoint presentation, September 9, 2003
- Hively, Jan. "Facts related to older workers." 2001.
- Halena, Sue. "Older workforce grows as Americans live longer." Stcloudtimes. January 21, 2003.
- McMurry, Martha. "Long-range projections predict a growing, aging Minnesota population through 2060." Minnesota Journal, August 19, 2003.
- "Older workers, still vital, consider 'what's next?.'" Chicago Tribune, March 19, 2003.
- Smith, Dick. "For our common good." September 9, 2003.
- West Metro Workforce Centers. "Career connection." Bimonthly employment news for those in career transition. August & September 2003 issue.

THE GOOD:

- Uchitelle, Louis. "Older workers are thriving despite recent hard times." NYTimes, September 8, 2003 (reprinted in St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch same day)
- "Older workers will be needed with economy on the upswing." U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging. September 4, 2003.

THE BAD

- Fiedler, Terry. "Job cuts fray white collars." Startribune, April 13, 2003
- Forster, Julie. "Target changes workers' benefits." Startribune, May 10, 2003.
- Svensson, Peter. "For many boomers, savings fall short." Startribune, April 14, 2003

THE UGLY

- Forster, Julie. "Written off." Startribune, April 28, 2003.
- "Back to age discrimination: a pervasive and damaging influence." News release, Administration on Aging, June 11, 2003.
- Sears, Paul. "Tips to combat age discrimination." 3 articles published in 2002 and 2003.