

Employers find old is gold Hospitality industry is mining the talent of mature workers

by Jane W. Auster

The candidate for this hotel job had to have just the right qualifications: able to work potentially long hours, available to serve guests at breakfast, capable of defusing any difficult customer service situations. In the end, The Fairmont Copley Plaza in Boston hired a candidate well into his 50s to fill this exclusive position in Fairmont Gold, a club level featuring a private lounge.

"We wanted someone with more empathy, not a twenty-something doing this on a school break," said Alex Pratt, The Fairmont Copley Plaza's regional director of human resources. "We have some older workers in our restaurant jobs who have owned a restaurant and are successful in their own right. They still very much want to work, and they bring a genuine warmth to the job. Some of our people work two jobs. They have a passion for what they're doing from which we benefit. Maybe they want to be out of the house, and they aren't ready to hang up their work shoes."

At least 15% of The Fairmont Copley Plaza's 400 employees are over 50, and more and more mature workers are applying for positions -- a trend mirrored throughout the hospitality industry.

Snapshot of the industry

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics:

- Accommodation and food services make up about 8.1% of all employment.
- Employment in the accommodation and food services industries is forecast to grow 18% between 2002 and 2012, accounting for more than 1.6 million new jobs.
- At the same time, hospitality will lose 10 million workers in the U.S. by 2010.

Facing a potential labor shortage crisis, the hospitality industry is opening its eyes to an older pool of workers and being pleasantly surprised by what it's finding. Mature workers are looking for jobs...not McJobs that might last six months until something better comes along.

Older workers = desirable workers

Given the choice, many employers are hiring older workers over their younger counterparts:

- Mature employees exhibit stamina and determination.
- They take pride in their work and demonstrate that they really want the job.
- They're reliable, consistent and punctual.
- They offer problem-solving and mathematical skills from years of experience.
- They're not always looking over their shoulder at the next opportunity.
- Their priorities have shifted. They don't face the same financial stresses as younger workers.

Foodservice employers warm to older workers

Fully 60% of employees for Chartwells School Dining Services, part of global contract foodservice and hospitality giant Compass Group, are over 50, and 3% are 65-plus.

"The nature of our work is part-time seasonal (September to June), so it lends itself to someone who's not looking solely at a 40-hour a week foodservice job," says Cathy O'Connor, regional director, Chartwell's. "They might be subsidizing another job. Some are empty nesters who want to get out of the house. They like to travel, and in this job they get Christmas holidays off, March break, school holidays, summers."

Another plus for Chartwells is the ability of these mature employees to work with students. "You're like the mom away from home," says Ms. O'Connor.

Even in a fast-paced foodservice job, mature workers are proving their worth. North American doughnut chain giant Tim Hortons of TDL Group Ltd. relies on older employees to fill a number of jobs at its nearly 3,000 outlets throughout Canada and the U.S. And they find that their older workers act as mentors to the younger staff.

At one store, an employee newly hired as a baker was trained by a mature employee with many years of experience. The older worker demonstrated great patience in training the new recruit, who later became a store manager.

"Our younger staff have an opportunity, through working with our mature employees, to enhance their people skills, while our mature employees feed off the youthful enthusiasm our younger employees bring," says corporate HR director Nan Oldroyd. "The stores are fast paced, but our operating systems are set up to promote teamwork. Our data suggests that our most mature age

groups are not only our most tenured, but work the highest average number of hours per week. This indicates that they are very capable of meeting the challenge.”

Tips for working with mature employees

Recruiter Peter Shrive, a partner with Cambridge Management Planning, offers this advice to employers hiring mature workers for hospitality jobs:

- **Be ready to be more respectful to these employees**, since you might find yourself working with people who are older than you.
- **Consider cutting some slack to older workers**, especially in restaurant jobs, as they might not be as agile or strong, both physically and mentally.
- **Be flexible in your scheduling**. Many older workers enjoy part-time employment because it enables them to travel. Make sure their schedule fits in to your plans.
- **Take the time to accept legitimate criticism** from someone with wisdom and experience. Mature workers are independent and experienced. Chances are they can teach you a thing or two, if you’re willing to listen.
- **Get ready for the different ambitions of the older worker**. You may see a tremendous amount of drive in a younger person that might not be there in an older person, for whom this is a retirement or post-retirement job.
- **Consider whether you want to invest in training and development** – older workers might not be long-service workers. Are you ready for that investment that might not pay long-term dividends?
- **Look for energy and attitude**. If mature workers have a young mind and young attitude, that’s what your customers will see.

Instead of facing a labor crisis, many smart employers are learning that a wealth of qualified, motivated, energetic candidates is already in their midst. In the hospitality industry, employers are discovering that with mature workers, “old” truly is gold.