

Responding to the Challenge of a Changing Workforce: Recruiting Nontraditional Demographic Groups

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As a result of a shortage of qualified applicants and the changing nature of the demographic composition of the workforce, there has been a recent increase in interest among human resource professionals in the targeting of recruitment efforts toward specific subgroups of the population. Based on the professional literature, this article discusses principles for the recruitment of Older Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, and members of racial and ethnic minority groups.

As the 21st Century begins, the common refrain heard from employers in the United States is that they simply cannot find enough employees, let alone skilled employees. As the U.S. economy continues to grow and unemployment drops, the shortage of job applicants remains a significant problem for both the private and the public sector. In response, personnel managers have turned their focus from the more traditional human resource issues to the topic of recruitment strategies. The worker shortage in the U.S. labor force has been accompanied by a change in the demographic makeup of the workforce. This has led the popular press to pay much greater attention to recruitment issues involving specific subgroups of the population, and this interest has spilled over into the professional and scientific literature. In this article, we will explore the questions raised in recruiting members of three nontraditional groups — Older Adults (specifically Older Adult Baby Boomers), Generation Xers, and Minority Group² members. We refer to these groups as nontraditional, only in the sense that there seems to be a consensus that each presents unique and different recruiting challenges, and in that each has attracted their share of recent media attention.

Referring to Baby Boomers—individuals born between 1946 and 1964—as a non-traditional demographic group may be our most controversial classification. Howev-

er, Baby Boomers have become nontraditional through the simple process of aging. The first wave of "Boomers," born between 1946 and 1954, will start to turn 62, a traditional peak retirement age, in 2008. Older Baby Boomers represent a sizable labor pool—if they can be convinced to remain in or to re-enter the job market—and also have characteristics that make them appealing to the public sector.

Generation Xers—individuals born between 1965 and 1980—are also aging and quickly being replaced by younger groups of initial job seekers. However, Generation Xers continue to attract a great deal of media and human resource attention due to their propensity to: 1) delay entry into the regular job market; and 2) possess skills which are extremely valued by public sector organizations seeking information technology professionals.

Despite recent gains, members of racial and ethnic minorities have higher rates of unemployment and are more likely to be underemployed than are whites. As with older adults, this demographic group is also growing in terms of their percentage of the population. As a result, minorities can be thought of as representing a third nontraditional demographic group where increased recruitment efforts should be directed.

It should be noted that in this article we use "recruitment" in the broad sense of the term as including the initial process of generating a pool of applicants, the initial formal contact between the organization and the candidate, the screening process, and the hiring process. However, our primary concern is with the initial stages of generating and attracting applicants and the initial exchange of information. In addition, although a wealth of popular literature exists on these groups, our primary goal is to offer practical suggestions based on the professional and the scientific literatures.

Recruiting Older Baby Boomers

By this point in time, most employers are aware of the forecasted demographic shifts that will result in a shortage of skilled workers. For example, there will be a dramatic decrease in the proportion of older, skilled workers, which is expected to significantly impact the workforce around 2010, when Baby Boomers will begin to retire in large numbers.³ In addition, the number of retirees will double in the time period between 1995 and 2025.

The nature of work is also changing. The pressure to find skilled workers is already being felt in many industries, and particularly for information technology jobs in the public sector, and has increased the need for special employment arrangements (i.e., part-time, temporary, or contractual workers). While older workers and retirees are logical choices for this type of work, relatively few organizations actively recruit older workers.⁴ Organizations need to be prepared to face the changes carried by this reduction in the available workforce. However, most organizations—public and private—are not prepared to deal with the upcoming demographic shift. Given the increase in the need for part-time workers, the anticipated shortage of skilled applicants, and the basic belief that most companies are unprepared for filling this need, understanding how to recruit older workers and retirees is a very pressing issue indeed.

Factors Affecting the Recruitment of Older Baby Boomers

Companies are increasingly interested in retaining or rehiring older workers as a means to anticipate or compensate for labor shortages.⁵ The decision to rehire and recruit Older Baby Boomers should be based in part on an understanding of the characteristics of this group.⁶ Many of the characteristics that vary in this group are significantly related to retirement behavior. In attempting to understand the recruitment process with Older Baby Boomers, one should consider health, finances, and education, since these significantly predict retirement age and adjustment.⁷

Boomers are more educated than any previous cohort, have accumulated a great deal of wealth, and are healthier than previous generations.⁸ The higher education level should make them particularly appealing for white-collar jobs, while those older adults with lower education levels are more likely to consider relatively unskilled positions post-retirement.

The favorable level of health is also encouraging for prospective employers. The positive levels of health are likely to encourage workers who are given proper incentives to stay in the workforce or return to the workforce, as healthy individuals are more likely to delay retirement as compared to those who are in poor health.⁹

Financial comfort is also a predictor of interest in continued employment and the decision to retire.¹⁰ For those who need financial aid, benefits and salary are likely to be determinants of job choice. For those who are financially secure, social and other nonfinancial incentives are much more likely to be successful in recruiting than a purely financial appeal.

Increasing Older Baby Boomer Recruitment

A review of the literature in this area suggests that there are distinct steps of the recruiting process that deserve attention.¹¹ As will be seen, these steps in attracting older workers are unique in some respects, and are not the same as traditional means of recruiting designed for younger employees. We will review three different segments of recruiting in turn, providing specific recommendations along the way. First is the advertising process, consisting of the message of the ad as well as the appropriate placement and modality of the ad. The second part of the process is the actual recruitment interview and follow-up, and consists of the environment created for the older worker by the recruiter and the organization. Finally, the nature of the work itself, such as the flexibility of hours worked, is an important determinant of the probability that an older worker will accept employment.

As a first step in recruiting Older Baby Boomers, it is critical to evaluate the nature of advertising materials. Relevant aspects of advertising include the photographs used, the actual content of the advertisement, and the placement and type of recruiting advertisement. The photographs used in recruiting materials should incorporate older employees.¹² Specific examples can be drawn from employers who have been able to successfully attract older employees. For example, Hardees, one of the more successful recruiters of older workers, pictures a "50-something" man with a bored expression beside a golf bag and a caption asking the readers if they are tired

of being retired.¹³ Such photographs of older employees should also be incorporated into company training literature and promotional literature in order to create the impression that older people are valued employees.¹⁴

The message of the advertisement can also send a positive signal to older employees. Many companies use phrases such as “experienced” or “mature” in their ads to convey that past work experience is valued.¹⁵ While these seem like small changes, creating a positive first impression that conveys that older workers are welcome is an important first step in attracting them to the firm. It is important to note that one should be inclusive in descriptions of work in order to make older employees feel that the job may be suitable for them.

Perhaps the most critical consideration in the advertising process is the placement and modality of the ad. The usual outlets for placing ads are designed to reach younger employees. In terms of where to place ads of appeals for workers, many organizations have been extremely inventive in their approach to targeting older employees.¹⁶ Adult education centers, temporary agencies, company retiree fairs, senior centers, civic groups, neighborhoods with a large percentage of older people, and even malls and libraries have been used to reach these prospective employees.¹⁷ In addition, the Internet continues to grow exponentially, with older adults being one of the fastest growing user groups. There are also job postings and related services offered by the organizations set up to serve older people, such as the AARP and the National Council on Aging. A relatively new program, the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, holds much promise for locating interested older workers. This program, now being implemented, involves a “one-stop career center” for all state employment and training agencies. All local training and employment services will be consolidated, so older workers (and those of other ages) may explore job listings at their convenience.¹⁸

Recruiting from within should also be considered by public sector organizations. An inventive strategy used by Travelers Insurance is an “Unretirement Fair” where employees approaching retirement are educated about the part-time work opportunities available in the firm.¹⁹ More intensive strategies for recruiting within include discussing flexible working options or retraining options with workers approaching retirement. Finally, some companies, such as Traveler’s Insurance, have developed retiree job banks composed of former full-time workers interested in part-time employment.²⁰ All of these strategies share in common the attempt to retain or at least have resumes from current employees. These strategies are particularly important in jobs where the labor is skilled, and training costs are relatively high.

While the initial stage of recruiting is critical, the attraction of a worker to a firm may be significantly altered by his/her impression of the interviewer and the company. A major concern of older adults re-entering the labor pool is potential age discrimination. Unfortunately, this fear may be well founded, since researchers often find that employers are ambivalent about hiring older employees and may have negative beliefs about their abilities. Thus, a company should take every possible means to ensure that a supportive environment is provided for older employees, and that a positive impression of the company is conveyed, even in the initial interview. In design-

ing an interview to attract older workers, companies can benefit by reviewing and revising the specific content of interviews. Interview content refers to the type of questions in the process, the actual choice of the interviewer, and the description of the company given during the interview. When describing the company to the applicant during the initial interview, a firm should emphasize the aspects of work which are most appealing to older workers — the flexibility of hours, scheduling freedom, social aspects, and the money and health benefits involved are important factors in the decisions of many older workers.²¹ Such attempts to tailor interviews to older workers are a positive step in making the applicant feel that the organization will accept the Older Baby Boomer.

The third major consideration in recruiting older workers is deciding which work options will be most appealing to the Older Baby Boomer. While health care provisions and salary are important considerations in attracting an older worker into a part-time position, these may be less under the control of an employer than other factors. We will focus on the flexibility and type of work offered to the older worker, since an employer may have more discretion as far as changing these options is concerned.

Innovative techniques have been developed for attracting older workers to organizations.²² One of the most popular options to older workers is phased or partial retirement that entails cutting the 40-hour workweek back to 20 or fewer hours. A closely related work option is flextime, where employees have control over the time and number of hours worked. The days and hours worked may vary from week to week. Other options include job sharing, where a number of workers perform a given job on a less than full-time schedule. For instance, some companies allow older workers to work two or three days a week in a given job. Finally, some organizations use older workers as consultants. While some of these programs involve internal recruitment of older workers, the literature suggests that the preference for part-time work and flexible working hours is relevant to external recruiting as well.²³ Maintaining flexibility in the number of hours worked seems to be a critical component in the success of most recruitment programs aimed at older adults, regardless of the type of work involved or whether the company is pursuing workers internally or in the outside market.

Recruiting Generation X

Individuals born between the years 1965 and 1980 are usually identified as Generation Xers.²⁴ As a group, Generation Xers have been exposed to a variety of unique factors that have helped to shape their attitudes toward work, and the confluence of these factors has also resulted in an identifiable Generation X culture.²⁵ From a recruitment perspective, Generation Xers have attracted interest because of their tendency to delay entry into the workforce and to have held a variety of temporary or McJobs. Thus, although the youngest Generation Xers have already reached the age of 20, many members of this group remain active job seekers. Having grown up with computers, they have also been targeted by those organizations seeking to fill information technology positions.

Factors Affecting the Recruitment of Generation X

Generation Xers have entered the workforce during a period of unusually low unemployment rates and have become accustomed to a job market where the applicant is in a favorable position relative to the organization. As a result, Generation Xers tend to feel that they can be selective in choosing employers and jobs and should be offered additional incentives by employers.

At the same time, both positive and negative work-related traits have been attributed to Generation Xers. Although often described as more individualistic, members of Generation X have also been described as "slackers" (i.e., unmotivated workers who place greater value on leisure activities).²⁶ Generation Xers also have a more liberal view of politics, which involves rejecting traditional parties.²⁷

One of the most notable cultural markers associated with membership in the group is a heightened sense of technological sophistication and familiarity with computer operation. This includes a much greater reliance on the Internet as a medium of communication and a source of job information.²⁸

Increasing Generation X Recruitment

Generation Xers tend to prefer a more autonomous workplace and also prefer a reward system that includes rapid raises and promotions for individual achievement.²⁹ This presents a challenge in terms of a basic incompatibility with traditional public sector compensation systems. As a result, public sector organizations should emphasize alternative job attributes. One factor which should be stressed is the service aspect of public sector work, as Generation Xers tend to favor jobs where they can be seen as doing work having social value.³⁰

A second point of emphasis in describing the benefits of public sector work would be the opportunity to balance work and leisure. Generation Xers want to play hard as well as work hard, and, thus, respond unfavorably to jobs where they are required to devote themselves totally to the company.³¹ In advertising and interviews, public sector organizations should demonstrate their commitment to programs that allow employees to balance family and work issues. Generation Xers want to hear employers say that they believe employees "should have a life" and not be required to dedicate themselves "24-7" (i.e., 24 hours a day and 7 days a week) to the company.³²

The medium, as well as the message, must be altered in order to effectively recruit members of Generation X. For Generation Xers, the Internet has become a major medium of communication, and, in order to effectively recruit Generation Xers, public sector organizations must learn how to most effectively utilize the power offered by online recruiting and selection. However, in order to maximize the potency of the design process, organizations must also understand the psychology of the Web surfer. In response, an entire article in this special issue has been devoted to this topic and appears elsewhere in this journal; for in-depth information on the topic of recruiting over the Web, we direct the reader's attention to the article dealing with the "Quest for the Qualified Job Surfer."³³

Generation Xers also have grown up with a model of recruiting where the job

seeker is often treated as a customer. In this model, there is an attempt to speed up the whole process of recruiting, selection, and the job offer. The problem in the public sector is often one of requiring job applicants to jump over too many hurdles. Thus, the hiring process is stretched out over too long of a time period.³⁴ In order to attract Generation X applicants, public sector organizations need to find methods that speed up and simplify the hiring process. One alternative that can be used to expedite the whole process is a greater reliance on online recruiting and selection. To remain competitive in attracting Generation Xers, public sector organizations will need to adapt innovative recruitment tactics that make efficient use of technological advances.

Minority Recruitment

As compared to whites, members of racial or ethnic minorities are more likely to be either unemployed or underemployed. For instance, the current unemployment rate for African-Americans is approximately double that of whites, with the Hispanic rate falling between the two extremes.³⁵

Thus, private sector organizations faced with a shortage of qualified workers may find that minority workers represent an untapped potential labor pool. However, hidden somewhere in these disparate employment figures are both the root of the problem and the solution to the problem. Public sector organizations have attempted in the past to increase minority representation, with perhaps mixed results. The research literature suggests two primary groups of factors that may directly affect the propensity of minorities to apply for employment in public sector organizations. These topics include perceptual factors and reactions to standard personnel selection procedures (i.e., top-down hiring practices).

Factors Affecting Minority Recruitment Efforts

Minority groups typically perceive that they have had few opportunities for success in American society, and that they have received fewer rewards for their achievements. As an example, African-Americans consistently report that barriers exist which undermine their educational and employment opportunities, that they receive lower levels of reinforcement from peers and others for achievement, and expect to receive smaller rewards for their attainments.³⁶ Likewise, Hispanics experience feelings of alienation from educational settings, and anticipate greater barriers to educational and career success than whites.³⁷ Further complicating the matter, African-Americans and other minorities often lack visible role models in organizational positions. They may also have limited access to information about available jobs due to inadequate social networks.³⁸ In addition, the potential for encountering discrimination and racism in organizations leads to lower expectations of occupational and career success. Thus, to maximize minority inclusion, public sector organizations must take steps to minimize the effects of past discouragement, while still emphasizing the importance of merit and achievement.

Cognitive ability tests (e.g., job knowledge, IQ, etc.) have been consistently

shown to be among the most valid predictors of job performance, and their usefulness is maximized by the use of top-down hiring procedures.³⁹ However, their usage tends to result in adverse impact against minorities.⁴⁰ As a result, minorities are often openly contemptuous of employment testing, question the face validity and fairness of cognitive ability tests, and self-select out of multistage selection systems that utilize such tests.⁴¹ The problem then for public sector organizations is one of how to maximize minority recruitment while retaining an emphasis on achievement and merit-based selection.

Increasing Minority Recruitment

In order to enhance personnel decision making, it is important that human resource practitioners in the public sector hire applicants on a meritorious basis. In doing so, organizations should strive to maximize the perceived fairness, as well as the validity, of selection systems. Minority testtakers view cognitive tests with suspicion, yet respond positively to face-valid tests. Hence, it is suggested that employers use valid, job-relevant tests, and attempt to maximize the face-validity of these tests. By doing so, not only is the process perceived as being more equitable and merit-based, but the test-taking motivation of minority applicants is also increased.⁴²

Beyond the legal stipulations, research suggests that the use of fair selection procedures aids minority recruitment efforts. In general, minorities are more likely to apply to organizations that are viewed as fair and socially responsible. Furthermore, minorities are less likely to select out of applicant pools, when an organization is viewed positively, and the selection procedures are viewed as being fair and job related.

To increase the recruitment of minorities by public employers, successful minority job incumbents should be used in advertising (e.g., commercials, pamphlets, Web sites) and in recruitment efforts. When feasible, organizations should deploy minorities as recruiters, particularly in settings where minorities are prevalent (e.g., historically black colleges or universities, majority-black or Hispanic geographic areas, etc.). The presence of successful minority employees sends a signal to applicants that the organization is committed to diversifying its workforce, that potential role models exist within the organization, and that minorities have a strong likelihood of success. These actions have the powerful impact of enhancing the company image as an ardent employer of minorities.

Public organizations should also consider developing their own future applicant pool through cooperative and outreach efforts with existing educational institutions, including grade and high schools, and by setting up their own training centers.⁴³ Minority recruitment efforts are also enhanced by developing internship arrangements or other formal partnerships with colleges and universities, particularly those with high minority student enrollments. The United States Office of Personnel Management (OPM) developed a program, Project Partnership, which combined the resources of the OPM, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, and National IMAGE, Inc. (a Hispanic employment, education, and civil rights agency) in recruiting minority college students for government jobs. In addition, the OPM has

sponsored alliances between federal agencies and historically black colleges and universities for the purpose of recruiting top minority students. Meaningful partnerships have been formed between public sector organizations and secondary schools in the form of employers offering summer internships for students.⁴⁴ Furthermore, organizations may benefit from collaborating with local school districts, which offer adult basic literacy education (ABLE) and English proficiency training, in order to increase the number of potential applicants across the skill spectrum.

Organizations offering such programs should emphasize to students the importance of developing job-related knowledges, skills, and abilities. As such, this information may serve to increase minority students' motivation to perform well academically and develop useful job skills, thus making them more marketable to prospective employers. Furthermore, the mere act of organizations showing interest in minority students may communicate to them that these institutions care about their well-being. This may improve minorities' perceptions of such organizations, thus increasing their propensity to seek employment with socially conscious employers.

A discussion of the recruitment of minorities would not be complete without some discussion of affirmative action. By definition, affirmative action efforts seek to increase the representation of minorities through the consideration in decision making of applicant race or protected-group status and include a variety of recruitment-oriented methods. Given the goals of affirmative action, it is somewhat surprising that relatively little research attention has been directed toward the question of the effects of affirmative action policies on the attraction of applicants to an organization.

An organization's affirmative action or diversity policy is an important factor in shaping its recruitment efforts and its image among minority applicants. However, the manner in which this information is presented will also have an important impact on applicant attitudes. Minorities do respond more favorably to advertisements or recruitment efforts that include an equal opportunity statement encouraging minorities to apply.⁴⁵ However, both self-interest and perceptions of justice/fairness may mediate the effect of the type of affirmative action policy on the person's degree of attraction and likelihood of applying to the organization. That is, in order to be effective, affirmative action procedures must be perceived as just and fair, and emphasizing merit or ability.

The organization can influence fairness perceptions through the content of the communications it uses to frame its affirmative action message. Communications regarding affirmative action should emphasize that affirmative action is a means for decreasing discriminatory barriers and restoring equity to minority members. Thus, affirmative action should be presented as a method of increasing the fairness and justice of organizational selection systems through its emphasis on the merit principle. As with other groups, minorities are more likely to respond in a positive manner to an organization that creates a climate of achievement.⁴⁶

Summary and Conclusions

In response to a shortage of job applicants, recruiters have begun to target their appeals to specific demographic groups. In theory, this increases the efficiency of recruiting. In this article, we have discussed some of the characteristics of three groups of interest — Older Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, and Minorities — and based on those characteristics, we have generated suggestions for more effective recruiting in the public sector.

In order to increase the recruitment of Older Baby Boomers:

- Design and place ads so that they appeal to the older adult.
- Direct organizational efforts toward retaining current employees.
- Consider initiating specific activities, such as job fairs, that are oriented toward the older worker.
- Offer alternative and flexible work arrangements.

In order to increase the recruitment of Generation Xers:

- Emphasize the social values of public service.
- Stress the existence of a climate where there can be a work-leisure balance and where employees are encouraged to have a life outside of work.
- Make use of the Internet in recruiting.
- Find methods of streamlining recruitment, selection, and hiring.

In order to increase Minority recruitment:

- Create the perception, and the reality, that the selection process is fair and nondiscriminatory.
- Design and place ads so that they appeal to the minority applicant.
- Consider initiating specific activities (e.g., job fairs, educational alliances) that are oriented toward minorities.
- In describing affirmative action or diversity initiatives, emphasize the importance of individual merit and achievement.

Regardless of the group targeted, public sector organizations today are attempting to become employers of choice (i.e., organizations which have an extremely positive image and are able to attract top performers away from their competitors). In order to become an employer of choice, an organization must first create a climate for achievement.⁴⁷ That is, the organization must create a climate where potential job candidates feel that it will be an accomplishment to earn a job with the organization, and that once they have a job, the individual's performance will be rewarded. Fortunately, public sector organizations have often proven adept at creating a climate where applicants feel as if they have earned a job based upon individual merit. The new challenge for the public sector is to maintain this climate of achievement while also increasing the efficiency of the recruitment process.

Notes

- ¹ The production of this article was a team effort. However, the first author accepts responsibility for final decisions regarding content and editing. As such, any disagreements regarding content or other comments should be directed to the first author, Dennis Doverspike. We would also like to thank Leilani de Saram, Palm Beach County, for her comments relevant to this manuscript.
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