

Corporations Finding a Valuable Resource in Hiring Senior Citizens

By: Karla Jo Helms

What is the responsibility of our corporate leaders when facing a world where a large majority regards senior citizens as a group of second-class citizens? Statistics show that seniors (65+) represent 12.7% of U.S. population, about one of every eight Americans.

Mature adults are the fastest growing demographic segment of the population and at age sixty-five, 23% are still working for a variety of reasons – to supplement their income or their health insurance benefits; to not have to be dependent upon relatives; or just to continue to make use of their talents and abilities by working. (1)

Private Industry Taking Notice

Privately-held corporations are taking notice. A Clearwater, Florida-based corporation, PostcardMania, started hiring more senior citizens. When the CEO's mother passed away due to cancer, Gendusa started looking for something for her father to do.

"His whole life revolved around my mother," said Joy, "I noticed that without something to create on, he was not as happy." Joy hired her father, not expecting the surprising outcome.

"The staff loved him – and he loved them. I saw him light up when he got to contribute to the overall expansion of the company."

Not only did Joy's father, Bernie Lebowitz, get attention, but he was invaluable in working on a much needed project to identify reasons for failed sales calls so that targeted marketing messages could be tailored to those past prospects and clients to generate more revenue.

"He was so conscientious - he would work on the weekends to ensure that he got his job done and ensured it he did more than he did the week before - every week," said Joy.

Bernie, a successful entrepreneur in the shipping industry before retirement, recommended his friend, Murray Schact, for hire to the PostcardMania employee roster as well. Schact, a former IBM executive, applied and came on board to help PostcardMania maximize their database for increased sales.

Before hiring her father, the majority of PostcardMania was a large percentage of young aspiring adults with little or no experience. That younger demographic – willing, eager minds that could learn a trade - excelled into Gendusa's top executives, being paid well above the norm. Gendusa quickly boomed her enterprise into the fastest-growing direct mail marketing firm in the nation recognized by Inc. Magazine in 2005. But bringing

experienced, well-educated, elderly employees into the mix changed the chemistry of the company – a change that was a welcome to Joy.

“It’s *not* that I thought that elderly employees would *not* be an asset,” Joy said, “Senior citizens rarely came in to apply for jobs here.” Since the hire of Bernie and Murray, PostcardMania’s Human Resources has expanded its hiring pools to more mature applicants. There is a bevy of older generation employees that work at PostcardMania now – many on their 2nd and 3rd careers.

The prevailing thought around the country is that people want to quit working when they are done with their 25, 30, or 50 year career. “I have found that the majority of seniors that apply (at PostcardMania) still want to be able to contribute to be useful in their lives,” said Cindy Wilson, PostcardMania’s VP of Human Resources.

Murray, now a Boca Raton citizen who in his career-life at IBM created the flight software for the airline industry, had been retired for over 15 years. He now works for PostcardMania remotely from home. PostcardMania’s IT division set Murray up to be able to access the company’s database and continue his work from afar.

“I am so thankful to be able to work on something worthwhile and meaningful,” said Murray, “It (PostcardMania) literally gave me my life back – I mean that.”

Corporate Giants Also Take Heed

Corporate giants are also taking notice of the elderly as a valuable resource and enlisting senior citizens for help – not just in volunteer activities, but in creating new careers that allows them to exercise their hard-won experience and expertise. Likewise this ‘help’ is giving these veterans their 2nd and 3rd careers.

Publix, the largest employee-owned supermarket chain in the United States, founded by the late George W. Jenkins in 1930 in Winter Haven, Florida, has a corporate philosophy to provide a diverse workforce and is known for its employment of senior citizens, where one of out every five Publix employees are older than 50. These ‘mature associates’ are a large part of the Publix workforce and make up 30,000 of their 141,000 total employees.

“Mature Associates offer valuable skills, maturity and experience,” said Shannon Patten, Publix Media and Community Relations Manager. “They have a strong work ethic, many skills and job knowledge that they share with our younger associates.” Shannon says the corporate philosophy is such that they encourage an environment where senior citizens will want to apply.

Even Wal-Mart, despite their recent bad rap in the media, is one of the leading employers of senior citizens in the United States, employing nearly a quarter million associates - just less than 20% of Wal-Mart’s workforce is at least 55 years old.

Senior citizens or ‘mature associates’ are becoming an integral part of the workforce and

is one of the ways corporations can take responsibility for the social and economic welfare of our country.

(1) taken from www.seniorjobbank.org

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About the Author:

Karla Jo Helms is the Vice President Public Relations for *PostcardMania* (www.PostcardMania.com). **PostcardMania** is a full service postcard direct mail marketing company which includes graphic design, printing, highly-targeted mailing list acquisition and mailing services with FREE marketing advice. They help small businesses all over the country to expand through the use of direct mail marketing techniques.