

Senior prefers working over retirement in her 'golden' years

HOME OFFICE | Fiona Barry, 66, works for a firm singled out as a top employer of people over 50 years of age

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Deep Cove senior Fiona Barry sees absolutely no reason to quit her full-time job with Metasoft Systems Inc. and settle into the "golden" years of retirement.

After all, the 66-year-old Barry -- who was hired by the Vancouver-based firm eight years ago at the tender age of 58 -- has the best of both worlds. She not only earns a full-time salary, but rises early most mornings and takes a short walk to her home office, where she works as a sales account manager and takes in a lovely view from her office window.

But Barry is lucky to work for a company that, along with several other Canadian companies, has been singled out for being a top employer of people over 50 years of age.

She is also part of a growing wave of employees whose employers are making special efforts to both accommodate existing and new staff members aged 50 and over. Companies are offering such progressive options as home offices, flexible hours and compressed work weeks -- arrangements that are particularly appealing to older workers.

In Barry's case, she works four of five days each week from home, largely setting her own hours so she can spend more time with her husband and family, including helping out with her young grandson when the need arises.

"This is wonderful, this is a great company to work for," Barry said in an interview. "They recognize older people's skills, no question about it. And a home office is very important to me. It makes it much easier for me to plan my day so that I'm not restricted to nine to five. This is absolutely a huge advantage. Not having to commute gives me extra time for everything. And I've got an office with a view.

"I'm taking this six months at a time, but I plan on working here as long as I'm successful with them."

Metasoft, a high-tech software company that provides funding information and services for the non-profit sector, recently received a Best Employer Award for 50-plus Canadians from the Workplace Institute, a Toronto-based consulting and research firm that specializes in the mature workforce.

The other B.C. firm to win the award was Penticton-based Excell Services, a 600-employee call centre where there are flexible hours, no retirement policies, plenty of promotions for those over 50, and retirees have the ability to top up their retirement funds.



CREDIT: Glenn Baglo, Vancouver Sun
Fiona Barry works from her Deep Cove home office. Her company Metasoft has won an award for its work in hiring people over 50.

According to a news release, criteria for the awards are excellence in the areas of hiring, training, career development, health care, employee and family benefits, retirement policy, pensions and pre- and post-retirement support systems.

The average age of all staff is about 40 at Metasoft, which

provides an online database of over 100,000 funders for non-profits in Canada, the U.S. and the U.K.

In 2003, Metasoft initiated its work-from-home program, an initiative that has resulted in 18 per cent of its 81 workers

working from home full-time

and another six per cent part-time.

The reduced amount of time spent commuting, and the ability to work flexible hours, equates to more quality time with family, other interests and hobbies, the company says.

"We introduced [telecommuting options] three years ago and it's been an overwhelming success. It's a great retention strategy. It also provides savings for both the company and employee. In many cases, they work better. We don't ask them to, but they often put in an extra hour. And they can spend more time with their families," Metasoft president and CEO Trevor Skillen said in an interview.

In addition, employees may apply for an unpaid leave of absence at any time, allowing for extra vacations -- something that is often appreciated by the mature worker who (like Barry) has a retired partner, or young family living at a distance.

"We find mature workers bring a lot of talent and expertise to the table," said Skillen. "You get a lot of accumulated expertise, focused energy."

Skillen said his company now has five employees over 65, including Bill Barratt, their manager of grant development services, who was hired at 66 and just turned 70. "He gave me a five-year plan last week. He's not planning on leaving."

Skillen said two of their top three sales people are over 60 and that they're committed and passionate about their work. "I can't think of any downsides. I really don't know why [other] companies aren't focused on this end of the market."

Most of Skillen's staff -- including those over 50 -- work full-time, he added, although the company is considering job-sharing as an option.

According to Metasoft, 27 per cent of their employees are over 50 (compared to 16.9 per cent on average in Canada).

Skillen said their older workers also provide a great balance for their younger employees, who bring curiosity and innovation to the company.

Older workers, however, often face unique challenges, such as retraining in the information technology field, he added. Two of Metasoft's top sales representatives, both over 50, didn't know how to turn on a computer when they started.

Barry, who previously worked in the hospitality industry, understands that. "I went in for an interview and they were very good at accepting me and teaching me computer skills. People over 55 have to get their computer skills up to scratch."

Barry feels a lot of companies are "missing the boat bigtime" by not hiring more older workers. "If more companies offered people over 55 the choice to work from home and then send them on a computer course, they'd get a lot of good people. Plus, the turnover is small."

Barbara Jaworski, president of the Workplace Institute, said in an interview that Canadian companies are starting to look at older workers as a valid option because of the looming talent shortage. "Particularly in B.C. and Alberta, they're getting squeezed and they're taking a second look."

She said an increasing number of companies are on the vanguard of a workplace revolution to overturn outdated, discriminatory hiring and retention policies aimed at workers over 50.

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Profile of Fiona Barry.

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