

Published by Thomson Reuters Canada Ltd.

Step aside, old age – this generation isn't ready

Retaining older workers no longer an option – it's a necessity

A funny thing that happens when we turn 50. Employers start asking about retirement, we're left out of succession plans and our kids raise an eyebrow when we mention the next ski trip or white water adventure.

We're neither young nor old yet society expects us to pack it in, pull up a rocking chair and take up cross-stitch. But an entire generation-and-a-half is saying, "No thanks" to societal expectations surrounding the 50-plus crowd. Composed of the veteran and boomer generation — whom I call "KAA-Boomers" — this group is radically redefining what it means to be in that time between middle age and old age.

There is a difference between age as a number and aging. Age has often been viewed as a disability but the concepts of age and disability need to be separated to truly understand this modern approach to aging. Being old doesn't mean being infirm and those between 50 and 80 have a very good chance of being in excellent health. These people want to live their lives with impact, leave a legacy and give back to their communities.

The seed for all this was planted in the 1930s when the concept of retirement was created. Back then, we were only expected to live to 65, so social security could easily fill the few years between work and death.

But this idea of creating economic security at a personal level also produced a purpose gap that Marc Freedman, author of *The Big Shift: Navigating Life Beyond*



■ GUEST COMMENTARY

BARB JAWORSKI

Middle Age, describes as "too old to work, too young to die."

As the 20th century evolved, lifespans increased while average retirement ages decreased, lengthening the purpose gap period of our lives, according to Freedman. The solution? We invented the "golden years" which changed the idea of retirement from a boring economic security program to the crowning achievement of the North American dream.

Suddenly, it was all about "freedom 55" and water cooler chat revolved around boats, RVs and exotic vacations. But as lifespans lengthened and social security weakened, the accessibility of freedom 55 faltered.

It turns out we couldn't retire at 55 — or even 59 — and many of us breathed a sigh of relief as province after province lifted the mandatory retirement age.

Turning 55 has become an opportunity to evaluate where we want to spend the next two or three decades of our working lives, and it doesn't require a leap of faith to understand most of us have no desire to continue working for a company that doesn't acknowledge us or offers us an unfulfilling job.

As a result, boomers are changing careers, starting up businesses, divorcing and remarrying. They are filling their years with purpose and passion.

All of this carries with it the potential to be one of the greatest transformations in the 21st century, characterized by reinvention of retirement convention. Most people in their 50s and 60s feel they're in their prime. They're not ready to be put out to pasture.

Counter this with the fact that, despite the efforts of HR leaders and marketers, both Canadian and American culture is rife with blatant ageism and ageist expectations. But these individuals are as unconcerned with societal expectations as they ever were. If society won't willingly accept this shift, they will force the issue.

Employers have a big challenge ahead of them. By 2025, 20 per cent of Canada's population will be over 65. Most organizations are woefully unprepared for this coming shift and many are already in the midst of a workforce crisis — experienced workers are leaving very big shoes to fill.

These workers rose up through the ranks of their organization, building experience and corporate memory as they

went. This generation has seen it all and has the experience and capacity to deal with whatever issues arise on a day-to-day basis. When they leave, they take that knowledge and experience with them, usually resulting in significant downtime for the organization.

Unfortunately, there is no one waiting in the wings to replace the departing boomers. During the recession of the early 1990s, generation-X workers, who held the majority of lower echelon jobs at the time, were downsized.

This interrupted their ability to rise up the ladder and gain the skills necessary to

replace the previous generation of organizational leaders. No organization is feeling the pinch more than the Canadian government. There are so few gen-X leaders, departments are battling over the few who are experienced enough to take over the reins.

Although gen Ys make up one of the largest demographics to enter the workforce since the boomers, they are still too inexperienced to step in (some even say it takes up to three gen Ys to replace one retiring worker).

Retaining older workers is no longer an option, it's a necessity and it's up to HR to illustrate the situation to their C-suite and

do what it takes to retain and reward these workers.

As a result, old-school "best practices" — such as laying off older workers to make room for younger workers — have become worst practices.

Barbara Jaworski is the founder and CEO of the Workplace Institute and developer of the Older Workforce Strategy Toolkit. She is author of two books in the KAA-Boomer series and co-organizer of the Summit on Mature Workforces taking place in Alberta in 2012. She can be reached at bjaworski@workplaceinstitute.org.