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FROM RETIRED TO HIRED

By Suzanne Kimball

Harold Kamp had been retired for 12 years when his doctor said it was “time he got back on the world.” At age 81, Kamp was depressed and felt a general lack of purpose. A retired U.S. Department of Defense employee with a college education and impressive 43-year background in business management, Kamp knew he had to go back to work. “I went all over town giving out my resume. Everyone was polite and said they’d call, but those phone calls never came,” says Kamp. “Who wants an 81-year-old guy anyway? If someone came to me and wanted a job at age 81, I’d sure think twice.”

But Utah businesses may want to think twice about *not* hiring retired workers like Kamp, who is now employed with Salt Lake City-based Starwood Hotels & Resorts.

People over 60 may fast become one of America’s largest workforce resources. That is especially so as the nation braces itself for an explosion in the elderly population, a dynamic spurred by the aging of baby boomers.

Population analysts predict that by 2015, 77 million Americans will be over the age of 50. On a local level, Salt Lake County alone has 100,000 people currently 60 and over. By 2015, that number will swell to 216,000. Already, Utah’s unemployment rate sits at barely 3 percent, making competition for resources fierce.

But beyond the sheer numbers of elderly people entering the job market, employers should consider what may be the most compelling reason for hiring older workers: reliability. “Seniors have a great work ethic,” says Stacie Simonsen, human resource manager at Starwood Hotels & Resorts. “They’re enthusiastic and are intent on doing a great job. And besides that, they would never dream of

being late.”

Starwood Hotels & Resorts began hiring older workers about 18 months ago when the company realized it needed more diversity and less turnover. Because Starwood is located in Research Park near the University of Utah, it naturally attracts students who tend to be transient, short-term employees. “We wanted to reduce turnover while increasing reliability. So, it was logical to turn to the elderly as a solution,” says Simonsen.

Sharon Broadwater, a diversity and recruiting manager for Smith’s Food & Drug Stores corporate office, is also keen on hiring older workers. “Seniors are more dependable and seem to do a better job,” says Broadwater. “Store managers at Smith’s must constantly deal with younger workers who want to party on a Friday night, and don’t even think twice about calling to say they won’t be coming into work — even if it means they lose their job. In my opinion, retired workers are a huge untapped resource.”

One way Utah companies connect with retired people is through the Senior Employment Program at Salt Lake County Aging Services — assisting individuals 55 and older. Ron Pierre, program manager for Aging Services, notes that not only do seniors want to re-enter the workplace, but many have to work because they’re not economically prepared to retire.

“Only about one-third of the people over 60 are financially secure enough to retire, and Salt Lake County statistics show that 34,348 people over the age of 55 are making less than \$1,000 per month,” says Pierre. Moreover, the recent May 7 changes in Social Security law have also added to the influx of older workers looking for employ-

ment. Under the changes, retired workers ages 65 to 69 no longer lose \$1 for every \$3 they earn over \$17,000 per year. That means more Utahns who need to work past age 65 will not be penalized for doing so.

Until recently, the employment program at Salt Lake County Aging Services only offered government-subsidized training and job opportunities for low-income individuals, as provided under Title V of the Older Americans Act. But Pierre saw the need to offer more than just government-funded training programs for the aging. “Because there are so many older Utahns now looking for work and only so much money in the public coffers to support that need, Aging Services realized it must establish partnerships with businesses to offer fulfilling work opportunities to retired workers,” Pierre says.

“It just makes sense that if people are coming into Aging Services to get information on Medicare and other services, they should also have access to businesses in the community interested in employing them,” he notes. With that focus, Pierre and his five-person staff set up a community partnership with American Express/Centurion Bank that initially sponsored the program with a community development grant. In addition, American Express began its own Seniors-to-Jobs program to hire older workers.

Salt Lake County Aging Services has since set up a total of 14 partnerships and increased its workload from 30 to 40 customers per month in 1998 to 250 clients today. “What’s unique about Salt Lake County is that we don’t direct people over 60 to Work Force Services. We provide opportunities to rub shoulders with actual businesses looking for the maturity and experience these people can bring to the table,” says Pierre.

Starwood Hotels & Resorts is among the most successful partnerships established by Pierre’s team. Stacie Simonsen and Starwood’s human resource director, Claudia Lambourne, coordinate with Aging Services to locate the right seniors for job placement at Starwood. The company even sponsors a group recruiting session — a job fair of sorts — with the help of the Senior Employment Program.

Seniors are prescreened to meet Starwood’s hiring criteria, then session leaders profile the company, including potential job functions. Recruiters conduct their interviews on the spot. Through these recruiting sessions,

Starwood has hired 25 qualified, older workers as reservation agents.

Smith’s Food & Drug Stores also partners with Aging Services to tap into the resource of retired workers. “Retired people are being hired by Smith’s stores to work in the deli, bakery and other service departments,” says Broadwater. “On the corporate level we hire older workers to process returned checks and conduct telephone surveys.”

Broadwater works closely with Pierre’s staff to dispel fears about hiring older workers. Other community partnerships using Aging Services to hire seniors include Hogle Zoo, which employs older workers to mentor younger ones; the U.S. Department of Commerce, which uses seniors to process the 2000 Census; and Alamo/National Car Rentals.

Dealing With the Barriers

Although the advantages of hiring older workers seems obvious, there are some issues Utah businesses should consider when employing seniors. While most employers require computer skills, some seniors may feel overwhelmed by certain technology. To combat the barrier, Starwood provides week-long, group computer training sessions to teach basic functions. “Teaching in a group session seems to be the most effective way of overcoming the fear behind technology,” says Simonsen. “Employers should realize that even though older people appear to lack self confidence initially, most really do have what it takes to get back into the work force if given a chance.”

Simonsen admits that teaching job skills requires an investment in time and money, but notes that seniors’ reliability and strong work ethic offset those costs. “As we train older workers, we have noticed that almost every person shows up at least a half-hour early,” says Simonsen. “No one from the younger crowd every does that.”

Broadwater agrees that even though seniors are a marvelous asset, fear of technology is a problem. Other work barriers can include transportation and health problems. One way to combat those problems, Broadwater explains, is to be more proactive and creative when hiring seniors.

Pierre agrees. “We have proposed that companies establish an ‘older worker consultant corps’ which allows retir-

ing employees to stay with the company on a part time basis and provide valuable strategic direction only someone with all that experience can give.”

Despite the barriers, those already employing the silver-haired set find more positives than negatives. “I see the national corporations as the vanguard of this whole idea, especially in light of the Social Security changes,” says Pierre. “Utah is probably not far behind, and it would behoove local businesses to jump on the bandwagon now while they still have a chance.”

The days of distributing resumes are gone for Harold Kamp. Three months into the job, he’s doing well. “I love it,” he says. “I like talking to people, I have good problem-solving skills, and like providing customer service.”

In fact, Kamp’s wife, Blanche, age 79, has just been hired to work at Starwood as well. “It seems to me that Starwood’s experience with hiring guys like me has been very good and, if that’s any barometer, other Utah businesses should give it a try,” he says.

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**Miss Kimball was the recipient of the Society of Professional Journalists’ “2001 Excellence in Journalism Award” for this article.*

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