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Column: Bosses Work to Keep Boomers

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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NEW YORK (AP) -- Although baby boomers are starting to head into their sixties, many of them expect to keep working well past the point where their parents retired. So small businesses that depend on boomer employees aren't anticipating an exodus in the next few years.

Nonetheless, some company owners are making sure they retain boomer workers by offering them flex time and extra benefits to help offset any hankerings for retirement.

At Grossman Marketing Group, a marketing and graphic design company in Somerville, Mass., President Steve Grossman expects his boomer employees to keep working even as they begin approaching the traditional retirement age of 65. He noted that many boomers still have plenty of financial obligations, and many just don't feel like calling it a career. (There are an estimated 77 million boomers in the United States, born between 1946 and 1964.)

Still, Grossman said, many boomers will be thinking about retiring, and "to the extent that we as owners of companies can continue to make the job interesting, imaginative and make that job something they look forward to every day ... we can avert that wholesale departure of people."

Being flexible and understanding about the personal issues many boomers face -- for example, their need to care for elderly parents -- is just as important, Grossman said. So his company offers employees paid family leave.

"If we have paid family leave, he (an employee) can keep his job, take care of his mother, not have to go through the guilt of not having done the right thing," said Grossman, whose company has about 120 employees.

The company offers this type of leave to other employees as well, for instance, those having children or needing to care for an ill spouse. It's not all altruism -- Grossman understands that being understanding, even generous, with employees will benefit his company in the long run. If he retains workers, he doesn't have to find and train replacements. He gets loyalty in return for his efforts on behalf of employees.

Grossman Marketing's flexibility goes beyond family emergencies. For example, Grossman lets one boomer employee leave early every Wednesday in the summer to play golf.

That might sound unorthodox, but, Grossman asked, "how does it hurt the company to let him play golf

every Wednesday all summer? It kept him on board and retained the talent." He noted that the employee made sure his work was covered, and that clients knew who to contact, during the time he was on the links.

At Callaway Partners, an Atlanta-based accounting services firm, 90 percent of the approximately 450 employees are boomers. Co-founding Partner Bruce Cox said the firm has built its business model on boomers because "they're the best workers we feel like we could imagine to put on our accounting projects." He noted that boomers are known for their work ethic and integrity, two priceless qualities for an employee to have.

To ensure that it keeps its boomer work force, Cox said Callaway has arranged for benefits packages aimed at the generation's needs and wants. Health insurance is designed to handle boomer health issues, and the company's vacation policy also emphasizes flexibility.

Todd Harris, director of research at PI Worldwide, a management consultancy based in Wellesley, Mass., supports the idea of creating a flexible work environment to retain boomers.

"Realizing that -- hey, maybe a baby boomer only wants to work 20 or 25 hours a week or wants to work every other day or only wants to work on certain projects -- having that flexibility is very, very important," he said.

You can argue that looking out for all employees' needs, while ensuring that the company doesn't suffer, will give a small business a happier and more productive work force.

Still, not all employers are willing to make accommodations for boomers. That's a mistake, according to Harris.

"If you have someone walking out the door with 30 or 35 years of experience that you just let go and you don't leverage, and you don't come up with flexible arrangements so they can still contribute, that's just a colossal misguided approach," he said.

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