

Second Spin

Who will replace all those retiring baby boomers? How about more boomers.

By Will Wilson | January 1, 2009

Will Wilson

is a Governing correspondent.
E-mail him at
willwilson@gmail.com.

More Like This

- [Courting Talent](#)
- [The Bench and the Ballot Box](#)
- [Do You Know What You Own?](#)
- [Issues to Watch 2007](#)
- [Seeking a Fix for 'Spiking'](#)

special projects and seasonal jobs. This helps the department avoid the expense of job advertisements, running new background checks and paying benefits for full-time employees.

Retirees such as Gendler and the people he manages represent a very small slice of the state and local workforce. But their ranks are likely to grow as the "silver tsunami" of baby boomer retirements accelerates, depleting the public sector of its most experienced workers. While governments have stepped up on recruiting young employees to replace those heading out the door, there's another simple if not always obvious group to look to for replacements: more baby boomers.

There's evidence to suggest that a good number of today's retirees will want the work. For one thing, some will have no choice but to earn extra income. That's partially because of what's happened to their 401(k)s recently. It's also because Americans are living longer lives, leading many to work later into life than has been considered normal in the past.

What's more, many baby boomers simply view retirement differently than their parents did. They don't want to just play golf and live a life of leisure; they want to engage in purposeful new challenges, whether it's through volunteering, working part-time jobs or launching what Marc Freedman calls an "encore career." Freedman is the founder of Civic Ventures, a think tank devoted to aging issues. He says a growing number of seniors see a sweet spot at "the intersection of continuing income and meaningful work."

Not many states and localities have learned how to bend their hiring practices, or their office cultures, around this new reality. But those that have are finding that retirees can be productive workers who come pre-loaded with a lifetime of both professional experiences and personal wisdom. Arizona is one of the nation's best examples. Gendler's program is part of a larger initiative known as Aging 2020. The idea is to create training opportunities for seniors, certify the best places for them to work, and match them with employers in both the public and private sectors. Melanie Starns, director of the Governor's Office of Aging, says the effort is crucial in a state where the over-65 population will quadruple within two decades. "If as much as half of your workforce could retire at any time," Starns says, "you've got a crisis on your hands."

The New Old

"We have a glittering notion of the golden years that equated success in later life with leisure," Freedman says. Yet as the baby boomers set out to reinvent retirement, this stereotype may be the biggest obstacle standing in the way. If employers, whether in government or business, want to hire people looking for encore careers, they'll have to get past the assumption that anyone with gray hair would rather hang out at the pool than punch the clock.

Freedman says government can begin by removing barriers to longer working lives, including financial disincentives to continued work. Some benefits plans, for example, discourage employees from continuing part-time service because they base payouts on the salary earned in the last year of work. A move to flexible schedules also can help: Just because many boomers want to keep working doesn't necessarily mean they want to keep up a 9-to-5 grind. But most of the barriers to hiring people in their 50s and 60s are cultural. Gregory Merrill, president of the National Older Worker Career Center, cites a list of common employer concerns. "Older workers can't be trained. They have poor health. They aren't tech savvy. They take more time off. They are set in their ways. All of those myths have been demonstrated to be inaccurate," Merrill says.

There are other obstacles to workers seeking later-in-life jobs. The cost and effort of retraining for a second career is one of them — and one where community colleges can play a robust role. The cost and availability of health insurance is another problem. The biggest hurdle, however, is that many willing workers simply don't know where to look. Linda Hoffman, a senior policy analyst with the National Governors Association's Center on Best Practices, has held two policy academies on finding work opportunities for seniors. "They want to work; they want to volunteer," Hoffman says. "But they don't know how to get in the door."

Many of the state and local initiatives for recruiting seniors focus on this last problem. New Mexico and Idaho, for example, have held job fairs for both public- and private-sector employers specifically targeting older workers. Baltimore County, Maryland, takes it one step further. At its annual Senior/Baby Boomer Expo, another job fair, seniors get training in how to hunt for jobs. As Ryan McShane, personnel officer for the county's Department of Aging, puts it, "These are folks who haven't put in a resume or completed an application in 20 or 30 years."

California has begun trying to rehire its own retiring state workers. Before they walk out the door, employees who think they

might want to come back, either with their old agency or somewhere else in state government, register with California's Boomerang program. In less than a year, more than 3,000 former employees have signed up. Their names, skills, interests and preferred work schedules go into a database, which personnel directors can search when they have positions to fill. Andrew Armani, who runs the database, believes Boomerang can ease the ongoing transition from one generation of government workers to the next. "This is an effort," he explains, "to make sure that the state of California isn't impacted by the baby boomers retiring, while we find a way to attract those younger employees."

That's sort of how Steve Gendler views his role in Arizona. Since starting up the network of retirees, along with another retiree, Chuck Wright, Gendler figures he's helped save the Department of Public Safety more than \$200,000 per year. Just as satisfying, he says, is having had a chance to build something bigger than model railroads: a program that will outlast his second spin in government. Now, both Gendler and Wright are retiring — again. "We're baby boomers," Gendler says. "We'll turn it over to the next generation."