

# A Looming Transition

## Surviving the Mass Exodus of Boomers in the Workplace



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In 2011, the oldest Baby Boomers will turn 65, marking a turning point in corporate America. As the 76 million Boomers begin to leave the workforce, the U.S. will experience the most dramatic economic and demographic changes in its history. For the very first time, we are facing a mass retirement movement. To survive unscathed, companies must begin planning and preparing for this transition today.

### Deficit of Workers

At first glance, the impending Baby Boomer exodus may seem of little concern to companies. After all, people have been retiring from the workplace for ages. However, companies need to keep in mind that the upcoming retirement years are going to be larger scale than in any other time in our country's history. With 76 million Baby Boomers leaving the workforce and only 46 million Generation Xers available to take the newly vacant roles, there's a deficit of 30 million workers. And while the Millennials (Generation Y) number at approximately the 100 million mark, the oldest of them are too young and inexperienced to step into leadership roles.

Therefore, think about your own company for a moment. How will you handle this transition? How will you groom your Generation X

workers to step into leadership roles? How are you going to transfer the 40+ years of wisdom and experience that the Boomers possess to your younger workers? How do you plan to keep your company successful and running smoothly with a deficit of workers?

The bottom line is that all companies need to harness the young leadership already in their company so that the Baby Boomer exodus has as little impact as possible on the organization.

### Tools for Survival

Smart organizations will take a proactive approach and start addressing this issue now. To help make the upcoming transition a smooth one for your company, here are five key survival tips:

#### 1. Know what you're up against

You need to find out as soon as possible how this mass retirement will affect your company. Meet with your Human Resources department and get details about your workplace demographics. How many Baby Boomers are currently working in the company, what are their positions, and what are their anticipated retirement

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dates? For example, are all your middle managers positioned to retire in the next five years? Will three key people be leaving all at once? Will your sales department shrink by half in the next few years? You need to know what the impact will be on your company so you can start planning and be ready for the transition.

## 2. Develop a knowledge transfer strategy

Most companies have policy manuals that detail each position's job requirements. While such a policy manual is a good start for grooming younger workers, it's simply not enough. After all, you can only document so much of the day-to-day activities. Plus, there are subtleties of every job—things you do just because experience and knowledge points you in a certain direction. You simply can't document those kinds of things. That's why you need to go a step further and develop a strategy/policy/training system for transferring the knowledge and skills of the older workers to the younger successors.

## 3. Mentor the younger workers

As part of the knowledge transfer strategy, companies need to implement a mentoring program. For a company to have a successful transition, the younger generation needs to work side-by-side with older, more experienced workers. You simply cannot transfer 40+ years of knowledge and expertise overnight. Therefore, if you know that a key person is going to be retiring in three years, have that person start mentoring a younger worker now. Again, this is not something you can accomplish during a new hire's 90-day training period. True mentoring takes a year to accomplish at the very least. Additionally, the Generation X workers who receive this sort of long-term mentoring will feel more valued and will be more likely to stay with the company long-term.

## 4. Retain the older workers in some fashion

Realize that just because someone turns 65 doesn't mean they want to retire that day. Many of your older workers will want to stay in the workforce in some capacity, either by choice or by necessity. Since many Boomers worked hard to put kids through college or are currently caring for aging parents, they may need to work well past age 65 just to make ends meet. Others are taking advantage of medical breakthroughs, and as a result, feel more active and healthy than they did when they were younger. In either of these cases, your older workers may be open to staying onboard on a part-time basis or as a consultant. Since they often want to pursue other interests at this stage of their life, being chained down to a 9-to-5 desk job probably won't appeal to them. The more flexibility you offer, the more likely they'll be to stick around as a resource for the company.

## 5. Put a strong management team in place

For your company to get through this transitional period, you need strong management and leadership. You need individuals who can empower and motivate both generations to be open-minded and to learn from each other. These leaders will need to have expertise, not only in your industry, but also in people skills. Realize that many younger workers don't have the patience needed to work side-by-side with older workers, as they believe the Boomers aren't up-to-date on technology or have a grasp on the real world. That's why you need leaders in place who can help people be open to the mentoring process—on both sides. If your company doesn't have the right leaders on board, the bottom line will suffer. Your leaders simply must be involved to see this transitional phase through.

## A Successful Transition for All

Because the unemployment rate is high right now due to the current state of the economy, companies can draw from a large pool of workers to help fill the gap the Boomers will be leaving. However, since we are not able to predict the country's economic future, we are unable to rely on this fix for the long haul. That's why planning and preparation are so needed.

The coming years will definitely be a challenge for companies, and the smart organizations will take a proactive approach by addressing the issue now. Remember, transferring the knowledge and expertise of your older workers to your younger ones is not something you can do in a few days or weeks. Therefore, if we want to survive the impending transitional phase, we need to adopt a longer-term focus than what was customary in the past. By helping your employees understand and appreciate the benefits of working together, your company can be successful and thrive in the years to come. ✪