

Heather Boulger | Inside the Job Market: Companies need older workers. Here is why.

- By Heather Boulger

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You enter the labor force, you work until a certain age, and then you retire. Or maybe you don't.

The U.S. demographic trend is changing — we are getting older, and more people are working into their later years.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, by 2024, 1 in 4 U.S. workers will be 55 or older, which is more than double the rate in 1994, when the 55-plus workers accounted for just 12 percent of the workforce.

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People are working later in life for a number of reasons. They are healthier and have a longer life expectancy than previous generations. They are better educated, which increases the likelihood of staying in the labor force.

Some decide not to fully retire because they enjoy their jobs or just want to stay active and alert. Others need the money. And changes to Social Security benefits and employee retirement plans, along with the need to save more for retirement, create incentives to keep working.

In Berkshire County, 43 percent of the population is 55 and older, compared with Massachusetts, at 33 percent. Those ages 65-plus are 28.4 percent of the Berkshire population, versus 20.7 percent for Massachusetts.

The latest Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development data shows the unemployment rate for those over age 55 at just 4.1 percent, compared with 5.7 percent for the total population and a steep 18.8 percent for teens. Unemployment claims for those age 55-plus is 28.1 percent, compared with Massachusetts, at 24.2 percent. Our population and workforce are aging.

According to the Department of Labor, the last full week in September was National Employ Older Workers Week, which promoted the vital role of older workers in the workforce.

This dedicated and experienced segment of the labor force contributes immensely to both private and public sectors, and in paid and volunteer positions. This week provided an opportunity to

increase awareness and focus on the development of innovative strategies for tapping into this underutilized labor pool, which, in turn, can help address the potential shortage in labor sectors.

The 2021 National Employ Older Workers Week, Sept. 19-25, carried the theme “The Future is NEOWW!” After what has been a uniquely challenging 18 months, we want to take the opportunity to celebrate the experience and contributions of older workers to the workforce and remind everyone that now is always a great time to “hire an older worker.”

Older Worker Week also showcased the Senior Community Service Employment Program, which provides on-the-job skills training to individuals 55 or older with limited financial resources.

Since its inception, the SCSEP has helped over 1 million older Americans enter the workforce. The SCSEP is administered locally by Elder Services of Berkshire County and serves unemployed, low-income people 55-plus. Participants are placed in paid community service positions for a maximum of 20 hours per week, and receive a variety of job search and support services. The goal is to prepare individuals with the necessary skills and job training to obtain unsubsidized employment.

Workers ages 55 and older are employed across many types of occupations, however, 42 percent were in management and professional positions, followed by sales, service, production, transportation and maintenance.

Some later-in-life career options can move someone from an office job into the outdoors, or perhaps a retiring teacher would prefer to give tours at a local museum. Self-employment is an option that may offer increased flexibility and autonomy. Perhaps you enjoy your job but would prefer fewer hours; you can join the 27 percent of workers age 55-plus who are employed part time.

Why hire an older worker? A strong work ethic, loyalty and communication skills are just a few reasons. Although many older workers may not have the same tech-savvy skills their younger colleagues do, they have years of experience you can't teach or replace. They have been in the workforce longer and have developed strong networks, and they typically know what they want.

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To stay competitive in today's workforce, companies need to diversify their employees, which means making an effort to attract and retain mature workers.

More than ever before, older Americans are working longer, trying new things and engaging in their communities. They are taking charge, striving for wellness, focusing on independence, and advocating for themselves and others. What it means to age has changed, and National Employ Older Workers Week was a perfect opportunity to recognize and celebrate the many contributions that the mature worker brings to our companies.

For more information, contact [MassHireBerkshireCC.com](http://MassHireBerkshireCC.com) or Elder Services of Berkshire County.