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Reinventing the baby boomer in tough economy

Laid-off baby boomers struggle to adapt to a rapidly changing job market

By Paul Srubas

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She received two job offers that had good wages and benefits. She stuck with a housekeeping job at the St. Joseph's Retreat Center in Baileys Harbor for 13 years and eventually bought a car and a house in Abrams. The recession forced the retreat center to close, ending Wanner's job as head of housekeeping. The mother of three and grandmother of five said she no longer can physically handle most menial labor jobs, but she lacks the computer skills for many other kinds of work.

Now she's struggling to come up with even one good job offer. She has no income and no insurance, and she's just a few years from retirement but with all of the debt and financial needs of someone half her age.

Wanner finds herself among the growing baby boomer population in Northeastern Wisconsin and elsewhere who once prided themselves on their long service with a single company and now find themselves having to reinvent their careers in an environment different from their first entry into the job market.

"I don't know what's going to happen," Wanner said. "I have no clue. I'm doing a lot of soul searching, meditation — spiritual things to help me not have such low emotional dips. ... I just have to pick myself up, brush myself off and get going."

Baby boomers, loosely identified as those born between 1946 and 1964, are not bearing the brunt of layoffs in the current economic climate. Workers between 45 and 54 and those 55 and older are experiencing lower unemployment rates than other age groupings, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Unemployment rates for both those older age groups were about 6.7 percent in May, according to the bureau's nationwide statistics. Workers age 35 to 44 were at 8.1 percent, and those 25 to 34 were at 10.5 percent.

But older displaced workers typically remain out of work longer, according to the bureau. Even in better economic times, the average out-of-work baby boomer takes at least a month longer to get work, and far fewer of them land back on their feet in less than three months than their younger counterparts. And when they do regain work, they take a bigger hit in their earnings compared with their previous jobs.

"The time you spend looking for work is related to your salary expectations," said Jim Golembeski, executive director of the Bay Area Workforce Development Board. "Anecdotally, the rule is you're off a month for every \$10,000 in salary you're looking for."

For the last seven years, Golembeski has seen a trend in which displaced workers do not have up-to-date technology skills. Boomers entered the work force when, "if you had a pulse and could show up, you could work," Golembeski said.

But all of that changed around 2002.

"Suddenly there were computers and fiber optic cable all over the world, and technology in manufacturing and health care and everywhere else suddenly caught up," Golembeski said. "A lot of people who assumed, 'I have a job, I'm set for life' suddenly found out that isn't true anymore."

When plants closed or laid off workers, many of those workers found they lacked even the basic skills to compete in this new environment, he said.

Golembeski pointed to the 2003 closure of the Mirro Aluminum Company as an example of that phenomenon.

"Nine hundred people lost their jobs, and a third of them were at or below fourth-grade reading and math levels," he said.

The problem has become even more severe, affecting even skilled workers in the current recession.

"White-collar workers have been affected deeply by this recession," said Nancy Thompson of HS Group, a human resources consulting firm in Green Bay. "If you're an organization and you're wildly trying to cut costs, cutting your high-priced talent is an easy way to do it."

In an environment where double-digit unemployment rates are typical, boomers find themselves competing for jobs with younger, cheaper, more-technologically sophisticated workers.

While there's nothing boomers can do about the physical disadvantages of age, it isn't an insurmountable liability, Thompson said.

Job experience and life experience are two very real benefits that boomers bring to the table, she said.

"Baby boomers bring their scars," Thompson said. "Adversity builds character."

Out-of-work boomers need to consider how their work and life experience can benefit a potential employer, and they need to learn to stress those characteristics on their resumes and in their job interviews, she said.

For displaced white-collar workers, "the most important thing I can do is network," Golembeski said. "Network, network and network some more. It's all about me going out and talking about me."

Displaced workers with limited skills need to do what Wanner is trying to do — go back to school.

She took several noncredit computer courses to build a basic knowledge, and she has just started taking more advanced courses for credit, with the goal of eventually working somewhere as an administrative assistant.

Most important of all, displaced workers both skilled and unskilled have to do something else that Wanner is doing: Keep fighting.

"I just got to keep going," Wanner said. "I just got to."
