IN THE LEAD: Baby Boomers Seek New Ways to Escape Career Claustrophobia

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Abstract

One 50-something manager who spent most of his career in the U.S., transferred to a post in Budapest three years ago after his children were grown. Recently, he moved again to China, where he helps local employees understand GE procedures and culture. "The opportunities for growth in China are enormous but you can't establish a work force there overnight," says Ms. [Susan Peters]. "We need seasoned people."

Other veteran GE managers are tapped to help integrate newly acquired businesses. They are well-suited for the task because of their knowledge about GE and experience with people, says Ms. Peters.

She joined GE 24 years ago in a management-training program in human resources and has since worked in several divisions, including plastics and appliances, and at NBC. Now at corporate headquarters in Fairfield, Conn., she encourages other managers to move across GE's diverse businesses and gain experience in a variety of industries.

ONE OF THE BIGGEST concerns for managers in their 40s and 50s, besides job security, is the lack of opportunities for advancement. There are so many baby boomers that the scramble for seats at the top is highly competitive. Even worse, the usual competition from younger people is tougher than ever as companies promote ambitious employees even in their 20s who are gaining technical and global experience very early in life.

The result is that many baby boomers feel underutilized and stuck in jobs they already have mastered years before they plan to retire. "Lots of companies pigeonhole people in their 40s and older as only being good at one particular thing," says Dory Hollander, an executive career coach in Arlington, Va. "They figure why take a chance on them for something new when they can get someone younger; but then they end up with managers who feel career claustrophobia."

A few companies recognize the need to motivate all their employees and are grappling with ways to challenge their baby-boomer managers. They encourage those they don't promote to make lateral moves that will broaden their experience. They also are receptive to veterans who raise their hands for very different assignments than they have had in the past. "If you don't keep people fresh and growing," Ms. Hollander warns, "they become stagnant."

AT GENERAL ELECTRIC, baby-boomer managers are encouraged to take advantage of the greater personal mobility they may have when their children leave home or they are more settled. "Suddenly they come to a stage when they may have more flexibility to take a foreign assignment or do something they couldn't at a younger age," says Susan Peters, vice president, executive development. Her staff actively recruits seasoned managers for jobs overseas.

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GE's commitment to continual career development is emphasized during annual reviews, when employees tell their bosses about their future goals. Those discussions are then reviewed by operations and human-resource managers, who try to match employees seeking job changes with new openings. "It's part of the DNA here to keep adding things to peoples' plates and making sure they have new opportunities," says Ms. Peters, who is 50.

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MARK WEBER, president and chief operating officer of New York apparel maker Phillips-Van Heusen, hopes his company's recent acquisitions of businesses, such as Calvin Klein, will provide new career opportunities for seasoned employees. "Now a manager of a branded business can move to a design business," says Mr. Weber.

Mt. Weber has had 25 different assignments in his 31 years at the company. "It has always been exciting, and part of my job now is to create new mountains for others to climb," he says.

What can baby boomers do to renew their careers if they are at companies or organizations that don't tap them for promotions or even lateral moves? "You can't go around whining," says Barbara Barski-Carrow, a senior consultant at the government's Health and Human Services department who just turned 60 and plans to work for many more years. "You have to think very carefully about what you want to do and become an ally to your boss. If you're clear about your goals and are a team player, you're more likely to get support."

She has worked at HHS for the past 16 years on an assortment of jobs, some of which she designed. Among these: developing a training program on sexual harassment, and training and leadership development for Hispanic employees. She also networks with an array of professionals outside her agency. "The contacts and exposure keep me thinking about new ideas and different approaches," she says.

Ms. Hollander, the career coach, also urges baby boomers to seek outlets for talents or aspects of their personality they haven't had a chance to express. "Midlife is a time when parts of the self that have been neglected begin to bubble up," she says. "Bean counters may suddenly need to do more creative work, while people who have been adventurous may need more stability."

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