Gardens for All Supply Company: Older Workers as a Tactical Advantage for Business

Teaching Notes

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Instructor Notes

The Gardens for All Supply Company (GASC) case can be used as a teaching tool in multiple ways.

1. The case and one or two questions can be used as part of an exam. (Instructors can use different questions, so they can use the case multiple times without fear of file sharing.)
2. The case can also be used for in-class discussion. Depending on enrollment, the class can be broken into teams with each team addressing one question. Another approach would be for each team to take the role of one of the partners or one of the advisory team members. Teams can then be asked to identify and write up the issues from their perspective and to present their position(s) in a mock company meeting.
3. The case can also be used as part of a final exam without asking specific questions and graded on the basis of students’ ability to identify the issues and present possible solutions.

Questions: Answer Key

Summary question: GASC wants to expand its business, and the partners need to find the right kind of workers. They are having difficulty finding talent, and they are losing experienced, older workers in crucial customer relations positions. The partners overlook the contributions and underutilize their older workers. The partners decide to ask several of their older workers for recommendations and conclude that the loss of several of these individuals could potentially damage their business further. Do you agree that older workers can convey the company’s values to new hires, serve as role models for workplace behavior, be mentors in knowledge transfer to younger employees and provide a ready resource for periodic workforce projects? How would you make this case?

Employers have a practical business need to recognize the value of older workers in the workplace as an expansion of their talent pool and as contributors to a more profitable organization. The benefits of hiring and retaining older workers are numerous to an organization. Older workers, 55 years of age and older, may have years of experience and knowledge that companies do not want to see walk out the door. Older workers offer an excellent resource for mentoring, role modeling, serving as temporary resources for project work, and supporting a company’s vision and values. Older workers often have assets not taught in school, such as less absenteeism, the ability to handle change, higher motivation, longer retention and the willingness to accept part-time work. These assets contribute to a more productive and positive workplace. The older workers in this case study performed well with little supervision, were motivated to do their best in their jobs and waived off only when the partners did not recognize some of the typical issues that arise when a business grows rapidly. Many factors will contribute to the success of GASC’s expansion.

1. Analyze how Pam, Mac and Sheila are reacting to changes at GASC. What are the issues for each?

This question is intended to encourage students to think about employment issues from the older worker’s perspective. The changes Pam, Mac and Sheila are reacting to include the following:

- Loss of influence and power.
- Loss of voice.
- Loss of collegiality.
- Loss of work ethic.
2. What work schedule options should Mattie explore to retain her older, more experienced, high-performing customer service employees who are considering retirement? Mattie needs to prepare a list of benefit options she can use in conversations with these customer service representatives to encourage them to continue working for GASC. What options should be included?

The list may include the following benefits options that GASC should consider offering employees:

- **Flexible work schedules.** This option allows employees to plan activities and to take care of personal needs during the week without the stress of completing all personal tasks in the evenings or on weekends, and it reduces the necessity of requesting time off.
- **Part-time work schedules.** This option allows employees to meet other personal needs during the day, to enjoy long weekends and to transition into retirement.
- **Job-sharing.** This option allows several employees to “share” a full-time position.
- **Snow bird program.** This option allows employees to “winter” in another desired location and later return to their original position.
- **Telecommuting.** This option allows employees to work from home for part or all of their work hours.
- **Consulting.** This option allows employees to work on consulting projects as needed.

3. What could be added to the retirement and insurance benefits package to attract and retain older employees?

GASC could add the following benefits:

- Retirement benefits for part-time employees.
- Opportunities to further develop skills through conferences and training.
- Discounted medication programs.
- Elder care insurance.

4. What are the mentoring possibilities in this case study that would improve the quality of service from new employees and retain older workers? Why should mentoring be considered as an option?

There are several opportunities to capitalize on mentoring programs at GASC, including creating a training program for new hires led by older staff with more seniority in customer service, the retail stores and the warehouse. Older staff with more seniority could either volunteer or be recruited to mentor newly hired staff. All mentors should be required to successfully complete a training program before mentoring. These programs should offer new challenges, responsibilities and, in some cases, a renewed inspiration for older staff, thus possibly increasing retention. Mentoring can also foster effective, ongoing knowledge-sharing at different points of employment for employees.

5. How does the Equal Pay Act of 1963, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 (ADEA) and the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009 fit into the compensation issues in this case study?

The case study mentions briefly that Mattie may have hired new employees at the same or higher rates than several of her customer service employees with more seniority. The Equal Pay Act of 1963, part of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, protects all workers who essentially perform equal jobs from sex-based discrimination. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 (ADEA) is intended to protect older workers (age 40 and older) from discrimination. The ADEA protects older workers from discrimination in regard to hiring, firing, compensation, job assignments, promotions, layoffs, training, fringe benefits and any other term or condition of employment. The Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009 strengthened the Equal Pay Act of 1963. The Act restores the pre-Ledbetter position of the EEOC (Ledbetter vs. Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co., Inc., 550 U.S. 618 (2007)) that each paycheck that delivers discriminatory compensation is a wrong actionable under the federal EEO statutes, regardless of when the discrimination began. As noted in the Act, it recognizes the
reality of wage discrimination’ and restores ‘bedrock principles of American law.\(^3\) Although the Act’s focus is primarily on pay discrimination against women in the workforce, it protects both men and women from unequal pay. The Act does provide an exemption for employers to be able to pay employees at different rates for the same work if the differing rates are based on a seniority or merit pay system. However, we do not know all the facts in this case study, and a thorough analysis is warranted to ensure that no discrimination is present between the new hires and older staff with more seniority. Examples of this compensation review could include a review of employees’ wages to ensure their jobs, years of service and experience align with peers; salary surveys to set benchmarks for positions; and creating a wage scale for all jobs. Employers usually consult with an employment law attorney or a compensation specialist on staff to manage these compensation issues. As a small organization that may not have those resources, GASC may consider contacting SHRM or the local human resource organization and networking with small businesses to manage its compensation.

6. What new career options (advancement, role changes) could be created to retain and preserve the knowledge of the more experienced workers who are considering leaving?

Several opportunities may be available for the older staff at GASC. The partners could consider creating several supervisory or management positions in the warehouse, customer service and retail operations. By creating a supervisory position for Mac, Sam could improve accuracy of the inventory and consistency of the procedures in the warehouse and possibly re-engage Mac and retain him longer in the company. Mattie needs to create a more effective and consistent training program for new hires and existing employees. GASC is at risk of losing Shelia and Pam, both senior-level employees. Shelia is showing signs of burnout and is considering leaving. Mattie could create a manager of training position and offer it to Shelia. This role would retain Shelia’s retail knowledge and allow a planned transition for a new retail store supervisor. The complexity of the customer service department has increased with the expansion of GASC’s business, and similar to the other partners, Mattie’s responsibilities associated with growth make it challenging to stay current on the customer service department’s culture and training. Adding a manager position and offering it to Pam would improve Mattie’s understanding of the culture concerns and allow better supervision of the staff. Pam could also work with Shelia to create a new or revised training program and to bring back department gatherings and opportunities for team building and learning. Mattie also recognized that she needs to collaborate more closely with Brian on their hiring and training processes and to discuss whether their current approach to hiring and training is optimal for the organization.

7. How can the partners improve the gardening knowledge of new employees? Where should they look?

GASC needs experienced people to assist in teaching the basics of gardening and could explore the following options for resources:

- Have Shelia, a master gardener, and other similarly trained staff members recommend other master gardeners and attend local training programs and approach future graduates to work for GASC.
- Send employees to gardening conferences and training programs. This may be a highly valued opportunity for older staff with more seniority.
- Formally request assistance from all staff to identify and reach out to appropriate individuals in senior centers.

8. How could the company retain the knowledge of experienced employees?

GASC could create a program that targets retired GASC employees. This program would allow retirees to perform project work for the company. GASC should also start a formal knowledge transfer program.

9. What tax credits or training programs are available to the company?
There may be a variety of job training resources or tax credits available for hiring and training older workers. Several of the federal programs that are worth exploring fall under the Older Americans Act, the Workforce Investment Act and local Workforce Investment Boards.

10. What types of low-cost policies and activities could be added to engage older workers and to demonstrate that the company values them and encourages them to stay employed?

GASC could create or add the following to improve and maintain the desired culture for not only older workers but for all employees:

- Hold quarterly town hall meetings that profile older workers with testimonials as part of the meetings.
- Add an online suggestion box for company activities, and appoint a senior-level team to evaluate the suggestions and make recommendations.
- Suggest each department have “Friday Morning” stand-up meetings (led by older, experienced, senior-level staff) for 15 minutes to share weekly positive examples of employees demonstrating the company’s commitment to 100 percent customer satisfaction guarantee.
- Host social gatherings onsite and offsite with vendor speakers, provide in-house training on gardening tools, invite customers for “thank-you” conversations, and reinforce the mission.
- Provide executive coaching to Brian and his partners about best practices on maintaining a culture and on managing a multigenerational workforce. This option may not be low cost, but it is worth considering to “save” costs on turnover and management time spent on internal culture issues.

Instructor Background Reading


Employment from the older worker's perspective:
See also:

Instructor Note

A good way to end a class discussion about this case is to use the following video about a “real company” that actively seeks older workers. Although the benefits of this strategy are highlighted in the video, ask the students to reflect on the benefits of a multigenerational workforce.

“The average age of Vita Needle’s workers is 74 years old, and that’s no accident. The manufacturing company has intentionally hired seniors—a decision that has increased profits and benefited older workers who often have a harder time finding a job. Paul Solman reports on their unique model for doing business.”

Notes


2 Ibid.