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Just like the “graying” of the nation’s inmate population, the criminal justice work force is also “graying.” This phenomenon spans the entire country; it is the product of the baby-boomer generation reaching the age of retirement.<sup>1</sup> The issue of how to replace a large portion of the correctional work force during the next several years has become a common concern for many agencies. The loss of many of the most experienced, seasoned employees in a relatively short period of time not only has resulted in agencies scrambling for replacements, it has caused executives to acknowledge that the current workforce has not been adequately developed to assume roles of increased responsibility and leadership within the agencies.<sup>2</sup>

As reported by Marcus Glasper,<sup>3</sup> organizations will respond to this situation by: “scurrying to establish aggressive recruiting and succession planning programs to develop their leaders. Rather than relying upon the natural and self-sustaining growth cycle of an organization, we must now compensate for the years of recession, crisis management and reduced hiring rates.”

National statistics related to the aging and the anticipated retirements of the current work force show that the labor force will continue to age during the next several years. In fact, by 2012, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the baby-boom cohort will be 48 to 66 years old.

Additionally, the average retirement age of today’s work force has steadily declined and can be attributed largely to a rise in the labor force participation rate of older men and women between the mid-1980s and 2000, according to Murray Gendell in the October 2001 issue of *Monthly Labor Review*. In other words, many workers leave the labor force, but continue to work at another job while collecting retirement benefits. So while the work force continues to age, the age of retirement continues to decline. The impact of these trends is especially significant for the criminal justice work force. According to the U.S. Department of Labor report titled *Protective Service Occupations: Correctional Officers*, employee retirement is one factor contributing to the need for replacing police officers, correctional officers, and probation and parole officers. In fact, job opportunities are expected to be excellent for these occupations, although the report also notes that “in the past, some local and state corrections agencies have experienced difficulty in attracting and keeping qualified applicants, largely due to relatively low salaries and the concentration of jobs in rural locations.” The aging work force and the declining retirement age are exacerbated by these other factors.



## Responding to Today's Work Force:

Attracting, Retaining  
and Developing the New  
Generation of Workers

Awareness of the significant number of pending retirements in many correctional agencies resulted in *Corrections Today* dedicating its August 2004 edition to the topic of the correctional work force and the issues surrounding it. Some states have initiated work force surveys to assess the magnitude of the anticipated retirements and the impact these retirements will have on the agencies. Some agencies are taking steps proactively to address the estimated work force losses.<sup>4</sup> Other states are using this form of "reduction in force" as an opportunity to re-examine their organizational structures and to develop streamlined operations that are leaner on staff, but more efficient in workflow, more automation dependent and more systems oriented.

For agencies that are experiencing significant work force retirements, now may be the time to consider new ways of doing business, through intra- and interagency reorganization that will streamline various business practices, create economies of scale and eliminate intra- and interagency duplication of work.

## A Company's Most Valuable Resource

As both the public and private employment sectors are faced with unprecedented retirements, staff must be recognized as the valued resource that they are. The most important resource in any business is the human creativity, energy, commitment and responsiveness to the needs of the organization based on its mission and objectives. Therefore, personnel should be valued, respected and invested in for the future success of the agency.

The highly specialized nature of many jobs in criminal-justice-related organizations means that securing and keeping appropriately skilled staff becomes even more of a challenge. Not only must individuals in many criminal justice fields possess technical skills (e.g., computer skills, knowledge of criminal law procedures, security and custody management, etc.), they must also possess personalities and personal characteristics that enable them to deal with the enormously difficult offender population.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, the challenge confronting employers in corrections is to successfully match up prospective employee's technical skills with those necessary for the job, and equally important, accomplish an appropriate match of personality characteristics necessary for successfully working with the offender population.<sup>6</sup>

## What Makes Them "Tick"?

Although much has been written about this new group of workers, they possess several noteworthy characteristics that are particularly germane to understanding how to attract them as employees. They are more personally mobile than the earlier generations with a willingness to move to different regions of the country. Also, they are more likely to not only change jobs, but also change careers. This generation is less likely to commit to long-term employment in one agency and, therefore, is less likely to consider retirement from one agency as an employment objective. Generation X is more strongly motivated to seek an interesting career, one with diversity and flexibility. While this generation is certainly interested in making money and upward mobility, it is not motivated primarily by monetary reward, job stability, job longevity and success.<sup>7</sup>

So how does corrections respond to this new generation? The answer lies in adequately marketing the career path. Today's corrections field is a complex, diverse and dynamic business. Numerous professions are required to successfully maintain this self-sustaining community. Opportunities abound for everything from engineers to dentists and psychologists to facility maintenance managers to use their skills, wrapped in job longevity and good retirement benefits, with the opportunity to positively impact offenders.

## Strategies to Recruit, Retain and Maintain

How the employer approaches or addresses the issue of recruiting and retaining good staff must be considered from two avenues. The first is external to the immediate and direct

authority of the supervising administrator and involves changing the state's policies and practices relating to recruitment, hiring, remuneration and retention.

Public agencies must recognize that they are competing with the private sector, which possesses enviable flexibility related to personnel matters. Additionally, competition with the private sector means competing with a myriad of exciting career choices, such as jobs in technology and various business ventures with the potential of lucrative remuneration. Unfortunately, public sector careers often appear less interesting and less rewarding than the lure of private enterprise.

Some of the external mechanisms that have been addressed in various work force surveys reflect human-resources-related business practices that must be addressed at the state level. They include the following.

***The need to streamline hiring practices.*** All too often there are numerous steps through which the prospective employee must navigate to be placed on pending employee lists, waiting to be contacted for a job interview. For those prospective employees who are unable to wait for months for employment, they become disheartened and often find work elsewhere. It is frustrating for the prospective employer to work from those same lists attempting to secure candidates to interview, only to find out that the candidates have long since accepted another position. The degree to which the civil service system, military preference, equal employment opportunity requirements, union agreements and other hiring factors obstruct, delay or expedite the hiring process impacts significantly, according to Glasper, upon the employer's ability to respond adequately to the work force needs.

***The degree of latitude the agencies have with respect to flexible work schedules, shifts and other nontraditional approaches to work.*** These include job sharing, flexible scheduling, working from home under certain circumstances, part-time employment and accommodating special family needs, such as working only weekdays or only weekends, splitting shifts, etc.

**Remuneration strategies that reward employees for increased skills and knowledge, without staff having to be promoted into a different position.** Some states do better than others in this area, in that they offer career paths in range-step raises; they have established multilevel job classifications that allow advancement through a classification series; and they ensure annual cost-of-living increases. The value of these practices becomes particularly clear when it is considered that these are commonplace tactics in the competing private sector.

Another aspect of remuneration, which is extremely difficult for the public sector to satisfactorily address, is keeping job compensation competitive. Many departments of correction are currently experiencing difficulties in securing many health care disciplines to include nurses, dentists, dental hygienists and others. The private sector employers are able to offer attractive signing bonuses, loan pay-back plans, individually designed work schedules and attractive vacation options. An example of one state that has responded to this staffing crisis is Pennsylvania, which has increased the entry-level pay for nurses and offers supplemental bonuses. Additionally, Pennsylvania is offering nursing students loan forgiveness options.

**Establish a percent contribution to retirement plans.** This could include deferred compensation plans, a 401(k), 403(b) or other retirement programs to encourage employees to embrace employment in state government as a long-term career commitment. The federal government has an excellent program that encourages saving for retirement by such contributions.

One huge advantage that most state government employers have to offer prospective employees is the generous fringe benefits packages, which include the accrual of earned time, reasonable work periods until retirement, good lifelong retirement plans, and continuing health and life coverage during retirement. The benefit packages often equate to about 30 percent to 45 percent of the salary. States should do a better job of advertising these benefits to enable employees to recognize that current salary is only a portion of the overall compen-

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sation package. Although many private sector employers offer more immediate, appealing compensation in the form of high salaries, they fall short on the long-term benefits at retirement. Given that corrections' new generation of employees is less concerned about long-term employment commitment and retirement, one novel approach that state government could consider would be to offer employees the option of the traditional government compensation package or a more contemporary offer of higher salary benefits upfront.

### Mechanisms Internal To the Agency

The second avenue available to employers to address how corrections handles the work force focuses primarily on the issue of retention. This avenue may be seen as the internal mechanism that the public sector employers have for attracting and retaining a competent, committed and energized work force. The internal mechanism is directly related to the agency's leadership and administrators, and how they lead, direct, develop and manage their employees. According to James Jacobs and Elana Olitsky's *Pace Law Review* article titled "Leadership and Correctional Reform," the challenge is for corrections to "systematically nurture and develop leadership." In addition, Gasper states that because correctional systems are paramilitary and hierarchical in nature, often this structure results in staff mechanically progressing through the rank series instead of understanding the requirements for higher-level positions and seeking them outside the continuum of rank promotion.

Generation X employees are motivated by goals, by experiencing success, and the ensuing sense of achievement, and the administrator has tremendous ability to influence staff job satisfaction. Agencies should look internally for potential leaders and aggressively pursue their develop-

ment. Agencies must find ways to engage them in the business, including decision-making opportunities, because engaged employees are retained employees.<sup>8</sup>

Peter Senge, quoted in Gasper's *Challenges and Barriers to Succession Planning in a Corrections Environment*, focuses on the organization as a learning environment. His point is that there are certain features in an organization that make it a "learning organization," one in which employees learn the business, develop their skills, knowledge and talents. These key features include systems thinking, shared vision and team learning. Organizations that practice inclusiveness are most likely to have these features. Gasper also notes that inclusive organizations will have a different structure and protocol for making decisions, in that staff will be included in strategic planning and goal setting.

### The Challenge Ahead

Responding to the phenomena of the baby boomer generation's retirement creates special challenges for employers and at the same time affords employers the opportunity to offer to desirable employees the opportunity for advancement. Wise leadership is one that is savvy enough to motivate the new generation of employees in order to advance the productivity of the baby boomers to new levels of creativity. Those who are in positions of leadership must shape the traditional work environment to yield, attract and retain a generation of workers who are driven by motivators quite different than the prior generation's desire for job security, income and a comfortable retirement.

One may be tempted to conclude that the "sky is falling" given the complex phenomena facing the correctional work force. But the sky is not falling, at least not yet. Opportunities abound to address the work force challenges that confront correctional and criminal justice agencies.

At the agency level, competent, skilled leadership is the key to engaging staff at all levels. Staff who have a sense of confidence and trust their careers in the hands of the agency's leaders will be inspired to seek professional growth. Leadership must be inclusive as it develops its goals and strategies for its future initiatives. At the state level is the challenge to better market careers in public service. Public servants have an opportunity for a rewarding, consistent work experience, safeguarded with job security, retirement and health care benefits, and with the opportunity to positively impact human lives for the better.

## ENDNOTES

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