

Boston Sunday Globe

Careers

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE MARCH 30, 2008

(c. 386,415)

THE CORPORATE CURMUDGEON | DALE DAUTEN

A solution for those lingering boomers?

'I recently had my annual physical examination, which I get once every seven years, and when the nurse weighed me, I was shocked to discover how much stronger the Earth's gravitational pull has become since 1990.'

DAVE BARRY

For 10 years we've been hearing about this impending shortage of workers, about this looming leadership gap and inevitable talent void. Well, I haven't seen it, have you? All these years of alarms, and still, a hundred qualified people for every worthwhile job.

Oh, I understand the logic of the prophecy: The great lump in the snake of time, the boomer generation, is finally going to be digested and move beyond the workplace, leaving behind a smaller generation and thus shrinking labor pool; ergo, the gap/void/shortfall.

But here's the problem: Boomers just aren't going away. They linger on, talking about how much there is left to do. And I suppose there is. Perhaps the quintessential boomer is Prince Charles . . . waiting, smiling bravely, still waiting.

What got me thinking about talent shortages was speaking with someone who has bet her career on solving the problem she's certain is coming. Last year, in her early 50s, Linda Stewart walked away from a 25-year run in the financial industry to start a company called Epoch, based in Boston. Her company acts as an agent for executive talent, primarily retired boomers. She's bet on what she calls a "leadership shortage."

I told her that it seems to me to be the human version of the Y2K scare. But Stewart was having none of that logic, instead arguing this: "It's like global warming. Everyone thought for years that it wasn't urgent, that 'well, maybe it's a problem, but not for me,' and then suddenly it's here and it's a problem for everyone."

So she took her conviction about the leadership shortage and combined it with what she heard from her fellow boomers. In talking with friends about their futures, she realized this: "They don't want traditional employment, but they don't want traditional retirement, either." So Stewart came up with an employment category she calls "independently employed," and she's a talent agency for people in that new

category.

Here's how it works. She goes to CEOs and asks them to name three or four initiatives that aren't moving ahead fast enough. She says, "Most don't stop at three or four — they have a dozen." Then Stewart tries to align her "independently employed" specialists with the company needs. She gave me the example of a company that wanted to open an office in China, and she has a woman who has done that several times in her career. So she brings the two together, saying, "We provide the talent they need for the time they need it."

There's much to like about this approach. First, the woman who'll open the office in China, has grown weary of the typical corporate employment, and now, as Stewart puts it, "She's in a position to work for six months and then take six months off."

Meanwhile, the CEO likes the plan because it isn't like hiring a consultant, who will tell you how to do it; no, this is a person who will come in and do it. "Further," Stewart says, "it's a project with a beginning, middle, and end. You don't have to figure out what to do with the person

when the project is over. There's no cost to sever the relationship because the person plans on it being severed, wants to have it severed."

What I like about this arrangement is that the work is separated from the job. In a typical employment arrangement, the job often gets in the way of getting the work done; here, there is only the work. No politics, no worrying about the future; indeed, the CEO and the co-workers don't even have to like the project person, knowing that he or she will soon be done and gone.

And speaking of done and gone, perhaps this is the solution to getting the boomers to let go. They get freed from the annoyances of employment but retain the joy of contribution. They get paid for what they do and know, without having to pretend they still want to do and know it all. So, put some Stones on the stereo and let it play; the generation that started the cliché "work hard and play hard" can do both and still have time for a hip replacement and money for that eye lift.

Dale Dauten is a syndicated columnist. He can be reached at dale@dauten.com.