
WORK PLACE MATTERS

Hiring younger workers can have a positive side

The current recession has put a tight squeeze on job opportunities for young people. Because of the high unemployment rate, experienced adult workers now compete with teens and young adults for entry-level jobs.



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Fast food outlets used to be the most common workplace for teens. But, now, many fast food establishments prefer to hire adults with work experience.

Even before the recent economic downturn, the work force participation rate of those ages 16 to 24 was at its lowest since World War II. This is significant, because early employment is the best indicator of future sustained work and higher income.

The period between ages 16 and 24 is important, as young people prepare to take on adult responsibilities. Future workers lay the foundation for successful long-term employment through exposure to entry-level jobs, career options and progressively challenging employment experiences.

Some employers shy away from hiring people younger than 18. The basic age-related guidelines of the Fair Labor Standards Act are:

- ◆ People 18 years or older may perform any job for unlimited hours.

- ◆ Those age 16 and 17 may work an unlimited number of hours at any job not declared hazardous by the secretary of labor. Hazardous jobs include such tasks as operating a

meat slicer, driving, working on roofs or on machine shop floors.

- ◆ Work permits are no longer issued to youth 14 to 18. Details about child labor laws are available at the Bureau of Labor and Industries Web site: www.boli.state.or.us.

So if you hire a younger worker, what can you do to help make the arrangement successful?

Beyond the legal requirements, it's best to take a slightly different approach to managing teens and young adults. Many young people are encountering serious discipline and responsibility for the first time.

You have the opportunity to help young workers get off to a great start in the business world and be better prepared for whatever comes next. You're helping develop their character and their work ethic.

Karina Lake, co-owner of Lago Blu gelato in Eugene, has had a lot of experience hiring and supervising this age group. She says it can be easy to fall into the role of the parent.

"You will bring out the best in a young employee by giving them every opportunity to behave like an adult," Lake says. "Give clear instructions, but don't talk too much."

Lake also has learned that being careful in the hiring decision saves time, money and future stress. She advises employers to go over your young applicants' résumés carefully. Have they succeeded in school? Volunteered in the community?

"Even if they have minimal paid experience, they should list references from teachers or counselors," she said. "It's tempting to hire teens you know through friends, church and so on, but be honest with yourself — could you let this employee go if it doesn't work out?"

Here are some tips to help you successfully manage younger workers:

- ◆ Make the orientation process more detailed than you typically would with an experienced adult. Go over rules, policies and procedures in great detail. In particular, explain the dress code and your policy on cell phone use. Stress the need for promptness and reliable attendance.

- ◆ Build education into your training process. This age group needs to know the purpose of their job duties. Don't print mounds of paper and expect the information to be read and retained.

- ◆ Help them develop a strong work ethic and personal integrity. Even in the best of companies, young workers may be exposed to employees who are not as productive as you would prefer. Set a positive example and use coaching techniques to counteract any negative influences.

- ◆ Review performance on a regular basis. A young, inexperienced worker needs plenty of regular feedback. Performance reviews don't have to be tied to wage increases. Use them to encourage positive performance and correct problems before they become serious. This also helps familiarize young workers with the performance review process.

Lake admits that before opening Lago Blu, she was nervous about hiring high school and college students. Now, she finds supervising young workers "one of the most rewarding aspects of my job."

If you have questions about training, contact Robin Onaclea Smith, business service coordinator at Lane Workforce Partnership, at robino@laneworkforce.org or (541) 682-7224.