

OPINION

GUEST VIEWPOINT

CREATING TOMORROW'S WORK FORCE

Private investment key to developing stellar employees

By ANNIE SAKAGUCHI

Boomers are retiring. More than 40 percent of the labor force in Lane County is older than 45. In sectors such as health care, wood products and transportation, the percentage often exceeds 50 percent.

Members of subsequent generations are fewer in number, lag behind their parents in educational attainment and come to the workplace with different expectations about work and what it means to be an employee.

In a 2005 national survey by the National Association of Manufacturers, 83 percent of respondents indicated that a shortage of talent affects their ability to serve customers and limits their growth. That's also true for businesses in Lane County. Yet, as an owner of local McDonald's restaurant, I see hope for the future.

Let me share a few stories.

Megan came to work for us as a crew person during her senior year at high school. Her attention to customer service and her ability to lead resulted in promotions — first to crew leader, then shift manager and assistant manager. While working for us she completed both her bachelor's and master's degrees, then was hired by a local bank. She is now a universal associate and training mentor for the bank.

Betty has a different story. A

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79-year old retiree, Betty was asked by one of our former managers to help out on weekends at our restaurant. She worked for us for five years before resigning to marry and travel.

In those five years, she made friends and made our Gateway location the friendliest and cleanest in Oregon. She also trained our special needs crew members how to clean and maintain our lobby. She was patient and persistent, and made them feel good about their accomplishments. She made a real contribution to our customers and to other employees.

Tiffany was looking for a steady job so she could be close to her boyfriend, who moved to Eugene from California. Her friendly smile and greetings make a customer's day. Regular customers are spoiled, because she knows when they will be coming to the drive-through and has their orders ready to go. She remembers their

names, and makes them feel special.

Tiffany will succeed because of her attitude and initiative. She can have a career, even without a college degree.

Megan, Betty and Tiffany reflect another major trend: a diverse, multi-generational work force. It is not uncommon to see four generations represented in the workplace; each brings its own perspective, yet they can work together.

Lane County businesses that adapt to the complexities of the 21st century work force will enjoy success. The first step is investing in their current work force. Unfortunately, Oregon is one of the few states in the country that does not fund worker retraining but relies solely on the federal government.

For example, the Lane Workforce Partnership annually receives approximately \$300,000 in federal Workforce Investment Act funds for worker training. That's simply not enough. It will take a collaboration between state and local governments and businesses to "skill up" Oregon's workers.

So, employers and individuals must change their attitudes about training; it's no longer a cost, but an investment. It's no longer something someone does for me; now it's something I do for myself — whether the person saying that is an employee or the owner of a company.

Many companies already are working to ensure that their employees are well trained and have the ability to move up the career ladder. These companies take advantage of local resources, whether it's private consultants, Lane Community College, a private educational resource or the services of the Lane Workforce Partnership. In the future, we'll have to do even more.

Of course, all employers want employees like Megan, Betty and Tiffany. Not all our employees are like them, but these women give me hope.

Older workers can re-enter the work force to help younger workers, and younger workers can take the initiative — whether that means getting a college education or starting a career in one of our restaurants.

Boomer retirements, a diverse work force, global competition, technological change — it all can feel so overwhelming. Yet there are solutions. Together, we can create a vital, thriving economy that improves the quality of life in Lane County.

The future is in our hands.

Annie Sakaguchi is president of the Lane Workforce Partnership. This is the first in a series of biweekly columns about work force development in Lane County.