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Business

■ UNRETIRED

Older workers in new jobs

Retail jobs help seniors stay in touch

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After working most of his professional life as a yard man in the New York City subway system, Frank Jackson retired in 1981 and moved to Billings to live off of his pension.

But his pension wasn't enough.

Nine years ago, when he was 63, Jackson took a temporary stock hand job at Target during the Christmas season to supplement his income. He's been with the company ever since, reporting to work at 4:30 a.m. to load and unload merchandise and process returns.

"I didn't get a cost-of-living raise on my pension, so a few extra bucks have helped," said the now 72-year-old part-time worker. Plus, "working keeps me busy," he said.

Jackson is among a growing number of Americans who are staying in or re-entering the work force after the traditional retirement age.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, women aged 65 participated in the labor force at a rate of 20.9 percent in 1993, up from 17.3 percent in 1984. The same number for 65-year-old men held steady around 30.5 percent during the same time period.

And the retail industries, in particular, seem to provide the jobs that more and more of today's working seniors favor.

"Why would they want to be tied behind one of those things?" asked Jim Wallman, gesturing across his office to an electric typewriter. Wallman is project director at the American Association of Retired Persons Senior Employment office in Billings.

"It used to be that the elderly wanting to return to work were interested in clerical, maintenance, kitchen, child care or elderly care jobs," Wallman said. "The trend is shifting more, however, to retail sales."

No statistics are readily available to quantify the trend. However, Wallman said at least a third of his clients accepted retail and fast food jobs in 1994, while only about 10 percent did so 10 years ago.

The older workers who spur the typewriters seem to mirror those bored, yet tireless, eager youths in the Mountain Dew commercials: Been there. Done that.

The older workers want something new with more action, Wallman said, while physical and technical limitations come into play, too.

"We find that a number of the older workers are not computer-oriented (for today's office jobs), and some can't do the physical labor, any more, associated with maintenance," Wallman said. Thus, they are more suited for retail jobs, even though they might be on their feet most of the day.

Carl Zimmerman, 58, owned and operated a line of hair salons along the California coast for 30 years. He now works part-time at Wendy's in the Billings Heights.

"I got burned out," Zimmerman said of his previous occupation. He said the stress of sales still



Gazette photos by James Woodcock

Carl Zimmerman got burned out managing a group of hair salons, so he took a job at the Heights Wendy's.



Helen Clark, formerly a physical therapist, thought the Target store seemed like a cheerful place to work.

exists in the fast food industry, "but because the business is not mine, I can walk away from it."

With the high cost of health care and the failure of Social Security and pension programs to keep pace with inflation, economics is another factor in some senior citizens' decisions to go back to work.

"They need the income," said Wallman.

While Social Security payments went up 2.6 percent in 1994, for example, Medicare rates also jumped \$41.10 across the board — often swallowing up the Social Security gains. In one of Wallman's cases, a client actually lost a dollar after the dust settled.

Then again, money is not always the primary motivation.

Paul Vasser, 75, is a part-time people greeter at Wal-Mart. He owned a local drycleaning business for 35 years before retiring in 1981.

"I played golf and did all kinds of traveling," Vasser said. "But after a while, I got bored."

BeaAnn Melichar, executive

director of the Yellowstone County Council on Aging, said some working seniors are looking for a reason to get up in the morning, yet enjoy the schedule flexibility of retail. Others seek an activity that will boost their self-esteem, give them an identity and keep them in touch with people.

Helen Clark, 73, is a cashier at Target who started three years ago as temporary Christmas help. Formerly a physical therapist, she said that the money she and her husband had planned to retire on "disappeared."

"I walked in the store one day and talked to an employee, and it just seemed like such a happy place," Clark said of the retail outlet. So she decided to stick around.

"They say now if you keep your mind active, you can prevent diseases like Alzheimer's," she said.

Jackson said that too often retired seniors "sit in a rocking chair, watch television and die."

"I don't want to do that," he said.

Employers welcome older Americans

Older Americans are becoming a more visible part of the labor force and not only because they are holding more retail jobs.

"Within the last 10 years, stores and managers have focused on the retired as viable employees," said BeaAnn Melichar, executive director of the Yellowstone County Council on Aging. "They are beginning to finally realize that they are dependable and stable."

It was perhaps the fast-food industrial leader McDonald's Corporation that first nationally publicized its intent to hire senior citizens. It launched its "McMasters" senior hiring program about seven years ago, said Kate Gran, human resources coordinator and a McMasters coach with McDonald's northwest regional office in Seattle.

"We'd always had a diverse work force, but we had been known as a youth employer," Gran said. McMasters was meant to re-educate both sides of the fast food industry — the employees and the consumers — about the need to welcome senior citizens into the system, she said.

Billings Target manager Doug Corbridge welcomes them with open arms.

"We rely on their experience," he said, and their seasoned business attitude. Though many of his older workers come to Target with no

"...They really care about their job. And ... they care about the people. And that's important in retail."

—Flo McMasters
Wal-Mart
assistant manager

retail experience, they do have a commitment to and concern for their job that is unique to their age group, he said.

"They've developed a work ethic," Corbridge said. "Younger people don't always know what employers expect, so they have to be taught that," in addition to the regular job skills.

He said the turnover rate is also lower among senior employees, because they aren't as restless to move on and try other jobs.

Wal-Mart Assistant Manager Flo McMasters added that older workers bring a built-in compassion for their customers that younger people sometimes lack.

From a business standpoint, the advantage of older workers is that "they really care about their job. And when they care about their job, they care about the people. And that's important in retail," McMasters said.