

AGING TODAY

Vol. XXV, No. 6

PAGE 8

November–December 2004

ISSN: 1043-1284

www.agingtoday.org

AARP STUDIES BEST EMPLOYERS

Bon Secours Richmond Health System of Richmond, Va., and SSM Health Care of St. Louis, Mo., offer phased retirement programs that allow employees to collect full retirement benefits while continuing to work part-time or reduced hours. These older workers also receive full health and other benefits.

Volkswagen of America, in Auburn Hills, Mich., administers a flexible-spending program that allows employees to allocate up to \$5,000 in pretax earnings to a special account that workers can use to pay for such needs as childcare and eldercare.

Pitney Bowes, in Stamford, Conn., retained an older employee with a heart condition by moving him into a less strenuous job. And the Principal Financial Group, Des Moines, Iowa, kept a valued worker who developed vision problems by purchasing a magnicam, enabling the employee to place documents under a camera lens and view the enlarged text on a TV monitor.

These firms were among 35 companies across the United States recently named as AARP's 2004 "Best Employers for Workers Over 50."

Along with its fourth annual list of honorees, AARP released "Staying Ahead of the Curve 2004: Employer Best Practices for Mature Workers," a detailed analysis of the best practices among winning employers during the previous three years. Some of the primary themes that emerged from the analysis were:

Attracting and retaining the right workforce. Among the measures taken by winning companies were offering phased retirement programs, flexible schedules through part-time work or job-sharing, career counseling, and time off to care for dependents beyond the requirements of the federal Family and Medical Leave Act, as well as reducing the physical demands of work.

Implementing new programs focused on mature workers. Most winning firms implemented retirement planning and preparation programs. Added benefits, such as permitting mature workers to add "catch-up" contributions into their 401(k) plans or offering the ability to purchase group long-term care insurance, were also common. Most such measures, except for those involving healthcare costs, require only a modest employer investment, according to the report.

Offering programs based on companies' market focus. Examples included financial services and insurance companies, which assisted mature workers with financial planning, and hospital systems and other healthcare providers, which made services available free or at substantial discounts to employees covered under their health plans.

INNOVATIVE HEALTH FIRMS

The study found employers in healthcare were more innovative than others and created approaches that "may be a precursor to what is coming to organizations in other sectors." For example, several healthcare companies target recruiting programs to retirees and mature workers with professional backgrounds, especially nurses. These organizations offer many flexible work options. In addition, hospitals are installing hydraulic hospital beds and other equipment to reduce the strenuous nature of the work, decreasing workers' risk of injury.

The report recommends that employers conduct an initial assessment "of how demographic changes will affect them and identify specific occupational groups where there may be problems." The study observes, "Today's responses are often piecemeal rather than comprehensive." It suggests that employers address their challenges as a business issue with a focus on specific cases to justify the need for new programs to managers and boards of directors.

The authors of the report also stress, "Talent planning is vital to understand where staffing gaps are

likely to fall and to build job-specific strategies to fill them.” By addressing the challenges of an aging workforce in a comprehensive way, states the report, American employers “can turn potential staffing liabilities into business opportunities.”

The executive summary of “Staying Ahead of the Curve 2004” is available online at http://research.aarp.org/econ/multiwork_2004_1.pdf. AARP also recently unveiled a new website to provide information and guidance for employers seeking to attract and retain a mature workforce. The address is www.aarp.org/employerresourcecenter. ❖