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IBM Retirees to Test the Waters at Treasury

Stephen Barr

Maybe it's no longer a young person's game.

The government, which has traditionally hired college graduates and mid-career professionals, signaled yesterday that it is interested in hiring mature workers -- those older Americans who are retired or face retirement in the private sector but want to keep working.

The nonprofit Partnership for Public Service, IBM and the Treasury Department announced a pilot project to help IBM employees and retirees navigate the federal hiring process and land jobs in the government. The Treasury Department agreed to serve as the test case for the project, in part because many veteran IBM employees have skills in technology, accounting and law that are needed by Treasury.

President Bush's chief civil service adviser, Linda M. Springer, welcomed the initiative, which was launched at the National Press Club. "We are fully behind the notion that we need to reach out to the corporate sector to people who are ending their careers there and looking for ways to engage and who particularly value at that point the opportunity for public service," she said yesterday.

If the project is successful, the partnership, which studies ways to improve the government's effectiveness, plans to take the hiring model to other federal agencies. Rick Hastings, deputy chief human capital officer at Treasury, said he hopes to get the project underway before July.

The announcement highlights the uncertainty facing large organizations as baby boomers decide whether to keep working, find encore careers or opt for a life of leisure. The government could be hit especially hard with a brain drain: 58 percent of the civil service is older than 45, compared with 41 percent in the overall national workforce, according to a report released by the partnership yesterday.

Max Stier, the group's president, said the government has several challenges to overcome if it wants to attract older Americans. A survey and focus groups conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the report found that many older Americans do not hold the government in high regard.

In the survey, 61 percent cited "too much bureaucracy" and "too hard to accomplish anything" as reasons not to work for Uncle Sam. Stier said 66 percent of the survey respondents thought the government was ineffective in solving problems and helping people.

The government also has not made it easy for outsiders to gain federal employment, Stier added. Only half of government jobs are open to the public, and applying for federal jobs is difficult, he said.

The partnership's report called the government "largely isolated from external talent pools" and suggested that many highly paid jobs are reserved for current employees, not outside applicants.

Despite such problems, Stier said the survey found that many older Americans are interested in public service. He added that data collected by the Merit Systems Protection Board showed that experienced workers who recently entered the government in mid- and senior-level positions prefer federal service to their previous jobs.

Stanley S. Litow, vice president for corporate citizenship and corporate affairs at IBM, said the federal hiring project represents another way the company can provide career services to its 350,000 employees.

The company sponsors a "transition-to-teaching" program that permits IBM employees to take time off to obtain teacher certifications and to practice teaching. IBM also sponsors a "corporate service corps" that will send 600 employees in small teams to developing countries to work on economic and education issues.

For the project with Treasury, the partnership will ensure that job openings are sent to IBM employees and help them understand federal hiring procedures and requirements. IBM will provide the employees with specialized training and networking opportunities.

If the pilot project succeeds, Litow said IBM hopes other federal agencies and other corporations will sign up to help bring older Americans into the government. "It is good business to operate this way," he said.

Treasury has not set any goals for how many IBM employees should be brought on board, Hastings said. Asked whether the department would show favoritism toward job applicants from IBM, he said no, noting that Springer had pointed out that federal hiring must adhere to legal requirements to ensure fairness and to give preferences to military veterans.

Springer, the head of the Office of Personnel Management, has urged agencies to step up recruitment of young Americans and has supported efforts to waive restrictions on federal retirees and let them collect full pay along with their pensions if agencies bring them back.

"Clearly, we are open to all comers," she said.