

## Company discovers gold in silver hairs

More employers try to attract -- and keep-- well-seasoned older workers on staff

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VANCOUVER - Fiona Barry sees absolutely no reason to quit her full-time job with Metasoft Systems Inc. and settle into the "golden" years of retirement.

After all, the 66-year-old Barry -- who was hired by the Vancouver-based firm eight years ago at 58 -- has the best of both worlds. She not only earns a full-time salary, but rises early most mornings and takes a short walk to her home office, where she works as a sales account manager and takes in a lovely view from her office window.

But Barry is lucky to work for a company that, along with several other Canadian companies, has been singled out for being a top employer of people over 50.

She is also part of a growing wave of employees whose employers are making special efforts to both accommodate existing and new staff members aged 50 and over. Companies are offering such progressive options as home offices, flexible hours and compressed work weeks -- arrangements that are particularly appealing to older workers.

In Barry's case, she works four of five days each week from home, largely setting her own hours so she can spend more time with her husband and family, including helping out with her young grandson when the need arises.

"This is wonderful, this is a great company to work for," Barry said in an interview. "They recognize older people's skills, no question about it. And a home office is very important to me. It makes it much easier for me to plan my day so that I'm not restricted to nine to five. This is absolutely a huge advantage. Not having to commute gives me extra time for everything.

"I'm taking this six months at a time, but I plan on working here as long as I'm successful with them." Metasoft, a high-tech software company that provides funding information and services for the non-profit sector, recently received a Best Employer Award for 50-plus Canadians from the Workplace Institute, a Toronto-based consulting and research firm that specializes in the mature workforce. According to a news release, criteria for the awards are excellence in the areas of hiring, training, career development, health care, employee and family benefits, retirement policy, pensions and pre- and post-retirement support systems. The average age of all staff is about 40 at Metasoft, which provides a database of over 100,000 funders for non-profits in Canada, the U.S. and the U.K.

In 2003, Metasoft initiated its work-from-home program, an initiative that has resulted in 18 per cent of its 81 workers working from home full-time and another six per cent part-time.

The reduced amount of time spent commuting, and the ability to work flexible hours, equates to more quality time with family, other interests and hobbies, the company says.

"We introduced (telecommuting options) three years ago and it's been an overwhelming success. It's a great retention strategy. It also provides savings for both the company and employee. In many cases, they work better. We don't ask them to, but they often put in an extra hour. And they can spend more time with their families," Metasoft president and CEO Trevor Skillen said .

In addition, employees may apply for an unpaid leave of absence at any time, allowing for extra vacations -- something that is often appreciated by the mature worker who (like Barry) has a retired partner, or young family living at a distance. "We find mature workers bring a lot of talent and expertise to the table," said Skillen. "You get a lot of accumulated expertise, focused energy."

Skillen said two of their top three sales people are over 60 and that they're committed and passionate about their work.

Most of Skillen's staff -- including those over 50 -- work full-time, he added, although the company is considering job-sharing as an option.

According to Metasoft, 27 per cent of their employees are over 50 (compared to 16.9 per cent on average in Canada).

Skillen said their older workers also provide a great balance for their younger employees, who bring curiosity and innovation to the company.

Older workers, however, often face challenges, such as retraining in the information technology field, he added.

Two of Metasoft's top sales representatives, both over 50, didn't know how to turn on a computer when they started.

Barbara Jaworski, president of the Workplace Institute, said in an interview that Canadian companies are starting to look at older workers as a valid option because of the looming talent shortage. "Particularly in B.C. and Alberta, they're getting squeezed and they're taking a second look."