

Training Column
June 2008

The Fifty Year Old Apprentice

I am forty seven years old. It shows. A little slower. A little more scalp. After thirty five years of working, I look at my life and career more often backwards than forwards. This is why I was so surprised when I met The Fifty Year Old Apprentice. A guy who is looking forward.

The first time I kind of laughed. I thought this seemingly old guy was a one shot deal. I figured if you make presentations to tens of thousands of apprentices at industry nights, schools and gatherings each year you are going to meet every kind of person. Every race, creed, color, gender and even age. But no. He is not an exception at all. He is everywhere I go. He is there in almost every audience I address across the US and Canada.

In Oakland, California. A little weathered but grinning and seemingly excited.

In Dayton, Ohio. In better shape than half the twenty year olds.

In Atlantic City. Taking notes.

Chicago.
Charleston.
Akron.
Atlanta.
Madison.
Concord.
Seattle.
Anchorage.
Las Vegas.
Ontario.
Los Angeles.

O.K. so now he's got my attention.

So I look a little closer and find thousands of apprentices in their forties standing right behind him.

And tens of thousands of apprentices in their mid to late thirties behind them.

And all this makes me start to think that this Fifty Year Old Apprentice might have something to teach me instead of the other way around.

He has made me start thinking about how serious a guy in his later thirties to fifty is going to be about work and life. He has made me start thinking about how people at that time of life are more likely to have formed an excellent work ethic. He reminded me that age has no bearing on the desire to sustain good lives and secure families with a total commitment.

In fact why is a thirty-five, forty or even fifty year old apprentice any less of a prospect than an nineteen year old? Why are we at high school job fairs if our ranks are filling up with a completely different and possibly better resource? Who would you bet your project, company or industry on? What are the trade-offs?...wisdom vs. energy? Experience vs. long term service prospect? Work ethic & life skills vs. raw talent? Maybe it is time we start thinking outside the traditional views and limits of age and apprenticeship.

I know that the construction industry can be rough on one's body over the years. And certainly the prospects of age and health have a bearing on work performance. But for labor and management to disproportionately focus time and resources on the recruitment of very young talent might be a mistake.

The average age of an apprentice in the US today is 28 years old. Just about the time that a marriage and family come along. Is it a coincidence that our candidates start looking for a real career then? And as life continues most of us learn not to take an opportunity for granted. We learn that second guessing oneself at a later date can be a very expensive lesson. And thus with each passing year one of our novice apprentices adds, he or she becomes more appreciative of the remarkable opportunity granted to them.

Just think about it. I wouldn't have unless I had met him over and over. The Fifty Year Old Apprentice and those thousands that stand behind him now.

Mark Breslin is a strategist and author specializing in labor-management challenges. He is the author of *Survival of the Fittest, Organize or Die* and coming in 2008 *Alpha Dog*. He addresses more than 50,000 labor and business leaders each year in North America. Coming soon a new Breslin Book for apprentice instruction : **Million Dollar Blue Collar: Managing Your Earnings for Life and Work Success.** More on his work and profile is available at www.breslin.biz.