

Paying your dues

Younger workers are finding a new way to climb the ladder while planning their careers, developing skills and meeting work goals

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At age 26, Maquoya Waithe says her work ethic may seem "a little old school."

Waithe said she worked her way up from a sales associate at a department store to the company's human resources division in less than five years. She was willing to arrive early and stay late. And she tackled jobs she wasn't interested in to get ahead.

"I do feel that I paid my dues," said Waithe of Columbia. "You have to give 100 percent of yourself. When you're there, you do everything you can."

Waithe's progress fits the new model for many workers younger than 40 when it comes to moving up -- work hard and move fast. But she knows there is a perception among many in the work force that younger employees are not willing to start at the bottom and move up at a traditional pace.

Experts said that reputation has grown because most workers today change jobs more often than they switch cars. The idea of staying with one company for an entire career has long since decayed in the American work place. And younger workers are more likely to take control of their career instead of waiting for their employers to make those decisions for them.

Mobility, however, doesn't mean the end of loyalty or having to pay dues, experts said. Workers today, especially younger ones, have crafted a new approach to planning their careers, developing skills and accomplishing work goals.

"In the historical frame, loyalty means start one job for 25 years, stay here, get a gold watch and then retire," said **John C. Peoples**, Baltimore managing partner of **Global Lead Management Consulting**. "Younger workers say, 'I want to be measured by what I do and what I contribute as opposed to the amount of time that I spent working.' "

Attitudes about work have shifted as growth in the economy has changed from manufacturing to services, according to a study by the Families and Work Institute of New York.

The study found that more people born before 1964 are willing to place work as their top priority, compared with younger workers. More workers born after 1965 tend to make family their top priority or seek more balance between their jobs and personal lives.

"They don't believe that two-way loyalty in the work place exists any longer and they have every right to believe that," said Chuck Underwood, president of the Generational Imperative Inc., a Cincinnati consultancy that provides human resource training on how to manage different generations in the work place. "And so they want to be rewarded immediately for good work."

Employees are more willing today to work for several companies as long as they develop the skills and knowledge they are looking for, said Richard A. Lamond, senior vice president and chief of human resources of Spherion Corp., a staffing firm in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

That has changed in part because younger workers have been influenced by an economy that has seen mass layoffs, where companies are less stable and employees are asked to shoulder more of the costs of health care and pensions.

That dynamic makes it harder for companies to retain good employees, experts said, and has pushed many to adjust their recruiting and retention efforts to hold on to younger workers who have potential.

"The emerging work force ... they want to be treated fairly and won't tolerate companies that tolerate low performance," Lamond said. "It's a partnership perspective -- if that stimulation isn't there, they are going to move on. Workers are not looking for longevity, they are looking for continuous stimulation."

Underwood said employees born before 1964 often complain that younger workers don't stay late when the company faces a deadline because they expect to leave the same time each day.

He said younger generations need to realize that the global competitive market means the work place no longer provides an "8-to-5" schedule. In turn, he said, older workers must learn to understand the attitudes of their younger colleagues.

Experts believe that loyalty is still important in a career, but many workers are using a different approach to make their marks in a company.

"In a few decades, people will say the most loyal employee is the one that is the most productive in the time they were with the company," Peoples said. "Younger workers want to give greater contributions in the five years that they stay as opposed to the contributions someone might have made in their lifetime."

Some workers acknowledge that they learned to be more patient after joining the work force.

Jennifer Lott, 32, of Baltimore majored in communications and psychology at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., and always had an interest in theater. She coupled her

academics and passion for the theater into a career in marketing, which started with a summer internship with the Tennessee Performing Arts Center.

The center offered her a job after graduation as a marketing assistant. "I started at the bottom and worked my way up and learned as I went," said Lott, who is now the marketing director for the Hippodrome Theater in Baltimore, a job she has held for three years.

She spent about seven years at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center, where she moved up to marketing coordinator and director of marketing before moving to Baltimore. She figured her degree from Vanderbilt would help her secure a high salary and better job title early in her career.

Matthew Pearce, 31, took a sales position 3 1/2 years ago so he could work with an information technology company and gain more experience in corporate Web design. The Baltimore man said he has learned that paying your dues is still an important part of moving up the corporate ladder.

"[Paying dues] is something I equate with an entry-level position," he said.

Pearce studied cinematography at the **University of Maryland, Baltimore County**, before switching to computer science. He left school after a year and half to start working and is taking classes part time to finish his degree, which may take several years.

Pearce works for Tescos Inc., a Timonium distributor of wireless communication products, and is now in a technical position. He also runs his own side business: a Web design firm called IO Media Design that serves small companies.

"I'm taking classes now for software I've been using for 10 years just because it satisfies part of the degree," Pearce said. "Either I get a degree now or I am going to spend the rest of my life paying dues over and over again in entry-level jobs."

Waithe, who is now a recruiter for a Baltimore staffing and human resources company, said she feels that paying her dues is a continuous process of always trying to do more and work harder regardless of where she is in her career. "Real winners will step up and make themselves available for new opportunities and you never know who is watching," she said.

Like Waithe, Lott wants to keep advancing. "I'm still paying my dues," Lott said. "There's a lot of places I can go from here -- it's an ever growing and ever changing business."