

BUSINESS 2.0 MAGAZINE: HOME DEPOT GOES OLD SCHOOL

By Melanie Warner

(Business 2.0) – As an engineer who spent 34 years at NASA’s Johnson Space Center, Rob Roy has the kind of technical acumen that makes explaining the differences between competing washing machines a breeze. And he’s spent half his adult life nurturing a passion for remodeling homes. “Name anything about a house and I’ve probably done it at least once,” he says. “Laying down carpets, installing gutters, roofing, plumbing ...” Roy is also 65 years old—and that, as much as anything else, makes him one of the most valuable new hires at \$65 billion retailer Home Depot.

Roy, who makes \$11 an hour selling kitchenware and appliances at a Home Depot store in Thornton, Colo., is part of an army of retirees being deployed to the company through a partnership with the 35-million-member AARP. The organization has begun recruiting more than 700 older workers like Roy—not for menial jobs, à la Wal-Mart’s cadre of aged greeters and baggers, but as sales associates and managers who can help customers navigate Home Depot’s towering, intimidating shelves. “We want them to have technical depth,” says Cindy Milburn, Home Depot’s senior hiring director. “That means plumbers, carpenters, electricians, people with millwork backgrounds, and people with design skills.”

Believe it or not, workers like those are becoming difficult to find in the under-65 crowd. Like a growing number of companies today, Home Depot takes seriously recent projections of a future labor shortfall. The National Association of Manufacturers estimates that as baby boomers continue retiring and the economy grows, the country will have 7 million more jobs than workers by 2010 (see “The Coming Job Boom,” September 2003). That’s why some firms are luring older workers back into their ranks. Already, about 17 percent of Home Depot’s sales force is over 50, and Milburn expects that figure to keep rising.

But Home Depot isn’t just thinking long-term. This year the company will open 175 new stores in North America. With rival Lowe’s trumpeting its great customer service, the race is on to find reliable, knowledgeable workers. Seniors fit the bill: Home Depot says its older workers stay on the job longer and don’t take as many sick days as their fresh-faced colleagues. Adds Jim Seith, director of AARP’s Senior Community Service Employment Program, “They don’t get pregnant, they come to work on time, they don’t have rings all over their bodies, and they wear belts.” More than two dozen major companies—including Anheuser-Busch, Barnes & Noble, and Sears—are now exploring similar partnerships with the AARP.

Roy, for his part, says this job is far more satisfying than the last two gigs he's taken since leaving NASA—a night job driving a bus, and as a baker at Safeway—and has no intention of retiring now. “I get bored when I don't work,” he says. “I put on weight and sit around the house. It's horrible.” Home Depot might well be saving him from his misery—and, with experts like Roy on the floor, saving itself some misery as well. — MELANIE WARNER

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