

## **ANALYSIS: Make way for next generation**

By COLIN READ, *Everybody's Business*

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— I recently received an impassioned e-mail from a reader frustrated by the plight of young professionals in the North Country. While I forever and decisively depart any measure of the ranks of young professionals, as I turn 50 this week, I nonetheless understand their legitimate concerns.

Young professionals are the lifeblood of our collective economic future. Without new ideas and new techniques, new energy and new perspectives, we fail to keep up with an accelerating global economy. This is just as true today as it was when the Woodstock generation assumed their leadership roles in our community. And as this business and political leadership of the North Country eyes retirement, we leave a gaping hole unless we develop a plan.

The time is now. The forces confronting us are more than a perfect storm of simultaneous events.

First, most of our corporate, community, and non-profit leaders were born in the baby boom that ran from 1946 to 1959. The first of this Woodstock generation are now eligible to retire. And this greatest wave of domestic population growth in our history will all be of retirement age in a dozen years.

Second, there is another wave trying to come up behind — the children of the baby boom. This baby boom echo has a thirst for the experiences that will allow them to assume the mantle of community leadership. They are also very capable, but their opportunities are few and far between, especially compared with the opportunities of those who came before them.

Third, while baby boomers are eligible to retire, the recent global financial meltdown forces many to consider delaying retirement. Fully 40 percent of boomers have indicated by survey that they are now rethinking their retirement plans. Consequently, we may not be making room for those that would follow.

Fourth, we once assumed that the older generation of family businesses would step aside to make room for their sons and daughters. For the most part, we no longer live in such times. Even the family farm, that former bastion of small and local business, now has more in common with a corporation than a family enterprise. And if farming families send their kids off to college, there is a very high probability the kids will not be returning to take up the reins. The family succession plans of the past are much rarer these days.

Finally, amazing advances in the health of our most seasoned workers and leaders means they anticipate at least 20 years in retirement. These individuals played a role in the profound advancement of quality of life over their lifetime and, rightly or wrongly, attribute a good part of the success of their enterprises to their uncanny skills. Some may not so quickly step aside.

The challenges of making room for young professionals does not just lie with the baby-boom generation that preceded them, though.

Young professionals want different things from their community. Theirs is a mobile generation that does not compare Plattsburgh to Keeseville. Instead, they compare the North Country to Sarasota, Seattle, San Francisco, Santa Fe or other areas that have long since figured out what younger professionals want.

And young professionals do not start out building their own families nearly as early as did their predecessors. This, too, makes them more footloose and creates new challenges for communities that compete for their skills.

These echoes of the baby boom bring with them a dramatic expansion of skills that are a product of an education system that also grows exponentially in sophistication every decade. They have much to offer, but little chance to show their stuff.

If we are smart, we can turn all these challenges into opportunities for our community. While it may not be the best time for the continuing tide of graduates fresh from our colleges, it may be an excellent time for Plattsburgh. If we are smart, we will be able to compete for talent that we otherwise could not afford.

Young professionals, too, must overcome some of their own challenges. Just as there is an arrogance of age, there is also an arrogance of youth. Young people do not yet know what they don't know. The deference once offered to those that came before us seems to erode a bit with every generation. And "paying dues" is just as much about earning the confidence of colleagues as it is gaining the experience needed to meet any situation.

A young person must also know that there is absolutely no substitute for very hard work, perseverance, loyalty and dedication. I would gladly take the very hard working and dedicated individual over someone more clever but less dedicated.

To succeed, young professionals must be dedicated to get the job done as and when promised, with no excuses. Like the famed America's Cup Sailor Dennis Connor once said, "There is no excuse to lose."

That ethic is perhaps the most important indicator of success and will bode well for anyone willing to adopt such a simple tenet. Unfortunately, it is easily forgotten by young, post-Watergate professionals that witnessed many public figures get ahead by cheating or smoke and mirrors, rather than through hard work.

Young professionals do want to be given a chance. They want community that has an interesting past and a bright future. And they want opportunities to interact with other young professionals.

It is incumbent upon us to do our part to help with their succession. To embrace this shared future and include young professionals, we will have to view our community through their eyes. Fortunately, how they view the community is similar to the "tourist eyes" I have spoken about in previous columns. Such a fresh perspective is in our best interest.

Above all, they want a chance to show what they can do. And they can benefit from the mentoring of those who blazed trails before them. Let's give them that chance. The community will be better for it. Alas, if we do not, there may not be much of a community to turn over to them someday.

So let's prepare our organizations for an inevitable succession. And let's make our communities attractive for those who want something quite different from community than we may want. These are the ingredients of healthy and sustainable economies. And these are the elements that our predecessors offered us.

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