

Older Workers at L.L.Bean

by Wendy Estabrook

Wendy Estabrook reviews L.L.Bean's policies and practices that support older workers, and employees of all ages, through flexible schedules, generous leave policies, its Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and specific educational offerings for retirement planning.

Like most employers, certainly those in Maine, L.L.Bean has an aging workforce—or more accurately—a multigenerational workforce. Currently, we have employees ranging in age from 16 to 91, with an average age of 49. We don't see this as a problem, but rather as a benefit in many ways. We benefit from having people at all stages of life and career and from engaging and supporting them throughout their careers. Our approach is to be an employer with “ageless appeal.” Most of our benefits, policies, and programs appeal to employees at all stages of life. We have actually found that typically what is good for the 25-year-old is also good for the 55-year-old employee although that may be for different reasons.

For instance, flexibility in the workplace is valued by employees at all stages of life and career. As a fairly large employer, we are able to offer many kinds of jobs and schedules. We have full- and part-time jobs with various shifts and flexible hours, as well as a variety of statuses: full-time, and three levels of part-time (on-call, seasonal, and active retiree). Hours associated with the different statuses vary dramatically. Some jobs offer the opportunity to work from home either occasionally or on a regular basis, a situation made possible by today's technology. Our Customer Satisfaction Department provides many employees the opportunity to work as home agents, taking calls from the comfort of their home offices. To meet the changing needs of employees' lives, many areas of the company allow employees to easily give away and pick up shifts as needed.

We also provide a number of benefits that appeal to all ages. We offer generous leave-of-absence policies so people can take time away to care for themselves or others. In addition to offering required types of leave, we offer L.L.Bean Family Medical Leave. This is available for care of a family member with a serious medical issue that is not covered under FMLA, and employees

are able to take up to six months in a 12-month period away from work. We focus on health and fitness by providing onsite fitness rooms and classes for employees and retirees. Our goal is to help employees to stay healthy and fit so they can enjoy life to the fullest, including working in a safe and healthy way. We also offer flexible spending accounts, so employees can use pre-tax dollars to pay for health expenses or dependent care for children or for aging parents.

With an average employee age of 49, it stands to reason that many of our employees are experiencing issues with aging parents. We see this through the number of leaves of absence taken by employees, as well as through feedback from our Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provider. For each of the past two years, we've had a significant and increasing number of employees take a full or intermittent leave of absence to take care of an aging parent. Fortunately, because we offer intermittent leaves, most employees have been able to flex their schedules to care for parents as needed while continuing to work. Approximately 15 percent of the employees who have sought out support through our EAP this year have had a significant issue related to an aging parent:

- Looking for emotional support/want to process with a provider
- Dealing with role reversal
- Dealing with illness and death
- Finding themselves addressing sibling issues/family dynamics
- Problem solving/needing to find resources
- Experiencing financial issues related to supporting the parent

- Requiring legal advice on issues related to powers of attorney.

In addition to offering one-on-one counseling on these issues, our EAP partner, Bridgetree Counseling, provides an Eldercare Seminar each year called “Taking Care of Mom and Dad and...Me.” This seminar is made up of four sessions focusing on legal issues, Medicare, living with dementia, and how to find and access community resources.

Through the sessions, we bring in different partners including Southern Maine Agencies on Aging, Legal Services for the Elderly, Spectrum Generations, and the Alzheimer’s Association.

Because we have many employees nearing retirement, we are also investing heavily in retirement education. Many, maybe even most, people acknowledge that they don’t have a plan for their retirement. They haven’t formed their thoughts about what their retirement life will look like, what the expenses will be, or how they will meet those expenses. In-house, we have developed and are offering quarterly pre-retirement information sessions. These sessions are positioned to be most helpful to employees who are thinking about retiring within the next two years, but often draw a younger crowd. The sessions focus on understanding pension benefits, options within 401(k) accounts, understanding health care options in retirement, company retiree benefits, and what decisions a person needs to make (and when) to make a smooth transition into retirement.

In addition to our in-house programs, we’ve also reached out and partnered with many other retirement resources. For instance, we offer a four-part series called “Retirewise” with external provider MetLife, coupled with the opportunity for the employee and a guest to meet one on one with a retirement planner. Our 401(k) administrator provides annual sessions on “Designing a Financial Roadmap and Building a Portfolio for Any Weather” along with one-on-one consultation appointments. We’ve also invested in an online retirement planning system, which allows employees to project sources of income in retirement (pension, 401(k), social security, and other savings) as well as project anticipated financial needs to determine retirement readiness. In 2014, approximately 700 employees attended at least one of our retirement education sessions.

For people wishing to phase into retirement, L.L.Bean allows employees to remain working and begin to collect their pension at age 65, which can help

them afford to work fewer hours if they are looking for more flexibility in their lives. L.L.Bean also has an active retiree status, so that retirees who leave the company can return to work for us at a future date, typically in a reduced-hour or seasonal situation.

Meeting the needs of an ever-changing workforce is an ongoing process. Current indicators, such as feedback through our EAP program and our annual employee engagement survey, tell us that we are on the right track, but we continue to listen and work to provide a great place to work for employees at all stages of life and career. 🐟



Wendy Estabrook is a director of human resources at L.L.Bean. In her role, she oversees a number of departments in HR to support the company and its employees. She is currently the co-convener of the Maine Workforce and Employment Workgroup, sponsored by the Maine Council on

Aging and the state of Maine’s Aging Initiative.