

Where Have All the Elders Gone? Reprinted with Mobility Magazine

Learning from the experiences, successes, and mistakes of predecessors keeps an industry vital and moving forward. Bloom comments on the process of communicating the body of past relocation knowledge to future generations, and the effect on the future of the relocation industry as a whole.

Since the beginning of time, it has been a tradition for the elders of a clan to pass the knowledge they have gained on to the next generation to ensure that the clan was able to keep alive these traditions and knowledge.

While it is recognized that things change, it is important to note that the relocation industry cannot be expected to survive if the knowledge that has been gained since the industry began is not passed on to future generations.

Currently, there is no system in place to pass along knowledge gained by experienced relocation professionals. What impact will there be on the industry if the knowledge is not passed on to those who come after us?

Today in the relocation industry there are three distinct generations of relocation professionals. The first generation are the elders, or “gray beards” to use a phrase coined many years ago by David Barlow, SCRP, senior vice president, Cooperative Resource Services, Mayfield Heights, OH, and Robert Quietmeyer, SCRP, general manager, Relocation Dynamics, Marietta, GA. The second generation are the “newbies” who comprise most of the individuals in relocation positions today. The final generation are those who have not yet arrived on the relocation profession scene.

The Elders

Back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, relocation was an industry beginning to evolve. This new industry was concerned with finding methods and procedures to enhance the recruitment and management development campaigns of corporate America. The nature of these programs was to move employees around every couple of years to enhance their training for the career ladder.

At the time, there was a group of individuals, comprised mostly of traditionalists and early to middle Baby Boomers, who represented corporations, financial service companies, real estate brokers, household goods movers, and other relocation professions. In the course of their interactions, they helped to develop, implement, and refine the very procedures that the industry uses today. The relocation professionals of that time wrote the book on how to handle the needs of the transferee as they developed.

This group was special because they had relocation in their blood, receiving satisfaction from assisting transferees with their problems during a highly stressful time. The elders were committed. Relocation was their “baby” and they watched it grow and prosper.

Elders had a work ethic, inherited from their parents, which committed them to solving never-before-confronted situations. They operated under the belief that the primary purpose of the industry that they chose as a profession was to assist the transferee with completing a smooth transfer as cost-effectively as possible. Their actions led to a standardization of the industry processes that the next generation could use to effectively deliver relocation services without some of the headaches they had endured.

The elders operated in a time reference where there was a sense of loyalty between the corporation and its employees. In the beginning, the corporations operated under a culture that called for the corporation to do what was necessary to keep the transferee and the family together in the process. The result was that the transferee would discuss with the relocation professional alternatives if they thought the costs were too much.

However, times are changing and those who joined the efforts in the beginning are starting to wander into other endeavors. Some of this change is due to retirement; others are leaving because of burnout from too many years on the front lines.

Some long-time relocation professionals have decided that they have seen enough. In one case, after 20-plus years in the business, a relocation professional went back to teaching five-year-old children. She commented that they were easier to deal with than transferees. In another case, the individual was an assistant to one of the industry leaders for more than 10 years. Since the leader was not ready to leave, he arranged for the assistant to get a position in corporate America. The assistant lasted one year, saying she could not do it anymore.

These are the very individuals who should lead the charge to pass on the body of knowledge and traditions to the next generation of relocation professional--the “newbies.”

The Newbies

Populated by the late Baby Boomers and members of Generation-X, many of these relocation professionals have fallen into profession by accident. The typical relocation professional within corporate America has less than three years of experience in the position. They are witnessing the apparent death of the loyalty once seen by the elders between the employee and the corporation, which is due to any number of reasons, including massive layoffs.

As an example, consider Karin Miller, relocation/alternative reward consultant, Electronic Arts, Redwood City, CA. Miller related that her boss arrived at Electronic Arts and found no relocation policy in place. Because she was highly service-oriented and was responsible for new-hire orientations and the rewards program, her boss asked her if she would like to take on relocation as well.

Miller said that she was not even sure what relocation was or in what direction she was headed. She began her exploration by talking with the household goods mover and the relocation management company that they were aligned with at the time. Part of their advice was to join both the Employee Relocation Council and the local area relocation council.

Miller did this, but she also talked with anyone and everyone she could. While awed by the elders, she talked with many of them. Her feeling was that without the benefit of these elders she surely would have failed in her efforts. Miller, however, was very up front in stating that if she had not gone out and found the gurus of relocation, they would not have willingly approached her to pass on their knowledge. In other words, the body of knowledge that is necessary to be of true service to the transferee does not come to the newbies automatically. It is only through networking and asking questions that the knowledge is passed on. The skill set that one can obtain from on-the-job training is not sufficient to carry him or her through the nightmare that relocation situations can become.

If the newbies are in an environment where the knowledge of the gurus is critical for their success, then what happens to the next generation?

The Generation to Come

The last generation is one yet to arrive on the relocation profession scene. It is populated by members of the later Generation-X and the Millennials who have not yet entered the workforce in great numbers. Many have not given a thought to relocation as a profession.

Even more prevalent in this group than in the previous group is that there is no real career path into the industry. Miller stated she had to seek out the gurus to convey the knowledge of the industry to her so she could service her transferees. Where will the next generation of relocation professionals obtain the ability to assist transferees of the future without a body of knowledge?

Future of the Relocation Industry

Where will the three generations of relocation professionals take this industry into the future? What we heard in talking to some of the industry gurus was slightly disconcerting, to say the least.

One well-known relocation director within the brokerage community stated that if she decided to retire today, it would take her a good 12 months to train her replacement to understand what it is she does. Several others told us that if their sons or daughters approached them and asked about the wisdom of entering the relocation field as a career, they would tell them to find another field to enter.

If the industry that the elders have built is beginning to dissolve, there still may be time to stop the erosion. However, it can only be stopped if the industry develops a clear method of transferring the body of knowledge on to the succeeding generations to come.

Corporate America needs it. Transferees need it. Service providers need it. The body of knowledge and traditions of this industry are still the basis for everything that is done in relocation everyday.

The relocation industry is approaching its 40th year. The business climate that everyone is operating in has changed along with the passage of time. Yet, the changes are not detrimental to the ultimate goal of the industry--assisting transferees with one of the most stressful times of their lives.

Relocation professionals have, at their fingertips, the methodology to pass on what has been learned by the elders in building this industry to the generations that come after them. Failure to do so will result in the end of the industry as we know it.

Elders truly felt that they could actually make a difference. To many, relocation is the reason to come to work, it is viewed as enjoyable to work with both the clients and the transferees.

If relocation is becoming a path to somewhere else, rather than a career, relocation professionals will lack the ability to make that difference. It is up to all of us to determine in which direction this industry will head.

The elders must play out their role as gurus now before they decide to hang up their working days within this industry. The newbies must continue to seek out the elders and learn from their experience. And the generation of relocation professionals yet to come must discover the joys of working in this industry and demand that the body of knowledge be made available to them before they are lost in the field with no lifeline.