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Florida Credit Union Holds 'Key' to Youthful Recruiting

By Kristin Gilpatrick

Editor's Note: This story on recruiting age diversity onto the credit union board is part of a larger story on the subject that appears in the September issue of Credit Union Management magazine. Read the story "Invite Youthful Insight" on p. 28 of that issue.

What's the average age of your credit union's membership? What's the average age of the board that represents it?

In many cases the two averages are not the same; they're often not even within the same decade.

Traditionally, the credit union board has been filled by volunteers of middle to retirement ages. While many board members, regardless of age, certainly strive to maintain youthful enthusiasm for new ideas and keep the younger generations' needs in mind when making decisions, it's difficult not to let personal and peer group perspectives even subconsciously play into decisions.

A need for greater age diversity, and more youthful insight, into those decisions is driving some credit unions to actively recruit younger board members.

One such credit union is [Keys Federal Credit Union](#), Key West, Fla., where most board members are in their early- to mid-40s today. It's a dramatic change from the age group the board represented almost exclusively a few years ago.

A NEW BOARD FOR NEW TIMES

"Our board was representing another credit union from another time before CEO John Dolan-Heitlinger came on board. He set about getting our open minded senior board members to get out and get excited about recruiting younger board members, and that's when they recruited me," notes Director Andy Griffiths, who also serves as chairman—and youngest member of—the local school board.

Dolan-Heitlinger encouraged the board to seek more age and employment diversity to gain different perspectives and a more balanced representation of membership.

"That senior board, made up of mostly retirement-age directors, decided to ask itself a simple question—'Who do we want on the board?' It sounds so simple but it's a question most boards don't ask themselves," Dolan-Heitlinger explains. "We sort of looked at as if the whole board won the lottery and left in one day and we suddenly had to go out and recruit a new board. We asked ourselves what we would want the board mix to look like. Once you ask that question it tends to move you toward people you don't have on the board now. For us that meant a move toward directors of a younger age."

Not wanting to lose the experience and insights of senior board members, the credit union developed a director emeritus program where senior board members gradually and voluntarily stepped aside so a new recruit could fill their seat at the table. Directors emeritus still attend meetings but cannot vote.

When the board first started actively recruiting younger board members, Dolan-Heitlinger was younger than all the credit union's directors. Today, just 9 years later, the mid-40s CEO is older than most of his directors.

One of those directors is 43-year-old Mark Hyatt, who joined the board two years ago, seeing it as an

opportunity to try something different in his community volunteerism, as he'd served many years on tourist development and chamber of commerce boards.

COMFORT & CONVENIENCE

"At the time I was recruited, there were two or three directors in my age group, which made it more appealing. Plus, the CEO was younger himself so I knew I'd have a peer group," Hyatt explains.

Management's youthful enthusiasm and vision—and at least another age group peer or two—were also deciding factors in Griffiths' decision to serve. "I also joined the board for personal growth and new experiences," he adds noting that the idea of personal growth through the education opportunities of serving on a credit union board would likely appeal to other 'younger' recruit prospects.

"Perhaps term limits is another way to keep the board fresh, though I would be opposed to short term limits since you also need to build experience," Hyatt further suggests.

Both also agree on another major influence on a younger person's decision to join a credit union board—especially if that person is already working full time as they do: time. "Efficient meetings are critical," Hyatt stresses.

"90 minutes or less for most meetings is my rule," adds Griffiths. "Cutting down meeting time involved in the commitment is very appealing to busy people."

RECRUITING ATMOSPHERE

The biggest persuader in their recruitment, however, was the credit union's general leadership atmosphere, they stress.

"Recruitment of diversity comes from the board itself; they have to be committed to it and genuinely drive toward it," explains Hyatt, adding that in Keys FCU's case, the young age of the board "also has a lot to do with our CEO, not just because he's younger too but because he's innovative and he and the chair keep board meetings flowing."

"Our CEO and the progressive-thinking senior members on our board really helped drive my recruitment to the board," Griffiths adds. "John is out there on the leading edge. He's a progressive kind of CEO that draws that progressive kind of people to serve on the board around him."

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