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ANITA SHAFFER

YourEncore offers second act for older workers

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This recession has been brutal for many older workers, with corporate downsizing and business closures sending the unemployment rate among people 55 and older to its highest level since the federal government began keeping the statistic in the 1940s.

Yet there are some corners of the workforce where the expertise and experience gained during 25 or 30 years in a field make someone a valued asset even in these financially stressed times.

YourEncore is a different kind of consulting company that has made seasoned veterans its business model.

The concept was born in happier times but might prove useful to those in New Jersey's highly trained workforce whose jobs are jeopardized by the recent spate of Big Pharma mergers.

Founded in 2003 by major companies who wanted to be able to tap their retirees' expertise, YourEncore matches scientists and engineers with companies that need a specialist for a particular project.

Michael J. Ferrante, formerly a senior director of research and development at Merck, planted YourEncore's flag in Cranbury in January and has been working to build a network of companies and a database of experts for the region.

"Companies are trying to figure out the right mix of internal and external resources," said Ferrante. "What companies are realizing is you can only cut so much before the work doesn't get done."

YourEncore looks for the "been-there, done-that experts who can roll up their sleeves and deliver," said Ferrante. For example, a company might seek an expert to write a grant, run a clinical trial or monitor a project.

"Think about any career where it's a long learning curve, anything across the scientific, technical supply train," Ferrante said. "Our focus is on the kind of skills they've spent a long time learning."

He said 15 life-science companies in the New Jersey region have joined YourEncore's network. Johnson & Johnson and Kraft Foods are among the 55 member companies nationwide. YourEncore does not venture into the human resources, IT or finance fields where other companies already have staked claims.

YourEncore, which is based in Indianapolis, has 5,800 experts in its network, including about 350 in the New Jersey area.

The company, which calls the specialists "experts" and not "consultants," differs from other consulting companies because it is not trying to find its members permanent jobs.

Companies pay to join the network; but individuals seeking contracts do not pay. Your Encore handles all the paperwork.

"It's not really about filling jobs," Ferrante said. "It's really about bringing expertise in. It tends not to look like sitting in an office with direct reports and a management structure. It tends to be about expertise and solving problems."

Although downsized employees are among its members, YourEncore appeals to older people who want to continue working in their field but also want to have the flexibility to fit other activities into their lives, Ferrante said.

He said the average age of a YourEncore expert is 59 years old, although some are in their 70s and even 80s. Typically, they have worked for a Fortune 500 company.

Now, many want to start their own companies and might use YourEncore as a part of their mix, Ferrante said.

Edith Lewis-Rogers, a Monmouth Junction resident who spent more than 30 years working for major pharmaceutical companies, is in that category. Her background includes quality assurance and quality-control compliance.

She started working independently in 2006 and joined YourEncore about a year ago. She said YourEncore lined her up with a position helping a pharmaceutical company with an inspection that had to be done in preparation for a clinical trial.

"There are opportunities out there because companies are in the process of trying to fill short-term needs for specific assignments," she said. "I am certainly looking for opportunities and have some opportunities that have come my way."

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