

## Mature Managers – a better Working Environment

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Photo: Siv-Elin Nærøe

– This is fun, says Erik Merum convincing. Mr. Merum, a 53-year old former business economist, has been an apprentice in one of the Rimi supermarket chains in Oslo for one and a half months. He is presently one of seven recruited through the Rimi-chain's 50+, a project aimed at increasing the number of mature, experienced managers in the shops.

At the age of 53 years Erik Merum is much older than most of his colleagues in the Rimi supermarket chain. The average age is only 33 years, in Oslo it is five years lower.

Espen Braaten, chain director and responsible for the project, states that the grocery chain used to find it very difficult to attract adult shop managers, especially in the big cities. According to Braaten the Rimi shops had poor reputation as workplaces catering only to the demands of young employees, with low pay and a level of service below par. In some shops in the Oslo area there has been an annual turnover of staff of 65 per cent. At the same time the turnover has been considerably lower in shops managed by older managers.

– We feel that a mixture of younger and older shop managers is beneficial and we want to show that we are not afraid to invest in people aged 40 or more, Braaten says.

– The shops have annual sales of NOK 20 to 100 million, and staff numbers between 10 and 50. Older workers have the skills and knowledge that may become useful in a demanding shop manager job, he adds.

### **Better Judges of Human Nature**

– Are older managers better managers?

– No, not necessarily, Braaten says, and emphasizes that the project must not be apprehended to mean that the grocery chain no longer wants young managers.

– We have many competent young managers, but a person who has been a manager for 20 years has a different background of experience than the one who has been a manager for only three years. Younger and older managers may benefit from learning from each other. It is particularly in their ability to deal with people – employees as well as customers – that older managers score more highly comparable with the younger ones, Braaten feels.

– We see that persons with long experience as managers generate a calm in the workplace. They are often more capable of understanding the individual staff member and his/her needs. Older managers are also often better at delegating tasks. I believe that work experience and life experience make a person more conscious of people in his/her surroundings. By attracting more senior managers we hope the result is more motivated employees and better HR management, Braaten says.

His hope in particular is that older managers will be more able to see the needs of other mature colleagues. This is a belief he shares with the would-be shop manager Erik Merum.

– Very much it is a question of jargon and ways of communicating, which can be useful to focus on in relation to both mature employees and customers, but in the end it is a matter of attitude, Merum claims.

### **Apprentice before Manager**

Erik Merum has plenty of past experience as a manager and has had many jobs in other sectors involving marketing, sales and customers. This background is useful but not sufficient for him to sail straight into a manager's job.

– It is important to start at zero when taking on the responsibility of a manager, so as to get to know all the elements and to know what the staff members' jobs involve. It is no good being afraid of getting dirt on your fingers, Merum says.

By the guidance of Hallgeir Øien he learns about managing a grocery shop from scratch. Merum rattles off all the tasks bearing witness to a varied working day: Everything from tidying the finished goods shelves, sorting vegetables, frying hamburgers and filleting fish at the fresh food counter, offering dinner and recipe suggestions to inquiring customers, to the role of the check-out girl and the post office clerk.

– It is important for him to feel that he has learned what there is to know about all the departments. We do not go on to the next item in the training programme until he feels secure, Øien adds.

### **Job Security**

After sitting in front of a PC monitor in an office for 20 years compiling sales statistics and making reports and marketing strategies, Merum wanted new challenges. A downward plunge in the trade in which he was employed made the need for an urgent change, but just as important was his need to make a break from his sedentary office work. When Rimi advertised for managers in the senior class, he went for it.

– It is never too late to try something new. Here I am given the opportunity to do everything from personnel management to budgeting, and I meet all types of customers. A deciding factor, though, was that this is a secure trade, people will always need food, he adds.

What remains now is some training in administration and budgeting, and then he will be put in charge of his own shop.

– I want to turn my knowledge to practical use as quickly as possible, Erik Merum says. In the first instance the project will be carried out in the Eastern Norway region, where it has been difficult to recruit mature managers. The chain aims to recruit at least 25 managers but has no upper limit regarding the number of older managers, as long as it has a job to offer.

Picture caption:

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