



Business Basics

Out Of Work And Not Young Anymore

Tara Weiss, 05.05.09, 7:35 PM ET

Most baby boomers didn't expect to find themselves hunting for a job at this point in their careers. But millions of them are doing exactly that right now--and finding it very, very hard.

With unemployment at 8.5% in March, up from 5.1% a year earlier, it's difficult for anyone to land a new position. But older employees--and ex-employees--are up against stereotypes that paint them as undesirable: They are reluctant to learn new skills and technology; they have one foot out the door; they're overqualified; they demand higher salaries than their younger colleagues.

"We're always given lip service with the idea that experience is valued, but I don't know if we've ever really seen it," says Laurie McCann, a senior attorney for the American Association of Retired Persons. "We've done surveys where employers say they value experience, but they also hold many stereotypes about them. That's the driving force behind discrimination--stereotypes."

In Pictures: Landing A Job Though You're Not Young Anymore

In 2008, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission received a record high 24,582 age-discrimination-charge filings nationwide, a 29% increase from the year before. About 2,500 of them alleged age bias in hiring. It's tough to prove, because job seekers can never be sure if they weren't hired because of their age or because they weren't as qualified as someone else.

In 2007 the Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College published a survey of employers' perceptions of employees in the early, middle and late parts of their careers. It found that 44% of employers said late-in-career employees were reluctant to try new technology, compared with 12.9% for early-in-career employees and 21.3% for mid-career employees; 37.7% called late-career employees burned out, compared with 32.9% for mid-career and 19.9% for early-career; and 28.1% said late-career employees were reluctant to travel for work, compared with 15.7% for early-career and 19.8% for midcareer.

Those same employers had positive perceptions too, saying that older employees were more loyal and brought much-needed skills to their jobs. "Research shows that employers have a positive perspective of older employees but have concerns and doubts at the same time," says Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes, director of the Sloan Center. "The positive attributes they associate with their own employees. The negative feelings they associate with older employees they don't know."

The trick to finding a new job is to leverage those positive attributes and squash the negative stereotypes.

First, older job seekers shouldn't rely on online job boards. Getting your résumé seen on them is very hard since there's so much competition, and if you don't clearly have exactly the right qualifications for a particular job your résumé won't even be considered.

Instead, use those job boards as a way to find out which companies are hiring. Then network your way in. Make a list of the employers in which you're most interested and use LinkedIn and other networking tools to see who you know there. Leverage those contacts to find out about openings and to get introductions to hiring managers.

In your cover letters be enthusiastic about the job opportunities. Say things like, "I'm a proven producer," and list specific examples of what you achieved at your former jobs. Mention things like saving an employer money and bringing in new clients. Don't say, "I've got 35 years of experience in the industry."

"Avoid numbers like the plague," says Richard Fein, author of *The Baby Boomer's Guide to the New Workplace*. "Numbers are always either too high or too low."

If you've got a client base that has followed you to different employers, highlight that. Explain that you come with a Rolodex full of

contacts who will follow you to your next position.

Once you've networked your way into an informational meeting or interview, be prepared to answer some difficult questions. Hiring managers may tell you you're overqualified. Have your script ready.

Laura Hill, founder of Careers in Motion, a Manhattan-based career-coaching firm, recommends saying, "At this stage in my life it's not about the money, and it's not about running the company. The reason I'm interested in this job is I want to make an impact. I want to be excited about the company I work for. Will this job be challenging enough? At this stage in my career, I'd just like to do the best job I can for this company."

If salary comes up, particularly if they assume you're too expensive, Fein suggests saying, "What I'm interested in is the quality of the job. I'm sure we can reach an agreement on salary that will make everybody happy."

To deflect the stereotype that baby boomers are reluctant to learn new skills, point out any new initiatives you undertook in your last position. On your résumé include any classes you've taken recently to update your skills, and list new technologies you've learned. Also, talk about how you believe in teamwork, since being a team player means you don't expect special treatment for having more experience.

When you go to networking meetings or interviews, dress stylishly. That might seem trivial, but first impressions are significant. You want to be seen as someone who can fit in. Stylish doesn't necessarily mean formal, though. "Nothing says I'm out of place more than showing up at a very casual place wearing a suit from 1986," says Laura Hill, founder of Careers in Motion, a Manhattan-based career coaching firm.

If a hiring manager asks what year you graduated from school, answer honestly. The best way to handle a blatant attempt to learn your age is with humor. Hill suggests saying, "I'm guessing that some other candidates for this job are younger. I'm sorry they can't bring you the world of great experiences I can. And if you have concerns about all my years of experience and income, I'm happy to talk about them."