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The elephant in the interview room: Are you being passed over because of age?

By Beth Braccio Hering, Special to CareerBuilder



"I can see the look in people's eyes when they first greet me," says Bill Wood, a 64-year-old from Minneapolis, Minn., who is looking for a job in information technology. "It seems to say, 'This guy is going to retire soon; we don't want a short-term permanent employee.'"

Cyndi Pauwels, a writer in her 50s from Yellow Springs, Ohio, has had similar experiences. "I was told (second-hand, off-the-record) by a headhunter, 'We don't hire older workers.' I've read that the longer I'm unemployed, the less likely my chances are of finding anything, and I'm beginning to believe it."

The current recession has been particularly hard on older job candidates. In March 2011, the duration of unemployment for all seekers averaged 39 weeks. But in April, the average length of unemployment for people over 55 surpassed the year mark (53.6 weeks), according to an AARP analysis of Labor Department data. And while age discrimination is illegal, that certainly doesn't mean it isn't happening. Complaints filed with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission have increased 35 percent over the last three government fiscal years compared with the average of the three years prior.

What is behind the longer length of unemployment? Lisa Quast, author of "Your Career, Your Way!" and president of Career Woman Inc. in Seattle, Wash., notes the following:

- Corporate downsizing during the recession eliminated many of the middle-management positions previously held by older workers.
- There are more entry-level positions available, and these are the positions into which young people are being hired. Higher-level positions are less numerous and harder to obtain, so it can take longer for older workers to find an equivalent position to what they previously held.
- Older workers are further up the career and salary ladder. Many do not want to take a position beneath their skill level, so they hold out on accepting lower-level positions, thus increasing the duration it takes to find a position.

Yet even when older workers are willing to settle for less, they often get passed over. "I have dropped my salary expectations to allow me to compete with younger candidates," Wood says. "The philosophy of industry in the past was to bring in 'young guns' that have fresh ideas and ways of doing things. Unfortunately for people in a similar position as me, companies are not changing that attitude and are missing out on a golden opportunity to improve the business by utilizing experience."

Older workers often are perceived as outdated or stuck in their ways. Such stereotypes can be hard to shatter, but not impossible. "Show some enthusiasm. Discuss how you have been innovative and are a life-long learner," says Robin Ryan, author of "Over 40 & You're Hired!" "Demonstrate on a résumé and in interviews the results you have achieved in the last few years. Show recent training (especially your technical prowess) and innovations made on the job, such as creating something new, making process/system improvements or saving past employers money." Ryan also notes that many mature workers appear "weather-worn and tired out" and suggests looking as vibrant as possible with a new hairstyle and a contemporary, well-fitting suit.

While being lively is one thing, trying to hide your age can backfire. "In some cases, I see older workers removing the dates of their college degree(s) or their earliest jobs from their résumé in order to appear younger," Quast says. "However, savvy hiring managers are able to see the candidates in person and guesstimate age -- and may then be forced to ask candidates to explain holes in their résumé, leading to questions of integrity and additional embarrassment."

Focusing on what you can offer a company (wisdom and experience) rather than what you can't (youth) oftentimes sets the tone. "If you sense the hiring manager is worried about your age, then take the first step to put him at ease by explaining how you believe your knowledge, skills and experience would benefit him and the position," Quast says. "If you choose to ask about his concerns, do so in a highly professional manner, such as, 'Based on my education, skills and experience, are there any concerns you have that I am not qualified for this position?' The goal is to get the hiring manager to show his hand without you having to bring up the topic of age."

Finally, resist making blanket assumptions that companies only value youth. "The real-life experience of older workers can be of huge benefit in the business world, especially for start-up companies with a lot of young workers," Quast says. "If you are truly worried about your age being a negative factor, seek out companies who could benefit from your expertise and sell them on yourself and your skills!"

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