

## **Career Builders**

By Mary-Alane Wiltse

### **Age Discrimination**

Based on Department of Labor definitions, anyone over the age of 40 is considered an older worker. As ridiculous as that may sound to people in their forties, imagine how it feels to people in their fifties or sixties. It means they have been old for at least ten years. The reason for the Labor Department's odd definition is the Age Discrimination Act of 1967, which protects people who are 40 years of age or older from unfair hiring and employment practices.

At the Career Center we get more than a few reports from job seekers that they are not being considered for jobs because they are too old. In actuality, it is extremely difficult to determine the true prevalence of workplace age discrimination. For one thing, intelligent employers will never admit to it, and for another, employers that may be discriminating based on an applicant's age may not even realize that is what they are doing.

It is possible to combat age discrimination. The strategy involves showing how the stereotypes that are connected to older people do not really exist, or at least do not apply to you. In case you didn't know it, old people are supposed to be inflexible, condescending, unable or unwilling to learn new things, and very tired. Old people also tend to think that since they have already "paid their dues" the world now "owes them", so their expectations are way too high.

A well written resume and a plan on how to structure answers to interview questions can help job seekers prove to employers that age is only a number.

If you are concerned about discrimination you should avoid calling attention to your age when you put together your resume. It is not necessary to provide your entire life history, especially if it is an extremely long one. This does not mean lying. It does mean presenting your relevant experience based on no more than your last 15 years of work. It may also mean leaving off the date you graduated from college or the dates you served in the military. You need to show that you continually update your skills by participating in professional seminars or other adult education programs. You should list the computer programs you know as a way to show you keep current with technology. You will want to use adjectives like flexible, energetic, and supportive when describing your skills and personal traits.

Job interviews need to be handled in a similar fashion. You will want your answers to gently rebuke the notion that you are too old. You should give concrete examples of your high energy level, and your enjoyment in learning new skills. It will be important for you to discuss your ability to work in a team environment. Give examples of not only how you have taken on leadership roles, but also how you have worked as a cooperative team member.

If during the interview you notice that everyone you encounter is much younger than yourself, you may want to address the issue directly. You need to say that you enjoy working with people who are younger than you are. You may want to discuss how your ego is not that fragile, so being supervised by someone who is your daughter's age will not be an issue. You should let the interviewer know that you respect the skills and knowledge of people from younger generations, and you have no problem following the chain of command.

Finally, many job seekers feel that the phrase “over-qualified” is code for “too old”. Frankly, “over-qualified” is more likely to be code for “too expensive”, and unfortunately many older job seekers find themselves in this particular situation. Employers do not want to hire people who are not going to be happy with the work they are doing or the money they are making. The conventional wisdom is that over-qualified employees will quit their job the second they find something better. Alternatively, they will spend all their time trying to get promoted, and in the process they will make their supervisor’s life miserable.

There is no easy solution on how you overcome these obstacles. It is a fact that you will be at a disadvantage if you find the need to apply for jobs that pay less than what you are accustomed to making. To have a chance in getting hired you will first have to find a way to be financially stable on a lesser income. You will also have to find some positive aspects of holding a job with less responsibility.

Once you truly believe you will be satisfied with a different job, you will be ready to convince employers. You can then write cover letters to employers that specifically addresses why you will be happy working for them. You will also no longer find it necessary to “lie” to interviewers. You may even have a shot at negotiating a pay scale that is above the entry level rate for that company. Your argument will be based on the fact that you have the experience to be productive on your first day. It is at that point you will find an employer who feels lucky to hire someone with your skills.

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