

Selling the Age Advantage

By Kit Harrington Hayes
Workforce50.com

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I regret to report that age discrimination remains rampant in the American workplace.

That makes job hunting an especially painful experience for laid-off workers age 50+ trying to get back in the game after an unwanted pink slip.

The good news is there is much to sell about what you bring to the table as a seasoned executive or professional with twenty, thirty or more years of experience. A major thrust of your job search effort will be educating younger hiring managers and changing their attitudes.

First let's look at the stereotypes that are typically held: Older workers are set in their ways, they are not technologically savvy, they're slow to accept change, they're counting down to retirement, they're going to be out sick a lot, they're too expensive, they won't want to report to someone younger. I'm sure you can add to this list but you get my drift.

What you need to do is present your candidacy in a way that counters the stereotypes. For instance, when I give my 30 second commercial, I describe the highlights of my career and then end by saying, "And on the personal side, I'm a downhill skier." My intention is to counter their internal response to my gray hair. I want them to perceive me as physically active, energetic, a risk-taker. I'm reshaping their first impressions.

Let me back up a minute and identify the pluses that older workers typically bring:

- You have both depth and breadth of experience – you've seen it all and have developed a healthy perspective that comes in handy when everyone else is operating in crisis mode.
- You bring a sense of history to your profession (and your company, if you are still employed and have been there a long time) – a quality that will become appreciated in all organizations after it is gone.
- You have a huge "bag of tricks." Over the years you have had to solve a wide range of problems – people problem, customer problems, technical problems, business problems – and you've learned what works and what doesn't. You have options that will fit a wide variety of situations.

- You know a lot of people, especially if you've been active in one or more professional organizations. You very likely know people in competing companies and customer companies, people you've worked with who've moved on to jobs in related industries, and so forth. Your professional network has value.
- Most likely you have a strong work ethic – you want to keep working and you know you have a lot to contribute. You understand the bottom line and you know how your contribution impacts that figure and how your work affects society.
- At this stage in your life there are fewer distractions from your work – no children to race home to, no kids home sick that you need to tend. Perhaps they're even through college so you don't need to be at the highest end of the income scale keeping up with tuition payments.
- Contrary to the stereotype, you probably are both computer savvy and up-to-date professionally. You are very likely to be open to new learning and perhaps have already demonstrated your commitment to continuous learning. You may have found it more difficult, however, to get your employer to sponsor/fund your continuing education.
- You may be genuinely interested in taking a step back professionally, moving from a management role to individual contributor. At this stage in your life, you may be able to afford a cut in pay and relish getting out of the hot seat. While this concept is foreign to senior management and human resources professionals, it is a commonly held desire of many older workers.
- Like older workers, you probably have had a great deal of experience working collaboratively with people of all ages. Most report enjoying that aspect of corporate life, knowing that relating to a range of younger people “keeps you young.” The flattening of organizations and the emphasis on working in cross-functional teams has contributed to this breadth of exposure. Sometimes you were in the lead and sometimes that role was filled by others, giving you positive experiences reporting to younger workers.

Here are some job search strategies you can use to work your way around the walls of age discrimination:

Engage a seasoned career counselor or coach. A job search can be an arduous process

and it's easy to go off course or waste precious time. A career professional understands today's job market and hiring practices and can guide your efforts. You need someone on your side who will be objective, honest and supportive.

Network to your next position. Plan to conduct your job search with heavy emphasis on networking. When you apply for jobs in the traditional ways, you set yourself up for discrimination on the basis of age – and you'll never be able to prove it. Hiring managers will search resume databases looking for 10 to 15 years of experience, not 20 or more. Your resume may work against you. Since most resumes are scanned into databases and retrieved using key words, yours may never be seen by human eyes.

When you are networking, always demonstrate your enthusiasm and energy for new opportunities. Ask your contacts to partner with you in your transition, keeping you apprised of new challenges, opportunities and anticipated needs in their companies and introducing you to colleagues in their networks. When you come highly recommended by trusted individuals, you won't have the same hurdles to overcome. So work the "hidden job market!"

Stay on the radar screen of the people in your network by regularly updating them on the progress of your search. In particular, let them know how leads they gave you have played out, especially how your meetings went with their network contacts. In particular, keep them apprised of a new area of interest that you may be exploring, asking them if they know anyone with this specialty. Email is a great way to keep in touch. When you don't have specific news to report, you can send an email that says simply, "Just want to let you know I'm still in the market. Your guidance, perspective and introductions have been a great help. My latest focus is on two young companies, A-company, located in Ytown and B-company, located in Ztown. If you happen to know anyone in either organization, give me a call. Otherwise, I'll continue to keep you updated." Another example of a light touch: "Just got the announcement for IEEE's September meeting and the speaker looks interesting. See the attachment. Would you like to meet there? Best regards,"

Alter your resume for applying on line. If you want to apply for jobs on line, do a version of

your resume that covers in detail only the last 10 to 12 years; allude to earlier experience in a short paragraph with no dates and remove dates from the education section. You will find in the job search literature the recommendation that you “dumb down” your resume – in other words taking titles down a notch or two and using less powerful action verbs to describe your role. It pains me to think that people feel they must resort to such tactics – that they can’t represent fully who they are and what they bring to the table. To be honest, I’m opposed to this tactic as I think it is unethical and could get you in legal hot water. However, I have to admit that I’ve seen candidates dramatically increase their interviewing activity through this practice.

Go the extra mile. If you apply to a number of positions online, put the company names on a “List of Target Companies,” and show the list to people in your network. Ask them if they know anyone in any of these companies. When you get the names of insiders, contact them for informational meetings. They may be able to help you meet someone close to the search who can work for you from the inside. Over the years, I’ve made a practice of asking people how they got their last jobs. In almost every instance where people have said they got their job online, it has turned out when I probed that they also connected with someone inside who helped. For instance, a neighbor put in a good word or a former colleague worked for the company and offered to hand-deliver another copy of their resume.

Become current in your field/industry. Most people find it challenging to stay on top of changes to their industry and field while they’re working full-time. This is especially true in today’s organizations where full-time means 50+ hours a week and, for many, includes heavy travel schedules. A job loss gives you the gift of time. Use it to get caught up on the trends in your industry, the latest and best practices in your field. Read your way to currency using both online resources and your local library.

Consider taking a course or two to update your skills. There may be a new technology that would make you a more attractive candidate. Or it could be a leadership program or other soft skill that enhances your marketability. Companies highly respect people who demonstrate that they’re continuous learners. The coursework will not only give you new skills to market; it will give you a huge confidence boost. Also, new credentials will energize you and your job search

campaign.

Join at least one professional organization. Professional affiliation is highly respected in all industries, fields and professions. Start attending meetings of the local chapter of the organizations that can best support your job search. The networking opportunities will surprise you. In addition, the monthly meetings will typically include valuable, updated information about the local scene. Consider joining a committee, volunteering to be a speaker, or leading a new effort for the organization. The opportunities to hone or demonstrate your leadership ability will be numerous. Contributions you make will increase your visibility in your profession. Once your membership is confirmed, use the membership directory to strategize the next phase of your marketing effort through networking with these colleagues.

Update your image. Make sure that you are presenting a current professional image. Things like hair style, dress and even choice of eyeglass frames can make a difference in how new people perceive you. This isn't about piercing your nostril or exposing your midriff, but rather that you are wearing styles of business attire that are current for your age group. Clothing should flatter your body type, be well tailored and conservative. Gentlemen with beards may want to consider whether the beard is making them appear older. I'm often asked about coloring hair. I colored my own for twenty years and I'm now enjoying my silver tresses. These issues are very personal – pay attention to what makes you feel most confident about yourself.

Prepare thoroughly for all job interviews. When you get to that stage of the search, you want to present your candidacy in the best possible light. There are many excellent sources of both “typical” and “tough” interview questions. Plan responses to them all and practice your delivery. I don't mean memorize answers as this would be very stressful and would not come across well. Instead, think carefully about the points you want to make, given each possible inquiry you can anticipate.

One of the most predictable interview openers is “Tell me a little about yourself.” This presents a great opportunity to shape the interviewer's impression of you. Walk them through some highlights of your career, emphasizing specific accomplishments and contributions. Include a

few personal highlights at the end. Athletic and fitness pursuits are particularly effective, including running, working out, hiking, biking, kayaking, swimming, or participating in competitive sports such as tennis, softball, marathons or triathlons. Activities that show mental acuity are also effective, such as crossword puzzles, sudoku and chess.

In job interviews, assume that the person interviewing you is stereotyping you and weave into your responses to questions information that counters the stereotypes. For example, when asked about where you see yourself in five years, don't say "on the beach." A better answer would be, "I see myself here at Your-firm making a solid contribution to the MyExpertise Department." When asked behavioral questions, such as "Tell me about a time when you handled a difficult customer problem," come up with a related story that illustrates your dedication, creativity, energy, or any other attributes that serve to counter the unspoken stereotyping you are facing.

Consider changing careers. Many people who lose their jobs late in their career launch job searches to do exactly what they were doing in their last job. Are you sure you really want to do more of the same? It takes more effort to change careers, but it may be that a new career would give you a whole new lease on life. You may be at a point in your life and work where you don't need to make the same money and where you could make a change. Some people at this stage will decide to become a consultant. They draw on their expertise and sell that to many companies. This can be exciting and fulfilling. It involves starting and marketing your own business. Other people want to do something different and will identify a skill set to take to a different industry or sector. I have been midwife to these transformations: a woman who had been a senior level manager in a corporation became an officer in a nonprofit organization; a female engineer who on weekends had been coaching soccer and teaching Sunday School for years became a Math teacher; a male who had been director of engineering for a high tech company "went back to the bench" to work as an individual contributor in a start up; a computer programmer in banking brought his technical skills to a hospital environment.

Become politically active. Whatever choices you make as you move forward in your career, I recommend that you let your representatives in Washington know about your job loss. Write to

them. Include information about the number of positions that were impacted, any trends you noted related to the ages of those affected, and information you're aware of about what happened to the jobs – especially if those jobs went to China, India and the like. Our politicians don't necessarily have the total picture about what is happening to the American workforce. They need to know and they need to start doing something about it! Your voice is important! I have been witness to hundreds of successful job search campaigns conducted by older workers. This can be done! I realize that the steps I've laid out may seem daunting. On the upside, there is plenty for you to do and all of it will contribute directly to moving you from where you are to where you want to be. You'll learn a great deal and meet a lot of terrific people along the way.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” *Jeremiah 29:11 NIV*