

7 Mistakes Job-Seekers Over 50 Make

A good portion of the e-mail I receive is from readers over age 50 who are looking for work after a layoff. Many tell me they found their last job more than a decade ago, in the classifieds of their local newspaper. Many more say they're daunted -- understandably so -- by the foul job market, the prospect of ageism and the likelihood of being interviewed by someone half their age.

All of them worry about the generalizations some short-sighted employers make about older workers. Either they see you as overqualified and overpriced, or they believe you're inflexible and technologically challenged. Perhaps they suspect you're just biding your time and taking up space until retirement rolls around.

We've all heard countless career experts (yours truly included) offer the same old job hunting solutions for workers over 50:

But platitudes will only get you so far. So let's talk about the top mistakes that hopeful hires over age 50 make and how to avoid them.

Telling Yourself That No One Hires Older Workers

I hear a lot of 50- and 60-somethings make this complaint. Yes, older candidates have to work harder to overcome discrimination, and no, it's not fair. But that doesn't mean every employer is hell-bent on shutting out all candidates over 35.

Example: The site RetirementJobs.com lists more than 30,000 full-time and part-time jobs nationwide with "age-friendly employers." Other job sites that cater to older workers: Jobs 4.0, Retired Brains, Seniors4Hire and Workforce50.com. In addition, AARP offers this list of the best employers for workers over 50.

So, please, don't tell me no one's hiring older workers.

Putting an Expiration Date on Contacts

You've been on this crazy hamster wheel we call "work" for at least three decades now, so you might as well milk the vast contact list you've amassed for all its worth. It's perfectly acceptable to reach out to former employers, co-workers, vendors, classmates and other colleagues you haven't corresponded with in a decade or two. (Searching sites like LinkedIn and Facebook make finding them a snap.) Not only will your peers understand, more of them are likely reaching out to their long-lost contacts, too.

Doing a History Dump

The No. 1 mistake I see with older candidates is they include too much information in their resume," said Cathy Severson, a career coach who runs the site Retirement Life Matters. "Clear the clutter, old-dated, irrelevant information from your resume."

Instead, tailor your resume to the job you're applying for -- each time. Two to three pages and 15 years of relevant experience is more than enough.

Likewise, be careful that you don't turn an interview into a snooze-inducing laundry list of your top 100 achievements over the past 30 years, said Tom Mann of TR Mann Consulting, a marketing and advertising firm specializing in boomers and older workers.

Experienced workers are so eager to show their skills off that they do a 'history dump,'" he said. "While it's important to share your relevant skills, how you present is equally important. Show that you are also fun. Remember, Gen Y doesn't want to feel like they're working with their mom or dad."

Copping an Attitude

Equally damaging is acting superior to an interviewer who's younger than you or showing up with a chip on your shoulder the size of the national debt.

"It's not a good idea to tell the person how much you can teach them," said Cynthia Metzler, president and CEO of Experience Works, a national nonprofit that provides job training to low-income workers over 55. "But it is a good idea to tell them if you have any experience working or volunteering in a multigenerational workplace."

Winging the Interview

Not practicing for your interviews is another no-no, especially if you haven't been on one since the Reagan administration. If you're not sure how your interview rap is coming across, Metzler suggests enlisting a 20- or 30-something pal or colleague to do a test drive with you:

"If you know you're going to be interviewed by someone who's 25 and you're 65, then find someone who's 25 and have them interview you."

Arthur Koff, the 70-something who runs the job site Retired Brains, suggests taking it one step further:

"Try to get an interview with an employer you are not interested in working for as practice. You don't want to go to your first [important] interview in a long time and make easily correctable mistakes."

Failing to Embrace Your Inner Geek

As a Gen Xer, I didn't grow up making videos and blogging about my every burp and hiccup. I'm actually one of the biggest Luddites I know. But like many of my tech-challenged peers, I've learned that blogging about my field and using the micro-blog Twitter are simple ways to get noticed by potential employers (how do you think I got this gig?).

As long as you act like yourself and don't show up squeezed into your kids' clothes, no one will accuse of you being a 20-something wannabe. Instead, people will be impressed by your tech skills.

"I have interviewed and hired people close to twice my age," said Asher Adelman, founder and CEO of the job site GreatPlaceJobs. "I would highly recommend that older job seekers take advantage of social media platforms, which happen to be very easy to use, even for technophobes, in order to give the impression that they are in tune with the latest technological advances. This will work wonders for convincing young interviewers that you have the ability to work and relate with younger co-workers and excel in today's rapidly changing workplace."

Ignoring the Overqualified Elephant in the Room

As we all know, when employers see candidates applying for a job below their experience level or tax bracket, their hackles go up. So if you're going for a position with less pay or responsibility than you've been accustomed to, it's your job to explain in your cover letter and the interview why this is.

"It could be because they've had a very stressful career life and now would enjoy having their hands in something that is still part of a team but doesn't involve so many headaches," said Judi Perkins, a recruiter for 22 years who now works as a career coach. "It could be they're willing to take a cut in pay because the almighty dollar just isn't as important to them anymore."

Whatever rationale you give (no longer interested in climbing the ladder, done with working 14-hour days, miss the hands-on tasks you did before joining management), be sure to let potential employers know that you're interested in them, rather than just a job.

If you need more help getting up to speed with today's brave new job hunt, visit your local career center and check out AARP's excellent job hunting advice for older workers.

Whatever you do, don't throw in the towel before you've even tried. Your tattooed, flip-flop wearing counterparts need someone who's been around the block a few times to show them how this work thing's really done.

Source: Michelle Goodman