

So How Old Are You? Things You Can/Can't Do About Age Bias

You're in the middle of a job interview and the recruiter or prospective employer asks, "So, how old are you?"

What do you think when you read this scenario? Let me guess that you are probably caught off guard and thoughts are racing through your head. "Can they really ask me that?" you wonder.

If you are like the majority of age 50+ job seekers, I'll wager you answered yourself with a resounding, "No."

And asserting that, you would be wrong.

While it may fly in the face of what you know about the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) and on top of that be outright rude, the question itself is legal. -->

You should know before an interview how you'll react and what you'll say when asked about your age. Much of what we believe we know about age discrimination is vague and ambiguous. That's bad news for age 50+ workers. Our opinions about age bias can influence our behavior during a job search and after we become employed. While it's important to understand the principles of age-discrimination law, it is more important to figure out how to deal with it out in the world.

Age bias in hiring and employment may be the last socially acceptable form of discrimination. While the ADEA makes age-based discrimination in hiring, pay, benefits, training, advancement, and termination illegal, many people over the age of 50, and increasingly older than 40, believe that age bias still exists and affects them.

Research from two recent studies conducted by RetirementJobs.com and AARP confirms that between 80 and 95 percent of people over age 50 believe that "age bias is a fact of life." The published statistics about actual age-discrimination claims, however, don't support common perceptions about the extent and power of age bias. All this is not to minimize concerns about age bias. I want you to think about what you can and cannot do about the reality, or self-fulfilling perceptions, of perceived age bias.

Here are two things you can't do about discriminatory employer behavior or decisions:

1. You can't compel employers to communicate: If you don't hear back from an employer you applied to or interviewed with, stop thinking it's you or something you did or didn't do. Contemporary recruiting practices seldom provide information to applicants. There is often no acknowledgement other than an auto-reply message, long delays or no invitation to interview, no feedback following interviews, and no explanation or notice of rejection. Employers are often overwhelmed by the sheer volume of applicants and have little choice but to acknowledge resumes via auto-reply e-mail, if at all. Employers have become extremely cautious about what they say to candidates and to employees. Stop expecting promptness and responsiveness; it's up to you to be persistent.

2. You can't dictate a company's hiring decisions or behaviors: Managers and executives will generally make decisions about hiring and firing based on the organization's financial condition. Staff reductions do not differ in motivation. This may not seem fair, but here's the deal: Older and long-service employees often receive better pay than younger coworkers, and health care and retirement-income costs tend to be higher for older workers. Employers may decide to lay off more costly employees. This is permissible as long as age is not the basis for the decision.

Here's what you can do to avoid or overcome age bias:

1. Know your rights: Become familiar with the fundamental rights provided by federal and state ADEA laws. You may not always choose to pursue or enforce these rights, but you should know what is and what is not permissible. Refer to this AARP explanation of your rights under the ADEA.

2. Be clear about your objectives: Examine your personal life and work history, and inventory your knowledge, skills, capabilities, and achievements. Consider what you most enjoy doing. Identify specific employers and know the type of job you want. Get some career advice and select the occupation or profession in which you are most apt to prosper. Put all this information down in a clear and concise resume. Your clarity and confidence of purpose will come through to employers.

3. Be at your best: This may sound a little silly, but look and be at your best. Splurge on a new interview outfit (even if that 30-year-old suit still fits). Be well groomed, maintain your personal fitness to the highest possible level, make sure your health or medical conditions are under control, be well rested, research the employer, and display your knowledge. These tasks should help keep you confident and poised. Try practicing for interviews with a friend or professional coach. Finally, put all concerns about your age and the threat of age bias out of your mind.

4. Be a continuous learner: Whether you are a candidate or an employee, always grow and learn. This is particularly important for your computer skills and knowledge. The abilities to use a computer, send e-mail, surf the Internet, and handle basic applications, such as word processing, are not optional anymore. Inability to make even basic use of a computer is a cause for rejection in all but a handful of jobs—many of which you wouldn't want. Buy a computer, set up an Internet account, and take lessons. While you're at it, get a mobile phone. PC skills and a cell phone are powerful ways to show you are technically savvy and not a dinosaur.

5. Seek employment and work in the right places: Many industries and employers value older workers. Search them out and apply there. If you're already working for an age-friendly employer, do everything you can to stay with that organization. Meanwhile, here are a few places to start looking for companies who hire and affirm older workers:

- AARP National Employer Team: A list of major national employers who have committed to age-neutral practices.

- AARP Best Employers for Workers Over 50: A list of employers recognized by AARP for their exceptional practices relating to the older workforce.

- Web Job-Posting Boards for Older Workers: There are numerous Web sites with job announcements focused on workers 50 and older. These include RetirementJobs.com, which evaluates employers and grants Age Friendly Certification to companies who welcome older candidates, RetiredBrains, Senior Job Bank, Jobs4.0, and Seniors for Hire.

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