

# Age Discrimination Isn't Always to Blame

## Plus tips on progressing in a managerial bottleneck

BY TAUNEE BESSON

*Editor's Note: This month columnist Taunee Besson answers questions about common job hunting and career problems. If you have a question about your job search or career, send it to our monthly advice column, National Business Employment Weekly, Box 300, Princeton, N.J. 08543-0300. All names are kept confidential.*

**Q:** Having read your comments in September on when to follow up after responding to an ad, I'd like to tell you of my related experience.

I was part of a reduction-in-force at a well-known engineering firm two years ago. In 1982, it employed about 44,000 professionals; now it has about 14,000. My background includes a B.S. in chemical engineering and an M.B.A., and I am 59 years old.

I joined the Houston 40 Plus organization and worked with them for six months, doing the many things they suggested to find a new position. Your advice for following up on ads was the same as theirs. My results, however, have been discouraging. After responding to an ad and waiting three weeks without word, I would call back to discuss the status of the job and express my interest in the position. My monthly phone bill averaged about \$125, and I never received anything—not even a negative letter—in reply. My impression is that when organizations get the idea you are over 45, nothing happens. If age discrimination isn't the cause, what is?

**A:** While I will answer your question about age discrimination, your letter broaches other issues that need to be addressed as well.

It's good to hear that 40 Plus and I have given you the same advice. Because job search is both art and science, two reliable resources frequently offer what seems to be conflicting information, leaving confused job seekers wondering what to do.

In your case, the advice hasn't worked. The unfortunate fact is, regardless of expertise, only a small percentage of those using want ads as job search tools find positions with them. Consequently, your age probably had little bearing on your disappointing record.

As 40+ probably told you, want ads are only

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one means of finding a position. For most job seekers, using and expanding a contact network consistently produces the best results. This is particularly true for older job hunters. Most find it easier to tailor discussions of their backgrounds to an employer's needs once they've talked to him or her face-to-face.

Your letter doesn't mention job search techniques other than ads. Where have you concentrated your time? If ads occupy more than 25% of it, you need to redirect your efforts.

In regard to age discrimination, some companies refuse to hire people of a certain age for a variety of logical and silly reasons, regardless of what they claim. In fact, in working with clients for the past 10

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years, I've found every age has its detractors. Your over-50 age group has overcome the "lack of experience" and "too many family responsibilities" stigmas only to replace them with:

- Fewer years to work before retirement.
  - Higher salary and benefit costs.
  - An employer perception of the older worker's inflexible attitude and inability to learn anything new. (This one is a myth, but many people still believe it.)
- For every interviewer who avoids 50+ workers, however, there's one who recognizes the advantages of this age group. Mature professionals will:
- Bring expertise ready for immediate application. Their training time is usually much shorter than younger people's.
  - Offer a seasoned perspective developed through years of handling similar situations.
  - Provide stable, mellowed personalities without being driven to prove their worth at the expense of their colleagues.

- Come equipped with a strong work ethic and the desire to build loyal, long-term relationships with their new company.

- Often exhibit more flexibility, enthusiasm and willingness to learn than some of their younger colleagues who "think they know everything."

- Give clients the comfortable feeling that their firm is run by mature, experienced, reliable people.

The trick is discovering companies that appreciate what you bring to the table. While you may find some by answering ads and contacting search firms, networking is your most direct route. The best prospects include companies for whom your age is perceived as a plus. They are:

- Large firms committed to affirmative action. Their management has a mandate to hire qualified women, minority and older candidates, either because they have government contracts requiring it or because they've found it's good for business.

- Organizations that need a stable, "old pro" image because their customers demand it.

- Consulting firms that are building departments in areas where they have no in-house expertise.

Recently, one of my clients, a 55+ engineer, decided to take early retirement when his high-tech company cut back its staff. Through some judicious networking he joined a management consulting firm that was expanding into materials planning. He is rapidly becoming a trusted consultant in this area both because it's a new field that few people understand, and because he has years of experience working with the type of technical people he now advises.

If your responses to ads and networking haven't been productive, examine the positions you're pursuing. With your engineering degree, M.B.A. and years of experience you have much to offer potential employers. Are you replying to job listings below your level, assuming people your age may have to settle for less? While this line of thinking is common, it's deadly. Employers don't want to hire overqualified people. Perhaps interviewers have told you, "You're overqualified," and you thought they really meant, "You're too old." They probably aren't hiring you because:

- They know you'll resent taking a pay cut.
- They think you'll find little challenge in the position.

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## Your turn to ask

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- They worry you'll leave for the next enticing job that comes along.

While being rejected is tough, they're probably doing you a favor by not allowing you to take a position below your capability.

Of course, if you're tired of the performance rat race and welcome a low-stress job, then apply for the lower-level positions, in person, if possible. Telling an employer face-to-face that you want to do a good day's work but not compete for a higher-level slot may convince him that you're the best person for the job after all.

**Q:** I'm an engineer in my early 40s. I spent the first few years of my career in various technical positions and eventually, through a few job changes, progressed to middle management. While nothing is wrong with my current job, there's absolutely no room for advancement. I'm considering a change that would allow me to move higher on the corporate ladder, but I don't know where to start looking. How can I achieve my goal?

**A:** It sounds like you're caught in the "80s crunch," a new phenomenon for baby boomers stuck in a management pipeline full of qualified

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candidates. Even in growing companies, the increasing emphasis on leaner organizations and automated information systems have severely decreased the need and opportunity for mid-level managers. At the same time, more 30- to 45-year-olds have moved into the professional pool and found themselves competing for fewer jobs.

While this may sound depressing, there still are plenty of options for people who want to advance their careers. If you're willing to apply hard work and political savvy to outshine your competition, here are some suggestions that can get your career moving again:

- Look for a new project that will increase productivity, save money, uncover a new market, im-

prove quality, etc. Taking on responsibility beyond your job description offers a learning experience and increases your visibility with upper-level management. Choose a project that excites you and has genuine benefit for the firm. Be sure to write a report summarizing your results and recommendations and, if possible, present it orally to your vice president or the executive committee.

- Consider enrolling in continuing education courses or studying for an advanced degree. Engineers are encouraged to keep up with state-of-the-art advances in their specialties. A masters degree in your company's field might give you the expertise required to move ahead of your fellow mid-managers.
- While an M.B.A. doesn't guarantee advancement, an engineering background and business degree continue to be a favorable combination. If your supervisory experience has been in technical departments, some business courses could broaden your perspective and encourage your superiors to see you as someone who understands both the technical and bottom-line aspects of the business.
- If a promotion isn't possible in the near future, consider a lateral move. Supervising another department can rekindle your enthusiasm, spark new learning, add valuable contacts and increase your management expertise. Japanese firms structure lateral moves into their training for top positions. For them, breadth of experience is as important as depth.
- Have you thought about creating a new job for yourself? Perhaps this could be a logical extension of your special project. Or, if you examine your company's structure, you may uncover a need that you can fulfill by developing a new department.
- Expanding networks within your organization and industry is an excellent technique for gaining visibility and discovering new opportunities. Increasing in-house contacts can also enhance current job effectiveness by building team work with other department heads. Industry contacts and professional organizations give you access to openings outside your firm and valuable information about how competitors are managing their business.
- If your efforts to advance within your firm aren't fruitful, pursue a position outside the organization, but only at smaller companies where future advancement appears likely. ●