

# A Stalled Job Search Can Be Pegged to Attitude

*Negativity is easily spotted by perceptive recruiters*

BY TAUNEE BESSON

*Editor's Note: This month columnist Taunee Besson addresses a job hunting question posed by an NBEW reader. If you have a question or concern about your job search or career, send it to Ms. Besson at the National Business Employment Weekly, P.O. Box 300, Princeton, N.J. 08543-0300. All names are kept confidential.*

**QUESTION:** I have read and re-read your article "Tips to Help Defeat the 'Pariah Syndrome'" (Nov. 27, 1988). The suggestions in the article aren't useful to me. I have reached the conclusion that because I am over 45 years of age no one will employ me. Isn't it true that anyone over 45 is brain dead and physically handicapped?

Let me quickly sketch my background and the reason for my pessimism. I'm an engineer with an advanced degree. In October 1987, my wife of 27 years filed for divorce. On Feb. 8, 1988, I was fired from my job. My divorce was final in March 1988, which left me broke and in debt. My father died in June 1988 and left me an electric razor. Last year, I sent more than 400 resumes to companies, all of which were rejected.

I learned of contract engineering where they don't pay benefits and other things associated with age. My resume is in front of more than 400 firms, and my name is before 1,000 more. I am versatile and willing to relocate, but no one wants to hire me.

I have enclosed my resume to complete the picture. I am very, very tempted to remove all the dates from my resume and let them guess my age.

It seems that anyone will hire the village idiot because the system will give him a pat on the back. However, anyone smart enough to tie his shoes is shunned like someone with AIDS. I have to eat, too.

Do you know *anyone* who would hire me?

**ANSWER:** Recently, I've received a number of letters from people over 40 years old who are concerned about age discrimination. In the following circumstances it can be an obstacle, though not an insurmountable barrier:

- **Finding positions with Fortune 500 companies.** Many large employers want to grow their own experts. They prefer to hire straight from college

and train employees themselves. Bringing in engineers from outside may upset their salary scales and cause morale problems.

When these firms move into new areas, however, they may need outside help if their employees don't have the proper background to excel in new technical applications. Your background may be valuable to them in this case, but only extensive search and networking can uncover such instances.

- **Having experience with only one company.** These days, many years with one company may give potential employers the feeling you can't adapt to a new environment. They may see loyalty as a lack of initiative, a stigma difficult to overcome.
- **Profiling a career that shows no apparent progression.** While people in technical specialties often aren't interested in managing others, their

## Many companies today see long-term loyalty to one company as a lack of initiative

careers can grow by taking on increasingly sophisticated assignments. If your resume and interviews don't emphasize advancement, you may be construed as deadwood.

- **Specializing in one area.** Here we have the proverbial Catch 22. Companies want highly specialized engineers for top-level assignments. Yet engineers and other technical experts may become so focused in their expertise that few firms can use their services. While it's relatively easy to transfer organizational and people skills, state-of-the-art technology demands up-to-date knowledge in a given area.
- **Looking for an income that reflects your background and experience.** Whether you've chosen to become a manager or crack engineer, you're probably on the high end of the salary continuum at ages 40 to 60. Many companies may feel they can't afford you.
- **If you've moved into middle management, the corporate pyramid narrows as you progress.** There may be relatively few positions available for someone at your level.

Before assuming age is responsible for your lack of employment, consider some other variables that may figure into your job-search equation.

**Attitude.** While your letter showcases your acerbic wit, it's filled with anger. Given what's happened to you during the past two years, some hostility is understandable. Unfortunately, it's not productive unless you channel it effectively. If you view potential employers as people who "hire the village idiot," they may sense your negativity even though you don't think it shows.

If you're having trouble putting your situation into perspective and getting on with your life, you have plenty of company. Many people who've been through either a divorce, an unwanted employment termination or the death of a loved one have great difficulty dealing with the fallout. They often turn to a friend, therapist or minister to help them through the grief process.

Rather than displace your anger about past injustices on future prospects, try adopting an "I'll show you" attitude. Get even by finding a better position with a firm that appreciates your contribution.

**Being fired from your last position.** Have you made peace with this yet? Can you interpret it as a positive event, even though it obviously was painful? Or does it still fill you with anger and contempt? Have you reviewed your situation to determine if you were at least partially responsible? Were you among a number of people laid off, or were you singled out because of poor performance or attitude (according to your management)? What are your references at the firm saying about you?

The reason for your firing and your response to it can have tremendous impact on potential opportunities. Be sure your explanation for leaving matches that of your former employer. If it doesn't, be prepared to deal effectively with the discrepancies. Do everything you can to portray your departure as a positive event, even if the only plus has been personal growth.

If your last employer is assassinating your character in reference checks, instead use as references colleagues who admire your work. Round out your references with people who know you through professional organizations, volunteer work or hobbies.

**Job-search techniques.** You say your resume is in front of 400 firms and your name is before 1,000 more. How did these 1,400 companies hear about

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# Attitude

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you? Have you been relying exclusively on mailing resumes, the least effective job-search tool? Companies use them as a screening device by looking for what's missing instead of what's there. Resumes usually are forwarded to Human Resources first rather than directly to technical departments. Consequently, the people who do the actual hiring may never get to see your resume because it's been screened out.

Along with using search firms and answering ads, concentrate your time and effort on the best source for job leads: networking. Professional organizations, conventions, former colleagues, college friends and instructors, fellow hobbyists and a variety of other friends, relatives and associates can help you uncover the hidden job market. Employers like to hire people who have been referred to them (preferably for free by individuals whose judgment they trust). The majority of jobs are filled this way.

**Resume format.** Every resume should start with an objective. Without one, employers have to guess the position you seek and you're unlikely to mesh your accomplishments with the job you're pursuing. Resumes must be targeted sales tools. Otherwise, they are prime candidates for the round file.

Take a close look at the following excerpt from your resume, which covers your last 21 years of experience. (Names and locations of employers have been omitted.)

## Work History:

1977 to 1988—Senior Engineer

- Designed an Experiment Loop Coolant System bypass, which incorporated rupture discs, for the Thermal Swell Accumulators for the Power Burst Facility (PBF).
- Wrote System Design Document for Experiment Loops at the Advanced Test Reactor (ATR).
- Designed, analyzed and installed several experiment Loop Coolant System modifications for the Severe Fuel Damage Tests at PBF.
- Designed, analyzed and fabricated a new coupon handling system for use in the ATR canal.
- Designed, analyzed and installed an ATR Spent Fuel Cast lid retention system.
- Designed an emergency cooling system for ATR spent fuel, assuming a large canal break.

1967 to 1977—Senior Engineer—Plant Apparatus Division

- Provided technical guidance and review of all phases for design, development, and construction of steam generators, pumps, valves and pressurizers for Navy nuclear power plants.

- Performed finite-element stress and thermal analyses of piping and pressure vessels.

Your resume uses a lot of jargon which relates primarily to projects in nuclear power plants. If you want to be hired in that field, your terminology is good. But if you hope to be considered for other engineering positions, you'll need to translate your jargon into language other specialties will understand. This will require some research in professional journals and conversations with experts in other technical disciplines.

Unfortunately, the U.S. has severely curtailed its research and building of nuclear reactors. Jobs in the area are very scarce almost everywhere in our country. If you feel you must remain in this industry, you should investigate opportunities overseas, where nuclear power has found greater acceptance.

In your resume, you've listed your education as B.S. Aeronautical Engineering, 1959, M.S. Aerospace Engineering, 1967, and M.S. Astronomy, 1973. For a highly technical position, your degrees

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## Get even with your old company by finding a better position with a firm that appreciates your contributions

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are outdated. You've probably taken courses since but haven't mentioned them. If you haven't continued your education, find out the hottest new engineering areas and take a few classes in them. This will increase your knowledge and your contacts and help you feel productive again. Who knows, you may discover a new career.

Don't dismiss consulting or contract work as an employer's way to weasel out of benefits. Look at it as an opportunity to make more money and pick your own projects. Some former employees really enjoy being their own boss.

Recognize that what happens in your job and your life is up to you. Your current condition can be a maddening predicament perpetrated by others looking to hire village idiots. Or it can be an opportunity to identify and pursue what you really want both personally and professionally. You can be a victim or a champion of the self-fulfilling prophecy. The choice is yours. ●