

Conscious Careering



Age discrimination exists, and is unfair, but older workers shouldn't allow it to become a self-fulfilling prophecy!

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There's no question about it. In today's job market, older workers often get something of a raw deal. Whether overt or covert, age-related discrimination is a fact of life in the modern hiring process and a phenomenon beyond any plausible denial. Not only will you almost never see a published job listing asking for more than 7-10 years of experience, but in recent years, I've heard employers and recruiters talk about their desire to locate "early-career professionals" or "candidates with a long runway"—both euphemisms I took to mean "sorry, older workers need not apply."

Should we find this trend surprising? Sadly, no, since it's impossible to imagine some degree of age bias wouldn't filter into the corporate hiring milieu, given that we live in a culture that routinely celebrates the attributes of youth over the more sophisticated gifts of wisdom, experience, and maturity. It would therefore be foolish to assume hiring managers are any more immune to this cultural influence than the rest of us, and won't at times display certain prejudices, no matter how many laws and anti-discrimination statutes we pass to the contrary.

What may surprise you, however, is my contention that the most productive way to combat age discrimination in the hiring process is *not* an external tactic or maneuver of some kind, such as trimming years off your résumé or casually dropping the name of your attorney during each interview. Instead, what many older job candidates need to do first is work on adjusting their own *internal perceptions* around this issue. In my experience, addressing age discrimination all starts in the mind of the candidate, themselves, and on reframing their experience into a source of great strength and competitive marketability. After all, no amount of righteous anger is going to make the age bias issue go away, and if you walk into any interview with a chip on your shoulder—or displaying even the slightest hint of a victimhood complex—you'll be finished before you even start! So instead of letting these fears drag you down, get creative and work hard to translate your age and experience into a series of positive, highly-desired job performance attributes.

Along these lines, here are a few strategies older workers can use to frame this issue more constructively and answer the ultimate question: "why should an employer hire you, instead of a younger, less-experienced employee?"

● **Extra experience gives you an extra advantage in solving problems.** No matter what field you're in, the more years you've spent in the working world, the larger the experiential "database" you have to draw from in terms of situations you've observed, successes you've achieved, mistakes you've made, and setbacks you've had to deal with. Make sure to promote this angle heavily, therefore, when selling yourself to potential employers. Stress that your experience gives you a demonstrable edge in solving problems and that your status as a battle-tested veteran will allow you to remain calm under pressure, come up with resourceful solutions, and exercise excellent judgment in addressing the employer's needs and challenges.

● **Your age may allow you to relate better to the company's customer base.** In contrast to the youth-infatuated culture we live in, the majority of spending in this country is *still* controlled by the 76 million people who comprise the Baby Boom generation. If you're a member of this age bracket, therefore, you've got a built-in advantage when it comes to relating to these critical customer groups. Prior to your interview, find out if your company targets customers born before the Johnson presidency, and if so, emphasize your natural advantage in building rapport (and profitable relationships) with this older, more mature audience.

● **Older workers are generally more stable and reliable than younger employees.** As opposed to younger professionals, who tend to be more nomadic and upwardly-mobile, most older workers own a home and have kids that are already grown up and out of the house—leading to longer tenures, reduced turnover, and fewer distractions and family emergencies during the day. Older workers should therefore play up these elements as a significant asset in their candidacy, since turnover is expensive and younger workers frequently drain cold hard cash out of the employer's pocket.

At the end of the day, attitude is everything when it comes to overcoming the age bias issue—and if there's one thing I can promise you, it's that until you've convinced *yourself* that your age is a source of great strength in your candidacy, it's unlikely you'll have much success convincing recruiters and hiring managers!

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