Job searching when you’re over 50

How to dispel myths about older workers and make a strong case about why you deserve to be hired.

SEARCHING FOR A NEW POSITION is a daunting task at any age. When you are 50-plus, your job search presents an additional set of hurdles.

The number of job seekers in their 50s, 60s and 70s has increased consistently over the past two decades, and the trend is expected to continue. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 11.9% of the total labor force in 1990 was over age 55. That percentage has increased to 19.2% in 2010, and is expected to grow to 25.2% by 2020.

Employers need to recognize the skills and attributes that the 50-plus group tends to offer, such as (1.) maturity, (2.) wisdom, (3.) depth of knowledge, (4.) wealth and diversity of experience, (5.) mentoring and training abilities, (6.) industry status and reputation and (7.) problem-solving.

Many employers cast negative stereotypes on older workers. As a 50-plus job candidate, you’ll need to encourage employers to evaluate each individual’s strengths and weaknesses on a case-by-case basis. Below are strategies that should help combat age concerns during different stages of the job search process.

THE RESUME

A resume should entice the employer with information about your background and strengths. Birth date and college degree dates are unnecessary to include on your resume and may get you rejected because of your actual or estimated age.

A 50-plus job candidate should emphasize experience and accomplishments over the past 10-15 years. This conveys to the employer that you are motivated to succeed and have current training in your field. Either briefly summarize your experience from 15-plus years ago or simply list employers without dates.

NETWORKING

There is no reason to mention your age to networking contacts. Emphasize simply that, at this point in your career, you have specific goals, a strong drive to accomplish more, a passion for your work and many more years of productivity to offer.

THE JOB APPLICATION

The Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 prohibits age discrimination of any kind in the workplace for workers 40 and older, including during the selection and
hiring process. This act does not specifically prohibit employers from requesting birth date on a job application form. Employers cannot use age information, however, to influence a hiring decision. Companies increase their risk of an age discrimination lawsuit if a job candidate is rejected after being asked for date of birth too early in the process.

Even with age discrimination being difficult to prove, employers are wise to request date of birth only after a hiring decision is made and then use this information legally for internal purposes such as pension and profit-sharing. It is necessary and legal for employers to ask for date of birth on an Inquiry Release Form for background check purposes.

Filling in your birth date on a job application form is a personal decision. For online job applications, you may want to simply fill in zeros for date of birth to have your application accepted.

TELEPHONE INTERVIEW

To increase chances of obtaining an on-site interview, emphasize relevant experience and accomplishments over the past 10-15 years, as well as your high level of passion, motivation, energy and enthusiasm. Be prepared to address the same issues as listed below for the face-to-face interview.

If the employer asks age-related questions, ask what the employer is really trying to learn about you and then answer the real question.

AGE MYTHS

Besides selling your strengths in an interview, prepare to discuss stereotypes associated with being over 50. Below are strategies for dealing with negative labels placed upon older vs. younger workers:

Less motivated to achieve. Stress that you are not coasting at this point in your career. Provide concrete examples of recent accomplishments and convey your high personal goals.

Limited years of service. Express passion for your work and that you would ideally like to work until age 70 or beyond. Most employers expect to receive at least 5-10 years of full-time service from a new hire. State, if applicable, that you have financial reasons to continue working.

Set in their ways. Show examples of flexibility in problem-solving approaches as well as adaptability to new systems and work environments.

Lack of fresh ideas. Give examples of creative contributions at recent employers.

Less energy and enthusiasm. Convey what you love about daily work challenges and what excites you about your profession.

Resistant to new learning. Express desire to improve yourself and show that you understand the value of new learning. Describe the benefit that you derived from recent college courses and seminars.

Subpar technology training. Prove either that you are up to date in technology training in your field or that you have the aptitude to learn quickly.

Overqualified. If you have talents and experience beyond the position level, convince the employer that you will not leave for a higher level position. Emphasize that you have different goals at this point in your career, such as fewer managerial responsibilities, no direct reports or to focus on only one aspect of your background.

Too expensive to hire. Convince the employer that you will not leave for a higher paying position. Stress that you have fewer financial needs now and that daily work satisfaction is most important.

Problems reporting to a younger boss. Give examples of younger bosses under which you thrived. Explain that capabilities and management style of a boss matter most.

Difficult to manage. Express that more is accomplished in a team environment and that individuals cannot have their own agendas. Relate the style of boss that brings out the most in you.

Won’t fit into a younger culture. Show that you recognize the strength of team diversity. Give examples of interactions with younger workers and what you have learned from them.

Not up to physical challenges. Address specific requirements of the position. Describe your good health and the physical tasks you have handled successfully.

If you are in your 50s, employers are concerned with recent successes and achievement motivation. If you are in your 60s, employers are concerned with how soon you will retire. You may want to take charge and say something like, “I am in my 60s and plan to work for at least 10 more years because I love my work and have a lot more to accomplish.”

Take pride in being 50-plus and get hired because of it!