Ask the Headhunter: The "Dirty Little Secret" of Age Discrimination

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*Nick Corcodilos is an expert on how to get a job. We ran into him while doing a story on **the relative futility of Internet job boards** and asked him to post his own **job search secrets**. It became a palpable hit, so we asked Nick if he wouldn't mind taking some questions from our readers. It turns out that in addition to giving interviews to PBS, Nick hosts a website called asktheheadhunter.com, and publishes a free weekly -- the **Ask The Headhunter© Newsletter**.*

HR Guy: Nick, You have one the best blogs and websites devoted to job search and career development. I have spent over 25 years in HR working for Fortune 100 companies. One of the many "dirty little secrets" in larger corporations is the pervasiveness of age discrimination. Most people in corporations know it exists but won't acknowledge it publicly. Do you have any useful ideas for how the over-40 candidate can solve this?

Nick Corcodilos: Thanks, HR Guy, for your kind words and for revealing something that many people have sensed. In some companies, discrimination against older job candidates is an unwritten policy. As I've suggested before, a person has choices. You can take them to court and sue if you can afford it. But most can't.

You can walk away and forget about it, which is what most people seem to do. But that doesn't solve anything. My recommendation is a sort of Zen approach. Don't fight the mountain. Go around it.

While some employers are just so biased against older workers that it's not worth even acknowledging them, some are passively discriminatory. That is, they do it because it's become habit. But their attitude can be altered. How? By forcing them to focus on how you will help them make more money and more profit. That's a tall order. I'll give you an example.

When a Fortune 50 company downsized, they hired me to coach some employees on how to find new jobs. One of these people was 58 years old. He was tired of the discrimination he faced. He tried dyeing his hair darker. He left dates off his resume to hide his age. But he kept getting rejected. John was literally getting ready to go to divinity school to become a priest.

Here's what I taught him to do. First, no more games with hair and resumes. No resumes at all. I helped him identify managers in companies he wanted to work for, and showed him how to contact them to discuss the problems and challenges they were facing but not to inquire about jobs. This yielded some meetings to discuss jobs. (It's amazing how some managers hate to be asked about jobs, but when they get to know you a bit, they want to interview you.)

At the meetings, John didn't wait to be asked about his skills or abilities. I showed him how to map out three challenges the manager was facing, and how to outline three things he could do to help. He presented this as a "mini business plan" for doing the job. The interview turned into a working meeting between a boss and an employee. The next time I saw him, John was beaming. He was waiting on one job offer, he said, and age never was an issue. "I did what you said. Before the interviewer had a chance to process my grey hair, I had him in a discussion about how we could make his operation more efficient and get the job done with less overhead cost. Suddenly he was interested in the 'green' rather than the 'gray' on my head!"

(For more about this approach, check a brief audio presentation from a workshop I did for Cornell University business students earlier this year: **"Don't Get Hired, Get Acquired"**.

There's no magic to this, and it requires picking target companies carefully, and doing a lot of preparation. Most managers are concerned first about their business success. Whether you're an employee or a job applicant, it's up to you to focus the manager on how you can help. Unless the manager is a true age bigot, you'll win him over with your plan for his business. Great hires and employees are hard to come by. Prove you're one of them, and age -- like any other unrelated factor -- becomes less of an issue. Or, you can go back to choice number one and sue.

Tammy: I'm living on the west coast but want to relocate to the east coast once my husband retires from the military. My question is what are the best ways to network and job search when you live in a different geographic area?

Nick Corcodilos: The best way to do it is in person. Companies used to pay to relocate new hires. That's rare today. If you can find a job in a new city, you will probably have to move yourself, and that means you will probably have to pay to travel for interviews, too. The challenge is to make this a worthwhile investment.

Here's how I've taught others to approach it. Carefully select the city you'd like to move to. Then research the companies you'd like to work for. Don't read job postings. Read newspapers and online local publications for stories about these businesses. Get to know them as best you can. In these stories, you'll find the names of company managers. Use LinkedIn or a simple Google search to get in touch with them electronically. Ask about their company to further educate yourself (inquire about what you read in the articles), but don't let on yet that you're looking for a job. Make a short list of the companies you have the best experiences with in this process.

Later, call (on the phone) the people who were helpful. Explain that they really piqued your interest in their companies, and that you will be in town on business in a few weeks. You'd love to have breakfast, lunch, or just a cup of coffee while you're in town, to get to know the business community in their city better. This approach doesn't put an "interview burden" on your new contact, and it's casual, but it's still business. Schedule a time to meet.

If you can schedule three or more of these meetings, it's probably worth driving, flying or taking a train to the city. Now you're really in town on business, talking to your target companies. I've seen this work many times -- I've done it myself to get new clients. But you make the investment only if you've got a critical number of meetings.

Diane: Is listing legitimate self-employment on a resume after 4-5 years of unemployment at a regular paid job considered a negative by prospective employers, as a "red flag," or as dishonest? If so, what can a person do to combat this?

Nick Corcodilos: In this case, sending a resume to someone you don't know who doesn't know you poses the same problems as when responding to job ads online. The information about your self-employment becomes a red flag, even if you're the most talented and conscientious worker in the world. Employers have biases that can hurt you. But, you can't defend your resume because you're not there. And if you explain in a cover letter, it sounds like excuses. This is why approaching employers indirectly doesn't work well. There are just too many reasons for them to reject you.

You can combat the problem by selecting your target companies carefully and identifying people who are connected to each company and get yourself introduced to the hiring manager. This advice frustrates job hunters because it takes a lot of work -- I know that, and I don't suggest it as if it's a magic bullet. But it gives you far more control than blasting out resumes and waiting for good luck.

Odds are high nowadays that managers who interview you have been unemployed themselves recently, and may even have been self-employed. So your status won't surprise or offend them. But they need context and more information about why they should trust you are not "unemployable." This is where references come in. Managers rely on recommendations from people they trust. Your challenge is not to write a resume cleverly. It's to meet people the manager trusts; people who will suggest to the manager that you're worth talking to. Consider it a "pre-interview" that it's up to you to arrange by finding those people connected to the manager.

This is a very high-level form of networking that I discuss in detail in a free article titled, **"Say NO to job leads"**.