



Executives in Transition: How to Win the Ageism Battle

Ageism is getting old. When talking about diversity in the workplace, mature candidates are often left out of the discussion. Steve Rosen talks about why there's still a place for them in the workplace and offers some tips to mature candidates looking for their next career challenge in the latest in the Future of Work series.

Ageism is alive and well in the workforce and it's not about to be eradicated any time soon. Realistically, if you're an experienced executive looking for your next opportunity, the goal is simply to overcome, or navigate your way through, the ageist attitudes you may encounter in your search.

Not always given a fair shake

It's been empirically shown that senior candidates are less likely to be hired than their younger counterparts with similar qualifications, and when senior candidates are hired, they are given fewer opportunities for training and are judged more harshly on their ability to learn or remediate deficiencies.^[i] This, despite a preponderance of research that supports the positive attributes of senior candidates, including dependability, loyalty, high work ethic, exemplary attendance, and good citizenship.^[ii]

But older workers are here to stay

While the debate about their attributes simmers, the number of senior executives in the workforce is rising steadily. [The participation rate](#) in the Canadian labour market—among those over the age of 55—has increased significantly in the past 10 years, even as the overall labour market participation rate in Canada continues to decline.^[iii] In fact, many employers will need to incentivize experienced executives to stay, especially since Canada's age demographics foretell a shortage of younger people to fill vacant management positions in the next decade.

Why are people staying at work longer? Many reasons are employee-driven, some by necessity. These days, it's taking significantly longer to save for retirement; thanks to the disappearance of many defined benefit pensions, combined with the demands of extended life expectancies. At the same time, our service-based economy enables a longer runway to work than in times when farming, manufacturing and labour dominated. Furthermore, many senior executives today value the engagement that work offers, and the gig economy is creating new interim contracts and part-time arrangements in consulting and freelancing—making it possible to extend your career by working remotely, or for short periods of time.

The Canadian legal system is also making way for senior executives to remain employed. For the most part, we've done away with mandatory retirement in Canada, and human rights legislation now protects older executives against age discrimination—mandating firms to widen the scope of diversity to accommodate employees on the basis of age.

Gauging the perspective of the decision-maker

However, it's one thing for a senior executive to hold on to an existing job, and quite another to land a position with a new employer. How does an executive convince the search consultant, the potential boss and the HR manager to take the chance on a mature candidate? You're not going to change societal attitudes, or even those of the institution you're pursuing. Nevertheless, there is a lot you can do to show the decision-makers involved that you have the skills and personality they want, as well as dismiss any preconceptions that employers may have. Doing this requires emotional intelligence, which enables you to gauge the perspective of the person on the other side of the desk. Understand that the growing ranks of mature candidates feed a sense of status incongruence among many younger supervisors—they may be uncomfortable with giving you instructions or intimidated by your experience and knowledge.^[iv] Worse, they may be wary of you touting your vast expertise a bit too much. You need to put that person at ease.

Addressing objections

Appreciating the sensitivities around hiring mature candidates is the first step to avoiding the pitfalls. A bit of self-awareness is of the utmost importance here. The objections to hiring experienced executives often manifest as issues of qualification, runway, trainability, energy, tech literacy, and team dynamics. Yet, on all of these points, there are clear positives to assert, while allaying concerns about any negatives.

1. **Qualifications:** Of all the attacks waged on senior execs, this should be the easiest to avert. Emphasize the relevance of your experience, relating the skills attained, targets achieved and prior leadership roles to the specific job opportunity. Dwelling on previous titles, positions in the corporate hierarchy, or time in the trenches, can smack of entitlement.
2. **Runway:** Mathematically, a 50-something has a shorter career runway than a 40-something. However, you're applying for a position, not a career. Often your younger competitor is in resume-building mode and may be the

greater flight risk after two years on the job. Don't be afraid to talk about your goals, loyalty and desire for challenge.

3. **Trainability:** This objection shows up most in survey research. Be sure to state your willingness to learn and gain new skills. Overstating your existing knowledge from vast experience could signal scarce brain space left for growth.
4. **Energy:** [Your resume](#) is the place to detail your active life and level of engagement, both in and outside of work, while your demeanour in the interview offers a chance to demonstrate your enthusiasm about the position. Visible excitement can dispel the image of the stereotypical senior who needs to curl up for the 3:00 p.m. snooze.
5. **Tech literacy:** No one is expecting you to write code, however, what is important is to showcase any experience or knowledge you have in managing ERP or CRM systems from a strategic vantage point.
6. **Team Dynamics:** Cultural fit is critical here. The focus should be on collaboration, listening skills, and adaptability. There is a big difference between advising and mentoring on the one hand, and lecturing or pontificating on the other.

A growing presence of senior candidates is becoming a fact of life. Those looking to land a new executive role need to be attuned to the ageist attitudes that lurk below the surface, be self-aware of characteristics that may put them at risk and know how to present positive attributes that make maturity and experience valuable to employers.

Recommended for you:

Want to read more in our Future of Work series? [Learn more.](#)

[i] Dennis, H., & Thomas, K. (2007). Ageism in the workplace. *Generations*, 31(1), 84-89.

[ii] Ng, T. W. H., & Feldman, D. C. (2009). The relationship of age to ten dimensions of job performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93, 392-423.

[iii] <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2017001/article/14826-eng.htm>

[iv] Collins, M. H., Hair, Jr, J. F., & Rocco, T. S. (2009). The older-worker-younger-supervisor dyad: A test of the Reverse Pygmalion effect. *Human resource development quarterly*, 20(1), 21-41.