



The Other Side of 55: Older Worker Preparation for Reemployment

Martha M. Russell, M.S., NCC, MCC

Introduction

Much has been written regarding a new definition for retirement and the aging of America's workforce. Most of these entries have appeared in the pages of financial planning, insurance and health care articles, and popular magazines. Generally the focus has been on carefree lifestyles after early retirement with sufficient money to fulfill multiple dreams.

While there have also been professional journal entries, they tend to be narrowly focused, often based on workers aged 40-50 (Newman, 1995), and/or hard to place clients facing multiple barriers. Research studies are often limited or inconclusive (Forte & Hansvick, 1999). While members of the professional career services community are indeed aware of the needs of the older worker, their contributions for a redefined future appear infrequently (Whiston & Brecheisen, 2002) although discussions and conference presentations have increased.

An on-line, human resources Delphi study conducted in 2003 formed the structure of a book on the aging workforce and included Career Development for Older Workers (Russell & Visser, 2005). The study summary suggested a need to identify factors that predict success in maximizing employment opportunities and techniques for finding new employment. The study also recommended a collaborative effort by multiple stakeholders to adequately prepare organizations and workers for future workplace needs (Visser & Beatty, 2003). This author contends that the Career Development profession must take a leadership role in this collaborative effort. Leadership that introduces an extended career development stage for older workers, provides a framework for alliance with workforce development programs and assists in expanding reemployment techniques is needed.

The Movement Towards Reemployment

Numerous AARP reports have shown evidence that older workers are an active segment of the workforce (AARP, 2004). One example included 1,200 baby boomers and found 80% of the respondents planning to work in some capacity during their retirement years (AARP, 2005). The following factors impacted older workers decision-making:

- Inadequate retirement savings.
- Stagnating pension coverage and other benefit reductions leaving many workers with little or no pension protection and inadequate health benefits.
- Changes and reductions in the eligibility for full Social Security benefits.
- Higher education levels with educated workers more likely to stay in the labor force.
- Increased life expectancy and improved health status.

- Labor shortages that may prompt employers to implement programs and policies to attract and retain older workers.

Additionally, workers are selecting to reenter based on personal values, including the desire for social interaction, continued contribution to the workforce, and internal feelings of well being, independence and productivity.

The Other Side of 55: Reemployment Process

Preparation for reemployment must embrace how a person deals with change and transitions. The success of past transitions can serve as building blocks for the future. Preparation that incorporates knowledge about self, past work experiences and future goals provides the foundation for a strong action plan. This includes interest and skills selection, especially in the area of transferable skills. Assessments, formal or informal, can be helpful if interpreted in a way that brings past and present together in a reflective and proactive way. Activities that focus on positive memories and narrative stories, realized dreams and future visions are powerful when used by individuals or in groups (Butler, Mason & Russell, 2003). One such activity this author uses identifies key elements from past decades that have impacted a person's life. This can be done in fun, creative ways that uncover social, political and global trends and events that have influenced decision making in a specific period of time. Acknowledging the influence of lifetime events can help focus on options for the future.

Exploring Options

Whether a person has been employed in a single job or worked with multiple employers, occupational research is often an unfamiliar technique. Developing a series of questions to ask employers and using multiple information gathering methods (i.e., internet, informational interviewing) can offer hope and a feeling of control as well as providing a targeted focus. AARP annually publishes a list of the Top 50 Companies for Older Workers. Criteria used to select the companies, such as recruitment efforts, training opportunities and alternative work schedules, can serve as an excellent source of questions for individual research.

- *Recruitment* – How does the company represent itself to the consumer or to potential employees? How appealing is the company in terms of advertising images, website information, and intergenerational appeal?
- *Training* – What types of skill-enhancing programs are available to employees? How proactive does the company appear in encouraging older workers to take part in training opportunities?
- *Alternative Work Arrangements* – How flexible does the company appear to be in terms of scheduling? Does the

company routinely offer flextime, telecommuting, shared duties, project contracting or other creative avenues?

Scheduling issues around caregiving for elder family members or young grandchildren may be one of the areas a worker must explore. Identifying older worker friendly and productive environments is unfamiliar to many of those facing a job search yet it can help increase comfort and skills with networking, job search interaction and the application process.

Networking and Job Search Interaction

Rife & Belcher (1993) found that peers who were also experiencing unemployment were able to provide the most highly valued supportive messages to the older worker seeking employment. Accordingly, creating opportunities for that support is an important career strategy for the older worker. A supportive community provides opportunities to share resources, and to address issues, challenges, and celebrations.

Addressing the Issues and Challenges

Age discrimination is a reality. However, there are major factors that impact the elimination of this challenge including the need to address the issue as it appears in the broader society as well as in the workplace (National Academy, 2004). This requires identifying attitudes and assumptions of both employers and workers and uncovering the reasons behind the discrimination (Goldberg, 2000). Since statistics show that by 2010, one out of three workers will be over 50, perhaps there is some reassurance that employers will become part of the solution (Charness & Czaja, 2006). Refocusing from age to transferable skills and strengths developed through the years is key. Those strengths might include a strong work ethic, a proven ability to take care of business, an understanding of the true meaning of customer service and the ability to draw on experience to solve problems and make progress.

Job Application Documents

Transferable and targeted strengths can be illustrated on resumes, applications and cover letters. Internet sites and bookshelves are full of advice for development of documents that are part of an effective application packet and many are appropriate for older workers. These may include using a combination resume format, a strong career summary and learning about on-line applications.

The use of a Career Summary statement on a resume can help highlight transferable skills and targeted strengths. Highlighting work experience in the past 10-15 years is most effective although earlier experience can be introduced in a creative way so that the applicant can target a new career focus. An effective resume is a document that is factual, organized, concise and focused. An experienced older worker may take two pages to produce a complete, effective presentation of background and skills. Gaps after exiting from work can be dealt with in a productive way.

Conclusion

Reemployment for those on the other side of 55 doesn't have to be difficult and stressful. There are techniques that combine the old and new, and strategies that value the past and the present. Strategic exploration can help address challenges as the workforce continues to reach *The Other Side of 55*.

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Martha M. Russell, M.S., NCC, MCC has owned and operated Russell Career Services since 1987. She is a past president of NCDA.

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