

Boomers' Experience Can Be An Asset In Job Search

Carole Feldman, Associated Press

Think changing jobs is difficult?

It can be even harder if you're a baby boomer.

Although there are federal laws against age discrimination, some employers may be reluctant to hire older workers, concerned about how long they'll stay and the higher salaries they may demand.

But the traditional retirement age of 65 is fading, just as the 77-million-strong, baby-boom generation begins hitting it. The idea of lifetime job tenure, in which people stay in one job for their entire career, is also disappearing, and that can be good news for those looking to make a move.

Companies that are more thinly staffed than in the past may well be "looking for someone who can come in and do the job," without needing a lot of training or supervision, said John Challenger, CEO of the outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas. Workers in their 50s or older can bring that added value, he said.

With the aging of the baby boomers — the generation born between 1946 and 1964 — the percentage of workers 55 and older in the labor force is expected to jump from 19.5 percent in 2010 to 25.2 percent by 2020, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

For those contemplating new jobs, Challenger said it's easier to change industries than to change functions.

"If you're a salesperson in a professional services firm, you can go do that in a banking organization," he said, as an example.

That's also important if you're trying to maintain the same level of income. "If you go to something brand new, you're not going to hold income," he said.

When writing resumes, boomers should highlight their accomplishments over the previous five or 10 years, even if takes more than a single page. And networking is critical, he said. This is the time for baby boomers to join civic, community, charitable or other organizations, and get to know new people. It's through these relationships that people find jobs, Challenger said.

When Barbara Brochstein, 60, of Wantagh, N.Y., decided to begin a new career as a special education teacher 10 years ago, it was a stretch from the career in advertising that she left after her children were born. But it was a logical next step

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from the teacher's aide position she took when they were teenagers, she said.

So she got a master's degree in education at age 50 and was one of five teachers hired together by the same department. She was considerably older than the others.

It wasn't so much her age that worried her, she said, as it was that she was doing something new. But looking back 10 years later, "You just have to decide to do it. You come with a lot of experience and a lot of knowledge."

Like other workers, many boomers are looking for a job that "gives them room for growth, is challenging and meaningful," Challenger said.

He said people shouldn't stay in a position that makes them unhappy. But what makes them unhappy isn't always the type of work they're doing. "Often when people look at it more closely, it's actually the people and the culture of that organization," he said.

Marc Freedman, author of "The Big Shift: Navigating the New Stage Beyond Midlife," said boomers often will switch careers to areas that have social impact, including education and health care.

"In their 50s and 60s, people's priorities change," he said. "They realize that the road doesn't go on forever. I think it causes a lot of people to re-evaluate what kind of job they want to do, what kind of life they want to lead."

Freedman founded and is CEO of Civic Ventures, which describes itself as a nonprofit think tank on boomers, work and social purpose. Its website, Encore.org, has information about moving from a private sector job to one with a nonprofit.

Among its programs are Encore Fellowships, which provide stipends to help people make that transition. Leslye Louie, national director of the program and a former fellow herself, said the average fellow is around 55 or 57, has been successful in the private sector, and wants to do something different and contribute to the greater good. "They're looking more at their legacy," she says.

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