

Time for some new tips for older job seekers

What you are now means more than what you did then, VIRGINIA GALT finds

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TORONTO -- If they were looking for a feel-good session, participants at a recent workshop for older job seekers were in the wrong place.

Their former titles will get them only so far, they were told, and even those university degrees earned 30-odd years ago have lost a bit of their lustre. What upgrading courses have they taken recently?

Recruiters are interested in who you are and what you can do for them now. What you did in the past, while clearly important, is not always enough to land a new position, human resources consultants advised the group of displaced executives and restless retirees attending a workshop organized by Toronto-based Prime50 Employment Services (prime50.com).

That said, the news is not all bad. Employment prospects are improving for seasoned veterans who can establish their currency, said independent consultants Bill Weber and Bill Hozy.

There are emerging labour market trends that work in favour of older job candidates -- particularly the surge in temporary and contract opportunities that may be less appealing to younger candidates with heavier family and financial commitments, Mr. Hozy said.

"Certainly, contract employment is on the rise, and it's a great way to audition for a job," said Barry Witkin, a chartered accountant and chief executive officer of Prime50 Employment Services, which matches job candidates 50 years and older with employers. "And the whole outsourcing trend," where companies are contracting out some of their functions, "represents a burgeoning opportunity."

Mr. Witkin has also noticed increased demand for "interim executives" to fill in for people on maternity leave or sabbaticals.

Even if a permanent, full-time position is the ultimate goal, Mr. Witkin said, job candidates can use contract employment to demonstrate their skills, expand their business networks and test the waters for other opportunities.

Currently, employed candidates are far more attractive to recruiters than the unemployed, the consultants said, and this makes it all the more difficult for those who find themselves suddenly on the street as a result of buyouts, mergers and downsizings.

Hiring practices have changed, interview methods have changed and the competition has intensified in the decades since many of these older job seekers last had to pitch themselves to prospective employers, the consultants said. They offered these words to the wise:

Eighty per cent of job openings are never advertised, they said, so job candidates have to learn to network. Practice a 30-second pitch -- "who you are, what you do, what you're looking for" -- because you never know when you might bump into someone who knows someone who knows of a position, Mr. Hozy said.

"You have to broadcast your availability," Mr. Witkin added. "I know a lot of people who don't even tell their families, don't even tell their spouses."

Keep the résumé short, no more than two pages, Mr. Weber said, "and keep in mind that it's not a job description, it's a marketing tool."

Showcase your accomplishments in prior jobs, he said. "What new programs did you implement and what were the results?"

University degrees are important "but so is what you have learned lately," Mr. Hozy added. "If you attended a mergers and acquisitions seminar at a business school, don't leave it off, even if it was just a week."

Make it easy for recruiters by providing a contact number where they can reach you quickly. "When people are looking for you, they want you now," Mr. Weber said.

"It's really good to have five or six references in your back pocket," Mr. Weber said. Former supervisors are the preferred references but it is also important to have former co-workers, clients and people who have reported to you on the list.

Increasingly, recruiters want to talk to a range of people to get "the full picture," he said.

Be prepared for tough questions in the interview. Becoming more common is the "behavioural interview," where you are asked to recount a disastrous situation you encountered and how you handled it.

"There are two ways to answer that," Mr. Weber said. One is that you have always avoided disastrous situations by planning ahead.

The other is to answer honestly and by putting your best foot forward. Even if you faced a situation you didn't handle very well, "here is where you say: 'This is what I learned from that' . . . Turn something that they [the interviewers] tried to make negative into a positive," Mr. Weber said.

If they ask the "billboard" question -- if there was a billboard that listed three positive things about you and three negative things about you, what would they be? -- answer the three positive things and try to move on, he said.

If the interviewer is much younger and less experienced than you are -- say, young enough to be your son or daughter -- try not to be intimidating, the consultants advised.

"Go in on the basis that you want to be part of a team. Let the interviewer know, 'I'm not here to compete with you, I'm not here to replace you . . . I'm here because I have some expertise that I believe will enhance the business,' " Mr. Witkin said.

If you get the position, prepare to hit the ground running, Mr. Weber said. "In our age group, we're seen as experienced hires," he said.

Even when you are working full-tilt again, stay in touch with old contacts and make new ones, he added. "Who knows when you are going to be in this situation again?"

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