

Over 40? Make the Most of It!

Savvy employers are learning to value experienced engineers. Here's how you can take advantage of this trend.

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Traditionally, we have been expected to achieve personal and professional success during the first half of our lives. We are to grow up and reach full maturity, acquire our major education and work-life training, select what we trust will be a lifetime mate, become a caring spouse and a devoted parent, determine and enter a career that provides purpose and meaning, achieve top success and status by making money, save for our children's education and a worry-free retirement ... What an unrealistic load of expectations to carry! It's no wonder so many adults feel overwhelmed. Realistically, we can have it all — just not at the same time. It is critical that this “achieve it all by your mid-40s” mindset be shifted to accommodate a more rational and balanced use of our lifespan.

In 1900, the average life expectancy was 66.7 years. When Social Security was established in the U.S. in 1930, 19% of the population lived to age 65, so at that time choosing age 65 as the normal retirement age was fiscally sound. However, we are now living about 20 years longer, and this is expected to increase as the health of older adults continues to improve.

Consider the demographics of the work

force. More people are turning 40 this year than ever before. The Census Bureau reports that the number of people over 50 has increased by 12 million, whereas the number of people in the 20–34 age group has declined by 6 million. And, by the year 2010, the number of people over 50 will increase by another 21 million.

The old conventional wisdom was that older employees “don't have the energy of younger workers,” “are marking time before retirement,” or “are overpaid.” The new conventional wisdom, as savvy recruiters are discovering, is that older workers have years of good experience and a Rolodex or Palm Pilot full of contacts. In fact, because older workers today are healthier and better educated than ever before, they also have lots of energy and drive.

Older workers can bring a great deal of value to a company. Numerous studies have demonstrated that older workers bring patience, expertise, maturity, stability, insight, and good connections to an employer, and they often make great mentors. A recent study by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) found that “older workers were perceived as having all but one of the top seven qualities rated from a list of 29 that companies



considered most desirable in an employee, including loyalty, dedication to the company, and commitment to doing quality work.”

Employers that seek to attract and retain older engineers will be ahead of the curve as the “Baby Boom” generation continues to age. Chemical engineers in the prime of their careers can thrive in this environment. This article will get you thinking about all that workers in the over-40 age group have to offer. It then outlines a plan that can help you make the most of the wisdom that comes with experience and with age.

What companies are learning

The approaching demographic shift is unprecedented. Employers need to redefine the working age population to include older Americans and adjust their practices regarding older engineers. They have used financial incentives effectively to encourage retirement; the same tools can be used to encourage work.

During the 1980s and 1990s, many companies restructured and downsized. Although companies can follow the old way into the new century, it is more likely that they will begin to recognize the potential of their older, long-tenure employees and restructure the job environment to increase the productivity of this group. The old methods are likely to prove unsuccessful in the face of a shrinking supply of younger labor. To stay competitive, organizations have spent the last decade on re-engineering, restructuring, and re-alignment. Now they are facing a different set of “Rs” — recruitment, retention, and retraining.

What you can do

Take advantage of job-related education and career development opportunities — whether part of the company training or tuition reimbursement plan, or on your own. Being a “lifelong learner” definitely has big professional and personal payoffs.

A recently released report by the Committee for Economic Development notes that skill attainment and skill maintenance are the keys to productive engagement in the work force. The decline in training as workers age is not consistent with the goal of extending work lives. If older engineers are to remain productively engaged, then they and their employers must work toward closing the training gap. Employees themselves have the primary responsibility to address their own skill needs. Employers who offer training should recognize the value of training their older workers and assure equal access to training for them.

Take advantage of opportunities offered by your employer. Employees who ask for training are rarely turned down and are viewed more favorably by management because of their flexibility and acceptance of new technology. Training venues outside of the workplace are important, including community colleges, universities, technical schools, and distance learning programs.

Perhaps the biggest training gap for the current generation of older workers is in the area of computer skills. Training in and out of the workplace today is frequently focused on computer applications — learning the basics and updating skills as applications become more sophisticated. Given the rapid pace of technological change, even younger workers are vulnerable to skill obsolescence if they do not continually update their knowledge of new applications.

Some chemical engineers reach a plateau long before retirement. Promotions are often no longer likely, and work assignments can settle into a familiar routine. For those who reach such a plateau at age 40, retirement at 55 can seem long overdue rather than “early.” Plateaus can make older engineers vulnerable to job loss. As one business magazine wrote recently, the career plateau can become a narrow ledge for some.

You can avoid career plateaus by continually updating your skills. Look for opportunities for new work assignments — these need not be promotions, but can simply be a change of routine and responsibilities. Pursue different jobs within the company that may require some retraining. The benefit to the employer comes from the institutional knowledge that an existing employee has, even in a new position, and his or her loyalty to the company.

Knowing what you know about yourself and the world, what would you do with your life and in your work if you could deduct 20 years from your chronological age? Without realizing it, our chronological age can unconsciously and automatically block our thinking about our future. We grow older, not by living a certain number of chronological years, but by becoming idle in mind, body, and purpose. We decline by abandoning our flexibility, our ideals, our talents, our life’s mission, and our involvement in our community. We grow old by buying into society’s story that we can be considered surplus or discarded.

If you’re over 50 ...

Fifty isn’t as old as it used to be. The average American today is living 29 years longer than the average American did a century ago. But those years are being added to middle age, not old age. Middle-aged people today are in better health and are planning to work longer. Many have whole new careers in front of them.

Lydia Bronte, author of “The Longevity Factor,” studied the careers of people over 50. Almost half of the participants in the study had a major career peak after age 50, and about one-third had a major career peak after age 65.

Often, your goals are different later in life than they were earlier. People want to align their work goals more closely with their lifestyle preferences. The nonfinancial benefits of work come in many forms — identity, prestige, self-esteem, mental stimulation, involvement, and interaction with others. The workplace is changing, and attitudes toward older workers are becoming more realistic. More and more, we are beginning to understand that change is

A 16-point plan for achieving success

1. Seek access to employer-provided training, and explore self-directed learning through CD-ROM tutorials.
2. Look at the courses offered by colleges and universities near your home and near your office on a regular basis. Get on the mailing lists for the brochures so you will have easy access to the course list each semester.
3. Hone your computing skills. This is essential to remaining competitive with younger workers.
4. Develop your interpersonal intelligence. It is important to communicate effectively and give feedback easily without giving offense. Understand the difference between disagreeing and being disagreeable.
5. Avoid “career plateaus” by updating your skills and looking for new work assignments within your current organization.
6. Age functionally, not chronologically. Reset your chronological clock, because chronological age is an unreliable measure of aging. Learn a new way to count time. Ask yourself this question: if you didn’t know your age, how old would you be?
7. Visualize what you would do if age wasn’t a consideration, and design a strategic plan to accomplish your goal.
8. Be sure you have a high-impact, marketing-driven resumé.
9. Consider looking for a position in organizations with fewer than 1,000 employees. They need people who can “hit the ground running.”
10. Find a way to talk about being physically active in your networking meetings and in your interviews.
11. Cultivate an extensive network of contacts. This includes being active in professional associations, attending conferences and seminars, and subscribing to Internet discussion lists.
12. When networking, say you are looking for companies that recognize the value of experience and a solid track record.
13. Pay attention to image. Get new clothes if necessary.
14. Don’t confuse age prejudice with salary prejudice. Address the salary issue head on.
15. Start or maintain an exercise program. Exercise not only keeps you in good physical shape, it also helps reduce stress.
16. Consider getting assistance in developing your resumé and in practicing your interviewing skills. Read a book on the subject or work with a career coach.

the only consistent theme over the life of our careers. Whether the change is planned or involuntary, you succeed when you are an active participant in the transition. The outcome can be a wonderful sense of renewal and affirmation. You can be energized to reinvest in your current career or make a career change that better fits your needs at this particular stage of your life.

The “right” job for you has a number of different components — work you enjoy, work you are good at, opportunity, appropriate compensation, the right culture, and a number of other things. You have more choices than you probably recognize. You can be a full-time employee, a

part-time worker, a freelancer, an independent contractor, a subcontractor, a seasonal worker, a job sharer, or a temporary employee. You have years of valuable experience — business experience and life experience — and with practice, you can learn to talk about your skills and abilities and be able to market yourself effectively.

Identifying your goals by assessing your values, skills, interests, and personality type can be very valuable in helping you understand which direction to take. Create a vision of what you want to do. Decide how many more years you want to work. What would happen if you handed off some of your work to someone else? Don’t use your age as an excuse — maybe the problem is something else; try to figure out what it is.

Write a list of the highlights of your life; include your biggest accomplishments, insights, and discoveries. Then write your dream history — for example, “at 20, I dreamed of being a photographer,” or “at 30, I dreamed of going to graduate school,” or “at 40, I dreamed of starting a business.” What happened to those dreams? As an exercise, finish these sentences: “I want to ...” and “I can’t because ...”

Once you’ve created your vision of what you want to do, take small steps toward your goal. It’s virtually impossible to take one giant step and reach your new goal right away.

If you’re a woman over 50 ...

Now I’d like to say a few words about middle-aged women. Sometime after I turned 50, I read a book called “On Women Turning 50: Celebrating Mid-Life Discoveries.” The conversations in this book provide the reader with pride and strength in maturity, and can offer alternative ways of perceiving our internal image and viewing our roles as professional woman, wife, mother, or friend.

American society, with its emphasis on youth, sees the individual woman as becoming less and less valuable as she grows older. It has been observed that women’s magazines ignore older women or pretend they don’t exist. Magazine readers and moviegoers often have no idea what a real woman’s 50- or 60-year-old face looks like. But, as mature women, we become more concerned with production than with reproduction. Women in their fifties and sixties have come to care more about how they feel than about what others think. This shift in how one meets the world can be liberating for women.

The necessity for developing an inner life and a creative expression becomes increasingly important in our middle years, when we begin to lose parents, partners, and friends. The act of creating can clear confusion by allowing us to focus our energies and offer a way to express our personal voice. Developing a strong identity among so many confusing cultural images of femininity is an ongoing struggle for many young women, and is often in conflict with the standard of beauty we see around us. But, by the time we reach our fifties, we come to terms with our crow’s feet and press on.



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Economic independence is basic to a feeling of personal dignity. Women in their fifties who have not done so already can pursue an alternative work style to fill life with a purpose and augment established income. At 51, gifted photographer Mary Ellen Mark said, “I feel full of energy and physically as strong as I’ve ever been.” Me, too!

Career depression

It is important to mention here something called career depression syndrome, or CDS. The sources of CDS include the accelerated pace of change, changing career values, and stress. It is not clinical depression. The three stages of CDS are career dissatisfaction, career demotivation, and career paralysis. It can be described as a kind of “whirlpool,” where weaknesses are magnified and strengths and successes are minimized or ignored.

Sometimes, older employees begin to fall into career depression. If you feel that you may be suffering from career depression, consider seeing a career coach or a therapist.

The “third age”

The extra 20 or 30 years of life we have gained have really been added to the middle of life — the prime of adulthood — rather than to its end. It is youth and middle age that have been expanded, not old age. Like a rubber band pulled by giant hands, as the life course has stretched, its whole length has stretched, not just one end or the other.

The result is not merely a simple addition of time to our lives. Instead, it is a transformation of the entire life course, especially adulthood. The period beginning with what was formerly the end of middle age is now being called the “third age.” It is as if we have created a second middle age, from 50 to 75. This extension of the period of vitality in the middle of adult life is astonishing. It radically alters many of our existing beliefs about our life course.

In the interviews conducted for the long careers study referred to in “The Longevity Factor,” many of the participants described a sequence of experiences very different from the stereotypes we might expect. In their early fifties, these people felt that they were just beginning to come into their own. They had accomplished or were nearing the end of most of the family tasks of early adulthood — marriage, childrearing, and putting children through college. They had served their apprenticeship at work, they knew how to get things done, and they had a firm grasp of the basics of their job or profession. With these major tasks accomplished, they were beginning to reach out for greater creativity in their work, for broader impact, for solutions that hadn’t been found. In short, they were poised for flight. Their real stage of professional development bore no resemblance to the conventional idea of what people do at age 50!

Barbara Sher, a therapist and career counselor, says, “You’ve turned a corner and you’re ready to create your second life.” The time has come to reach out and take back

the self that stepped aside to make room for the parent, the spouse, the wage earner, the maintenance person, the rescuer, the nurse, the warrior, and the rest of that long list of roles you took on over the years. You need to develop your own thoughts, reawaken your creativity, recover your originality, satisfy your curiosity, and go after all the important things your spirit craved but you never had time for. You need to move your wishes to the top of your priority list and let the wishes of a lot of other people drop down or drop off. This might take a lot of courage if you’re someone who habitually puts other people’s needs before your own. But in the end, this courage is worth any discomfort, because it’s an investment in your own potential.

Final thoughts

A recent survey of baby boomers revealed that over 70% expect to continue to work at least part-time after “retirement,” reflecting not only a strong interest in work, but also the importance of post-career or “bridge” type employment. For most older Americans, work in the future may not be the same burden that it has been in the past. We are a healthier society today, and older Americans do not face as many health constraints as earlier generations did. Also, our economy is moving away from physically demanding jobs and providing more opportunities for less-strenuous work. In 1950, one-fifth of jobs were physically demanding, compared with just over 7% today. There has already been some movement toward more flexible work arrangements, such as part-time and contingent employment. These arrangements are likely to be appealing to many older workers.

We cannot be expected to achieve all our personal and professional success in the first half of our lives and then “go gently into the good night” for the second half. We must re-evaluate our timelines and integrate our success and achievement with our entire lifespan. Retirement must be re-invented. This involves breaking the beliefs and barriers created by the mindless chronological aging myths and focusing instead on functional age. The challenge today is to consider all the elements of our entire lifespan — youth, age, career, retirement, leisure, and lifestyle — as threads to creatively and consciously weave together in a pattern of success of our choice.

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