

Fired at 50: How to Sell Yourself When No One is Buying

By Tucker Mays and Bob Sloane

There have been thousands of pages written advising job seekers how to conduct a successful interview. However, none have focused on the toughest interview of all, the one you face when you are over fifty. The over 50-age group has the highest rate of unemployment today, and the highest level since the Great Depression. And, it takes them longer than ever to find a job. Over a year for most, and two years or more for many.

Interviewing is especially challenging for executives over fifty, because most recruiters and company hiring authorities have a bias against hiring “older” workers, and most of whom are not good at interviewing to start with. Promoted up through the ranks or recruited to better jobs with new companies, they never had to learn how to interview seriously for a job while out of work.

At its heart, interview is selling. To win, you must sell yourself more convincingly than other qualified candidates competing for the same job. Over the past ten years, we have counseled hundreds of executives over 50 to find their next job in record time, and determined that there are five important ways they can win the interview.

The Five Keys to Interviewing Success

1. Pre-empt the Age Issue

As this is the most important thing you must do, we will devote most of our article to this critical need.

Know that the elephant in the room is your age. Should you sweep this under the rug and hope it does not come up or wait until it does and address it then? Neither. All effective salespeople know that the best way to counter a major, anticipated objection is to address it first, you.

We certainly don't advise that you be defensive about your age. Instead, subtly introduce examples in your career history that reinforce your "agelessness". Do this by making your age an asset. Specifically, describe the special abilities you have gained that are most in demand today that will give you an advantage over less experienced younger executives.

Problem Solving

At age fifty or over, there are few challenges you have not faced, or solutions you have not considered or tried. You have learned what action steps work best for certain situations, and what do not. Because of this experience, you are now able to solve business problems faster than most job seekers younger than you. You can more quickly identify the important drivers impacting underperformance and the best solutions to shorten the time required to improve sales and profit results. Give relevant examples in your career.

People Management

You have learned that people are a company's most valuable asset. It is a given that companies with the best people usually perform the best. Knowing that, you have discovered over time how to quickly assess who should stay and who should go, and how to make those who stay even better. You have helped them to strengthen their innate abilities, make more informed decisions, and work more effectively with others on a team.

We suggest you cite examples of people you managed who went on to successful careers, or those who struggled, but flourished when you changed their responsibilities to better match their skills.

Judgment

Good judgment is a highly valued trait for all successful executives. Companies now demand it. At fifty, your extensive business experience enables you to make better decisions across a broad array of alternative courses of action. From who to fire and who to hire, to where to cut and where to spend, you are in a better position to make these important decisions than younger executives because you have faced and made more of them.

We advise that during the interview you identify examples in your career where you quickly identified drivers impacting performance and implemented solutions that improved sales and/or profits.

Leadership

As few executives are born leaders, this ability takes time to develop. At your age, you will most likely have more proven leadership experience than those younger than yourself. During interviews describe examples of challenging situations where you led teams, initiated new programs and projects, spearheaded a company's shift to a new direction, or motivated your people to achieve aggressive goals.

Further, leaders are decisive. They evaluate options, chose what they believe is the best course of action, and commit to it. You must do the same in a job interview. After researching the company, be very clear on the ways you would leverage your extensive experience to help them achieve their goals.

2. Describe Your Flexible Management Style

As there is a perception that over fifty job seekers have become set in their ways and are reluctant to change how they manage. Describe how you modified your approach to fit different challenges and varied business cultures. For example, you could discuss how you altered management style when working on special projects. You had to adjust to changing priorities, make quick decisions with limited information, produce with fewer resources, and manage individuals on a team that did not report to you. You can also talk about how you responded to unanticipated threats to your business such as late shipments, a product recall, loss of a major client, or a new government regulation.

3. Cite Success Working for a Younger Boss.

Recruiters and companies are concerned that executives over fifty will have problems reporting to a younger superior. Egos get in the way, and younger individuals may view your greater experience as a potential threat to their job security. During interviews with recruiters, and HR personnel describe examples where you enabled a younger boss or bosses to succeed, grow, and advance their careers. When interviewing with a prospective superior who is younger than yourself, ask him or her what their greatest challenges are, and cite specific examples of how you believe your skills and experience can make their job and mission easier. You will be less likely to be considered a threat when you demonstrate that you respect their authority and are as committed as advancing their career as you are your own.

4. Adapt a Flexible Compensation Position

You will have a significant advantage over younger candidates when you are willing to accept less salary up front in exchange for greater performance-based bonus and or equity. Companies prefer executives who are willing to prove themselves first and “bet on the come”. Decide what minimum salary you need during preparation for interviews. When asked what your salary requirements are, mention that once you learn more about the job requirements and the company’s full compensation structure(salary, bonus, profit sharing, perks, equity etc) you will be in a better position to answer. Also say that given your strong interest in the job, you will be flexible and are confident that you will reach an agreement comfortable for both parties.

We have found that for executives over fifty, reducing salary requirements can often be the key reason they get an offer. And in most cases, they end up making more money over the long run from deferred compensation received for good performance.

5. Describe Intrapreneurial Achievements.

Over fifty executives are often perceived as being too corporate. Having enjoyed the full resources of larger companies, many are not equipped to succeed in smaller companies where they have the best chance of finding jobs at their age. The best way to counter this objection is to relate examples in your career when you worked on projects with larger organizations requiring “intrapreneurial “ skills. Explain how you led or worked on successful projects with cross-functional teams supported by a small budget and lean staff. Then you can stress your unique ability to combine larger company experience with small company skills.

About the authors: Tucker Mays and Bob Sloane are Principals of OptiMarket LLC, and executive job search coaching firm they co-founded in 2001 to help executives over 50 find their next job in the shortest time possible. Tucker and Bob have also co-authored the book “Fired at 50: How to Overcome the

Greatest Executive Job Search Challenge". For information, visit their web site at www.optimarketllc.com