

# Workspace by Diane Stafford

News and notes from The Kansas City Star's workplace columnist

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OCTOBER 30, 2007

## Age matters

I hang around human resource people. It's my job. At an employment law seminar last week, I sat at the lunch table with a veteran HR person who said what I hear in every HR gathering: It's hard to retain young workers.

And then I came back to the office to read dozens of e-mails from older workers who would love to work at her company or others like it -- and who promise greater stability than the company would get from 20-something workers. But they can't make it through the hiring filters.

A recent survey by Gray Hair Management Inc., a coaching and networking resource for executive-level professionals, found that two-thirds of 548 executives queried this month admitted to fudging their age on their resumes...or doing whatever was possible to hide their ages in their applications.

Not surprising, given that three-fourths of those surveyed said age discrimination is "severe to moderate" in the workplace.

In a column last week I invited HR managers to tell why this perception (or reality?) of age discrimination is so strong.

Two managers at temporary help agencies responded that they liked the experience and stability of older workers...bring 'em on.

One small business owner said he was open to hiring older applicants, if he could get them to stop being down on themselves or the work world in general.

But from the corporate world -- the place where older job hunters feel most victimized by institutional age discrimination -- not a word.

Of course, to admit age discrimination amounts to a lawsuit. No sane HR person would do that. Just look at Sprint Nextel's recent \$57 million settlement to end a collective action alleging discrimination in an earlier layoff round. Battling age discrimination claims is expensive, whether they're true or not.

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The bigger concern, though, is that age alone appears to be a corporate screening factor that outweighs other job-fit decisions.

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So, these guys are executive level, and they believe age discrimination exists...

Did they start believing that before, or after, they lost their last jobs?

If it's before, what did they do to prevent the age discrimination they knew was happening? They did nothing, if they're facing age discrimination now. And, if it's after, they must not have been very good executives, if they didn't notice it when they were actually employed.

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Posted by: [rumpelstiltskin](#) | [October 30, 2007 at 10:26 AM](#)

I get that older workers are "down on themselves or the work world in general." A large number of people older than I am (early 40s) were raised in an era when Americans generally worked their entire adult lives for one company. One of my grandfathers worked for the same company from 1940 until he retired in 1981, and they wanted him to stay. Even with the seismic changes in corporate America, I can see how one could still assume and expect one's own career to follow a similar path.

As I see it, the problem generally lies in publicly traded companies striving to meet the quarterly numbers by any means possible. Institutional investors have no tolerance for poor short-term performance, regardless of the company's long-term prospects. "Get rich slowly" is not in their lexicon. The easy way to meet Wall Street expectations is to lay off experienced, well-compensated staff. Unfortunately, most corporate "leaders" choose the easy way out.

I'm positive I'd like to work for leaders with a longer-term vision, and the freedom to carry it out. As a result, I'm not spending much time on the big boys in my

current search. If a company is still run by its founder(s), I'll consider it, but I'm done with most of the rest of 'em.

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Posted by: [Reality Check](#) | [October 30, 2007 at 11:02 AM](#)

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