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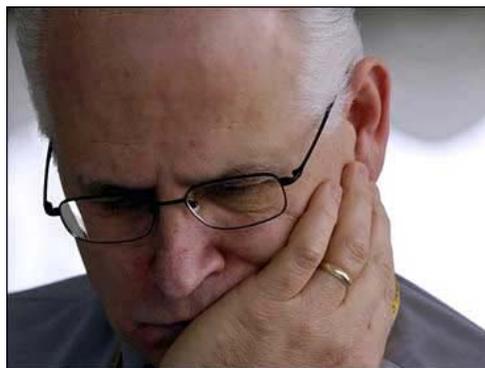
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Gray Hair: Job Asset Or Liability?

CHICAGO, March 29, 2005



(AP) Gray hair seems like a silvery career asset to 56-year-old Dan Vnuk now that he's given up dying his, hoping to improve his job prospects.

Not so for Aliza Sherman Risdahl, 40, who has felt unspoken pressure for years to color her prematurely gray hair. "I don't actually mind them, but ... no one takes women more seriously because we have gray hairs on our head," she lamented.

Rick Sanders takes notes during a networking breakfast conducted by the firm Gray Hair Management. The firm touts what a senior manager or "grayhair" can offer: knowledge and experience. **(AP)**

Opinions about the impact of gray hair in business remain conflicted as the work force gets collectively older, with the first baby boomers set to turn 60 next year and all 78 million members of America's largest generation now over 40.

QUOTE

"At some point you always think to yourself when you have an interview, 'Gosh, should I make myself look younger?'"
 Dan Vnuk

Does gray add gravitas for those seeking to be hired or promoted, or is it a drawback that is best disguised?

Even with demographics tilting in older workers' favor, experts say the answer depends on the circumstances.

Twenty years from now, one in every four adult Americans will be over 65. As a result, "this way of evaluating older Americans by their gray hair will have to change," said Dr. Robert Butler, an expert on aging and chief executive officer of the International Longevity Center in New York.

Gray hair once was considered the ideal in business and politics - white or gray powdered wigs were all the rage in the 18th century among U.S. colonists, who gravitated to gray because they equated older age with respect, power and prosperity.

Today, gray hair is common for men at the CEO level. But whether other executives, rank-and-file employees or job applicants benefit from gray is another

» matter.

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Certainly the message conveyed by TV networks is less than pro-gray, particularly among women. Spotting a female anchor or reporter with gray hair is about as likely as, well, having a boss who wears a powdered wig to the office. And not a single one of the eight women who are CEOs of Fortune 500 companies has gray hair, based on recent photographs.

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While quantifying the effect of gray hair may be impossible, there's been no big drop-off in a statistical category closely linked to ageism. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission received 17,837 age discrimination complaints in 2004 - down slightly from the previous two years but higher than any other year in the past decade.

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Butler, whose research and educational organization combats ageism in the workplace and elsewhere, says data bear out that older workers are among the most reliable in the work force because "they learn, they are dependable, they have a low absentee rate." But he fully understands why workers dye their grays to improve their self-esteem or their job chances.

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Karl Pillemer, a professor of human development and gerontology at Cornell University, says Americans clearly are ambivalent about gray hair in the workplace.

"On the one hand, there are some companies eager to hire the gray-haired. On the other hand, in some other areas there is extreme discrimination" against older workers, he said.

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Such discrimination has always been the fear of Vnuk, whose longtime salt-and-pepper hair has lately turned to mostly salt, at job interviews. The Milwaukee marketing administrator admits to wrestling periodically with the gray-or-dye dilemma for years.

"At some point you always think to yourself when you have an interview, 'Gosh, should I make myself look younger?'" he said.

Even his son encouraged a cover-up when Vnuk interviewed with a 30-something employer who was about the son's age. He told his dad: "Face it, nobody wants to hire their father" - a telling if "brutal" comment, Vnuk recounted with a laugh.

Vnuk spurned the advice and got the job anyway. But a few months later he dyed his hair chestnut brown in an attempt to fit in better with younger co-workers, a decision he quickly regretted as "really dumb" after enduring ridicule for the faux look.

Now he is back to gray for good, he says. Based on comments he hears at conferences and elsewhere, he suspects it is getting easier for gray-haired workers to feel comfortable.

"It seems to be more acceptable today," he said. "With the amount of baby boomers out there, I don't think it's as imperative to look younger."

Others disagree - especially when it comes to women.

Risdahl, an entrepreneur and TV and radio producer in Laramie, Wyo., first colored her hair after founding an Internet firm in the early '90s and realizing gray didn't fit the image of a young, hip company. While keeping her gray for long periods since then, she dyed her hair brown again recently for an appearance on camera.

Some might question the need to switch back and forth, but she heard enough private comments as a consultant on a hiring team to convince her anti-gray discrimination is for real in business.

"Women who are gray are considered 'tired' or 'old' or ... 'She's not going to fit in,'" Risdahl said. Gray-haired men, on the other hand, are seen as "seasoned," "experienced" or "distinguished," she said.

"It's so subtle in a sense, because no one ever talks about it. I just think that we look at the gray hairs as making women lesser."

Kathy Kolbe, a Phoenix-based public speaker and consultant to corporations on human instincts, is one of the comparatively few gray-haired women in business. After alternating between dyed and not, she declares herself now "permanently gray" after concluding it is an advantage in more ways than one.

She noticed she got lots of offers of help on her business travels when gray peeked through - from hoisting bags into overhead bins on airplanes to other assistance - and "pretty much nobody offered help" when it was hidden.

"So I let the whole head go gray and, voila, doors magically opened," said Kolbe, 65.

She senses the "look of wisdom" also has a positive impact on both employees and clients.

Addressing gray-hair whispers boldly, Scott Kane named his Deerfield, Ill.-based executive coaching and networking firm Gray Hair Management when he founded it in 2000. The move came with the dot-com era starting to unravel and after his son's boss told him, "There are a lot of young companies out there that need some gray hair."

Kane, 59, now touts what a senior manager or "grayhair" can offer - knowledge and experience - regardless of actual hair color. His own hair: blond-gray.

"Sometimes my clients come to me and say, 'You think I should be dyeing my hair black?'" he said. "We say, you need to do what you makes you comfortable, but we don't think it's going to make an impact on your ability to sell yourself as a provider."

By Dave Carpenter

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