

Job-seeking boomers have talent and a great work ethic, but technology and bias are challenges: Help Wanted

by Sarah Crump/Plain Dealer Reporter (May 3, 2009)



Thomas Ondrey/The Plain Dealer/Volunteer computer coach Lilloise Talley, right, makes sure Liz Gockel is doing all right in one of the three computer classes she is taking at Fairhill Partners in Cleveland. At 60, Gockel is joining the ranks of older workers who believe adding to their technological know-how will help them land jobs.

Picture the laid-off 60-year-old looking for work. You know the stereotype . . .

"That they're more reliable, sick less often, and have a work ethic bar none? Is that what you mean?" said Stephanie FallCreek, president and CEO of Fairhill Partners, the Cleveland agency that addresses elder issues.

She has little patience with people who stereotype, such as those who think gray hair and wrinkles equal slow and stubborn. Yet numbers suggest that FallCreek's attitude may not be that of all employers.

The latest report from [AARP Public Policy Institute](#) is that the average worker 55 and older waits 25 weeks to be re-employed while those under 55 get new jobs in 18.7 weeks. A U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics unemployment indicator shows that from March 2008 to March 2009, unemployment rates increased 89.2 percent among people age 55 and older. Among workers age 25 to 54, the increase was 79.7.

Though federal law prohibits it, "certainly age discrimination does exist," said Deborah Russell, AARP's national director of work-force issues.

The hiring manager behind the desk may have unspoken concerns about the older job applicant: Will he have the stamina to perform a job? Will we train her only to see her retire in a few years? Will her salary requirements be too high? The manager also may be silently computing how much hiring a 58-

year-old will affect the firm's health insurance premiums, said Andrew Margolius, a Cleveland attorney who specializes in employment law.

Yet Russell and others see technology as the real challenge for older workers.

They may have the talent, the work ethic and the calmness that come from having weathered numerous office crises, but many lack the computer skills vital to today's workplace, experts say.

The hurdles start with searching for jobs online and submitting electronic job applications.

"The reality is how much classified ads [listings] have shrunk in The Plain Dealer and the Akron Beacon Journal . . . Are they [listed] on the Internet? Yes -- Monster.com, Jobs.com, Craig's List, Careerbuilders.com. Navigating it is difficult," said **William Marshall**, 56, of Hudson, who lost his job as a steel pickler in November 2008. Marshall is one of the 88 people The Plain Dealer is following in its "Help Wanted" series.

How does age impact the job search? Folks age 55 and older in The Plain Dealer's "Help Wanted" pool comment.

"I am resisting the temptation of using my age as a hindrance. For the number of employers who are looking for the younger group, there is an equal amount of employers looking for the experienced." -- **Carmen Labbato**, 56, of Lyndhurst, a former information technologist

"The reality is how much classified ads [listings] have shrunk in The Plain Dealer and the Akron Beacon Journal. Where are the jobs which used to be so plentiful? Are they [listed] on the Internet? Yes -- [Monster.com](#), [Jobs.com](#), [Craig's List](#), [Careerbuilders.com](#). Navigating it is difficult. And then they tell me only 4 percent of jobs are filled from the Internet. It appears word of mouth seems more effective than any other way to get a good job." -- **William Marshall**, 56, of Hudson, former steel pickler

"I don't feel that I have personally been overlooked specifically for age, however job-seeker meetings are a true picture of the fact that most attendees are in their late 40s, 50s and 60s." -- **Sally Edwards**, 56, Hudson, former supply manager

"I'm continually surprised by the good that comes out of this, if you get past the initial reaction of disappointment or bitterness. The refocusing generates an awareness of your own strengths and capabilities. You meet all kinds of new people, if you network. I developed a whole new skill set -- cold-calling, for instance. So that's all a pleasant surprise." -- **David Hargraves**, 55, of Bedford, former IT team leader

"You keep yourself on a schedule so that you don't kind of drift off into the world of nothingness. Every day I look for jobs between 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. And every day, I work out." -- **Lisbeth Kovach**, 56, of Parma, former editorial assistant

"I went through a short layoff 18 or 19 years ago. [Then] unemployment didn't scare me. My problem now is my age. I know there's discrimination out there, even though they don't admit it." -- **Richard Yarmusch**, 62, Parma, former sales analyst.

"I use the Internet all the time [to search for jobs]: LinkedIn and the [Ohio Means Jobs](#) site. I have [LinkedIn](#) with some of the other people featured in The Plain Dealer's 'Help Wanted' series. Fortunately, I have computer skills and keep them up to date. It would be hard to

pursue anything now without them." -- **Denise Radovick**, 56, of Aurora, former paralegal administrative assistant

And once the basic application process is filed, most workers find that software know-how is required to qualify for even the most basic job.

"I know I have to enhance my computer skills," said Liz Gockel, who was sitting in classes at Fairhill Partners' computer learning center the day after she was laid off from her \$39,000-a-year receptionist job at a Solon manufacturing company on March 31. She'd been with the firm for 19 years, handling mostly correspondence that didn't require a lot of computer work beyond sending e-mails.

Gockel, also a "Help Wanted" participant, earned a bachelor of fine arts degree in 1973 from Kent State University, well before the advent of personal and office computer use.

She wants to quickly learn Excel, Internet and digital photography skills for her next job, whatever that may be. So she's made a job of getting a job. She goes to three computer classes a week while looking for work.

It's that kind of sterling work ethic -- displayed even on a job hunt -- that is the saving grace of jobless baby boomers. Of the 13 million people out of work in the United States, 13.6 percent are older than 55 -- the group with the smallest percentage of unemployment of all workers 20 and older.

"Whether they're from the assembly line, the boardroom or the classroom, what they bring to their next engagement is a very rich experience base. Practice makes perfect," said FallCreek, herself a 59-year-old grandmother.

Not every boomer struggles with computers.

"I use the Internet all the time," said [Denise Radovick](#), 56, of Aurora. The "Help Wanted" participant is a former paralegal administrative assistant who lost her job in October 2008. "Fortunately, I have computer skills and keep them up to date. It would be hard to pursue anything now without them."

And [Joe Gordon](#), a former American Greetings Corp. illustrator and another "Help Wanted" subject, taught himself the Web design tool Dreamweaver from library books.

"It wasn't hard," said Gordon, 61. The Cleveland Heights resident has learned enough to launch a Web site containing samples of his work at joegordon44106.com.

Advice, resources for older workers

Jim Hansen, job counselor with the Cuyahoga County Public Library; Paul Magnus, vice president for work-force development at Mature Services Inc.; and Deborah Russell, AARP's director of work-force issues, offer these tips to job seekers over the age of 55:

- Join a job club -- meet friends who will help you look.
- Retool a resume and cover letter for each job ad answered. Use key words found in the ad.
- Have a workplace-current wardrobe and hairstyle.

- See a job counselor. The Cuyahoga County Public Library has three, a free service (details listed below).
- Upgrade computer skills.
- Using business databases available at libraries, research the companies for which you'd be interested in working. Approach them even if they haven't advertised a job.
- Join LinkedIn, an Internet social network used by professionals.
- Be enthusiastic and energetic at job interviews: bust stereotypes about older employees.

Resources

seniorsconnect.org -- Cleveland Public Library-sponsored site provides a variety of senior employment information.

- cuyahogalibrary.org -- Cuyahoga County Public Library provides free career counseling by appointment at the Career Center at its Maple Heights branch. Registration is required for free upcoming Over 50 & Out of Work workshops at Brecksville, Parma-Snow and Berea branches. For information, call 216-475-2225.
- matureservices.org -- Mature Services Inc., a nonprofit agency with offices in Cuyahoga and Summit counties that provides employment services for older workers. Call 330-253-4597.
- fairhillcenter.org -- Fairhill Partners, a nonprofit elder-issue agency in Cleveland that also offers low-cost computer courses. Call 216-421-1350.
- aarp.org -- National organization for ages 50 and over has extensive Web site that includes links to an online community with various interests including employment issues.
- www.humanmetrics.com -- What career is right for you? Take a free job personality test.
- Deborah Russell, AARP director of work-force issues, will be a panelist at the 23rd Annual Anna V. Brown Community Forum, which will explore a variety of issues from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Monday, May 18, at Cleveland State University's Waetjen Auditorium, 2001 Euclid Ave. Cost is \$40, or \$20 for students and seniors. For information contact CSU's Black Studies Program at 216-687-3655.

Gordon and Gockel aren't alone in rushing to learn computer skills, said lawyer Margolius. "We are seeing that older workers are more motivated to go out and get the education and skills they need." That motivation paired with solid work history makes them more competitive job seekers, he added.

Though she may be "horrified about measuring up" computerwise in a new job, Gockel, who lives in University Heights, exemplifies the can-do traits that make many older workers workplace assets.

Her outgoing personality is a plus. Enthusiasm impresses future employers, said Jim Hansen, a career counselor who guides job seekers for free at the Cuyahoga County Public Library. He advises his clients to "put a spring in your step even if you don't feel like it."

Among the many free services provided by the county library, Hansen gives his clients a list of local job clubs.

"The network a job club provides is great. Not only do people help other people find jobs, they provide emotional support too," he said. (Club members will steer others to jobs they've run across but aren't interested in.)

Because of this collaboration among members, joining a job club cuts in half the time it takes to find a new job, said Paul Magnus, vice president for work-force development at [Mature Services Inc.](#), which has a free-to-the-job-seeker Senior Employment Center with offices in Cuyahoga and Summit counties.

The employment center also teaches how to use unconventional methods to search for a job, such as reading trade journals to see what industries are growing and using databases to find out what companies are in the forefront of such an industry. "Then they can approach those companies," said Magnus, who contends that 75 percent of available jobs aren't advertised.

If they do respond to ads, Russell of AARP wants seniors to retool their resumes and cover letters for each job they seek -- pre-printed resumes and "to whom it may concern" cover letters don't work anymore.

A job seeker should insert key words that appear in an ad into his or her resume. Electronic scanners that companies use to weed out candidates will pick up on those. Also, someone looking for work should think hard about how she has helped her former company.

"Employers are looking for added value. Older workers aren't used to selling their skills," said Russell.

To that end, Gockel added a line to her resume that mentions that she saved her company thousands in reprinting and embarrassment with her excellent proofreading of its marketing materials and correspondence.

And once that older person does get an interview, he should study the company, dress up and go in confidently -- as if he already has the job. "Bust the stereotypes," Russell cheers. "You want to look like someone who can fit in the 21st-century work force."

Liz Gockel is determined to fit in soon. Is she afraid that being 60 will stand in the way?

"Absolutely not," she said. "I'm ready."

Computer Assisted Reporting Editor Rich Exner contributed to this story.

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http://www.cleveland.com/help-wanted/index.ssf/2009/05/jobseeking_boomers_have_talent.html