

Re-Establishing Course

Changing employment situations can leave affected employees trying to redefine their career paths. The positive experiences shared by these authors can provide some options and strategies

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The corporate world can be challenging because business fluctuates with time, and employment reductions must sometimes be made to get the business back on track. This leaves the affected employees in a difficult spot as they try to re-establish themselves and maintain a desired career path. This situation is doubly troubling for mature professionals (>30 years of experience) who face the added stigma of being viewed as past prime. During such challenging times, it is difficult to remember that bad things sometimes happen to good people, and “lemons can be turned into lemonade.” The mature authors of this paper simultaneously faced the lost-job situation, but the outcomes were substantially different and both were positive. This article describes their experiences, which can serve as options for mature workers facing this traumatic situation and re-establishing course.

Downsizing

The oil-and-gas sector in the chemical process industries (CPI) has made headlines in the economic pages of the news lately. The prices of crude oil and natural gas are widely publicized since they affect almost every aspect of human activity. Crude oil and natural gas are essential raw materials for the production of transportation fuels, fertilizers and a wide range of petrochemicals and polymers. These products are eventually converted into everyday products including plastics, packaging materials, textiles, fibers, paints, solvents and a host of specialty products.

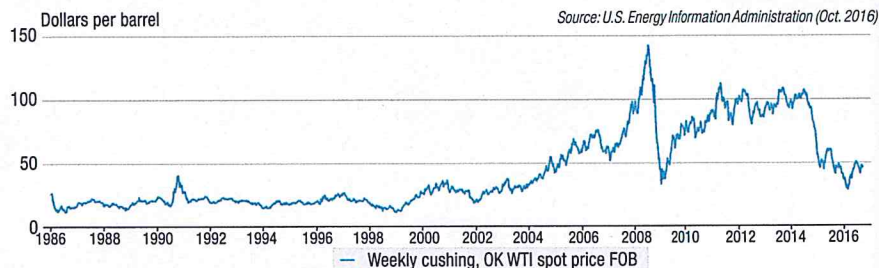


FIGURE 1. The price of crude oil, shown here with the Cushing Oklahoma WTI (West Texas Intermediate) price, has fluctuated greatly in recent years

Since the early 2000s, supply and demand of crude oil have fluctuated widely, resulting in a high degree of price volatility (Figure 1).

By contrast, the 1990s was a period of relative price stability. This allowed large corporations to develop projects and marshal the necessary human resources to achieve desired results. However, in the current environment when the price of crude oil has declined by a factor of four — from a high of \$142 per barrel (bbl) in July 2008 to the current price of about \$30–50/bbl — it is very difficult for corporations to remain profitable and provide steady employment. It must be remembered that in a capitalistic society, the first responsibility of a private corporation is to make money for the owners of the company. Unfortunately, sometimes this means having to reduce headcount as a way to lower overhead costs.

Corporate reaction

Most corporations try to resist downsizing, since it is disruptive to the organization as well as the individual employees. Furthermore, downsizing can have a negative impact on morale for even those employees who are not directly impacted. It is also difficult to recruit, train and motivate employees when the economy improves. Hence, most corporations reduce headcount only as a last resort. When this happens, the corporation tries to be humane and

respectful to the affected employees by providing advance notice and a severance package to ease the transition. In the U.S., health coverage is continued under the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (COBRA), and unemployment compensation may be available for an extended period through the relevant state governments.

Transition

Very often both younger employees (<10 years work experience) and older employees (>30 years of experience) are impacted. Younger employees are usually more mobile and marketable. They usually find jobs faster than more senior, experienced employees who tend to be more specialized, less mobile and higher paid. This article focuses on the choices available to the more experienced employees.

OPTIONS

As experienced individuals explore options for the next phase of their careers, it is important to honor several important commitments. This includes abiding by the spirit and the letter of the contract with the previous employer. Non-compete agreements and non-disclosure agreements must be carefully and scrupulously honored. Also, under no circumstances should confidential and proprietary information and trade secrets, both of a business

and technical nature, be divulged. If a certain matter is in doubt, it is better to err on the side of caution and get expert legal counsel. By divulging proprietary information, not only is the employee breaking the law, but is also compromising his or her integrity with a new prospective employer.

Determining a path forward for a mature professional who is seeking work is highly dependent on his or her personal situation. The following are some of the important questions that have to be considered:

- Does the individual face health issues or is the job seeker a primary caregiver?
- Does the individual still have children in school or a significant mortgage?
- Can the mature worker fall back on social security or spousal income for partial income and benefits, or is a full-time position needed?
- Is staying in the current location a must or is relocation or

travel possible?

Answering these questions and others will determine the focus of the job search. Perhaps at this point in the person's career, it is possible to take on part-time work and devote more time to family and hobbies. This may also be a time when the individual would like to pursue business endeavors that have always interested him or her. Whatever the focus, the desired path should be mapped and pursued with strong drive. There are a lot of options to consider and some are depicted in Figure 2.

Look for a smaller company

Smaller companies are a very interesting option for an individual with several decades of experience with a large corporation. These people have in-depth knowledge of how large companies operate, their structure, strategy and systems. Very often, smaller companies lack these capabilities and really value the background of the experienced

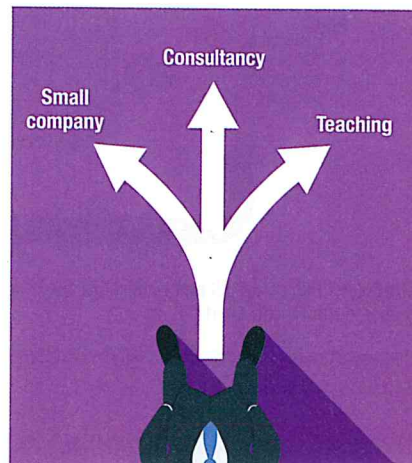
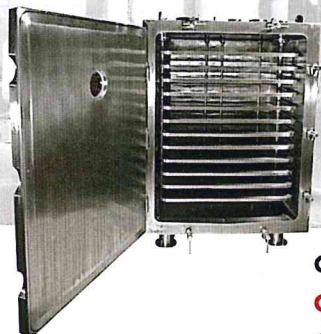


FIGURE 2. There are many options to consider when planning a change in career path

individual. Specific guidance can be provided in terms of how to develop an organization with roles and responsibilities, performance incentives, marketing research capability, marketing communications and customer relationship management. Very often these capabilities are undeveloped or non-existent in smaller companies. An experienced person

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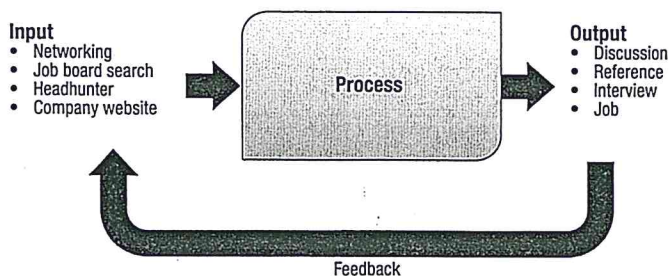


FIGURE 3. Those that put more effort into the process of job hunting can reasonably expect more of an outcome from those efforts

can quickly define the right solution and get results.

Start independent consultancy

Starting an independent consultancy is a possible path forward for the mature professional, and this path can offer a win-win situation for the individual and those being served.

For the individual, the consultant role can provide flexibility and the gratification of applying years of experience to solve problems. For the industry, there is often a valuable need for expertise that goes beyond current company knowledge. However, paychecks are not regular and are not guaranteed. Much of a consultant's time is spent in seeking opportunities and building relationships, none of which generate income. Hopefully at this point in the job seeker's career, she or he can live with this scenario.

Mature professionals should be aware that there is sometimes a stigma associated with consultants, and people taking this route should be aware of the perception by many. Alan Rossiter writes [1]: "Consultants are reputed to be the freewheeling cowboys of chemical engineering — grasping for big paychecks to squander on a lavish lifestyle." Consultants can help themselves by only becoming involved in areas where they have strong knowledge, and by saying no to requests that border on their knowledge base.

Teach at a local university

Some experienced individuals will choose to give something back to the community and their profession by teaching at a local university. While most universities require a Ph.D. degree to teach, it is possible to obtain an adjunct position with a community college based on lower degrees and experience. An experienced employee with several decades of

industrial experience will bring a new perspective to solving increasingly complex day-to-day challenges. By bringing real-world experiences to theoretical book knowledge, classroom lessons will become more relevant and long lasting. This will help foster a spirit of curiosity so that students can continue to teach themselves all through their lives. Given that technology is changing things so rapidly, it will be essential for people to continually renew and refresh their education to be relevant in this fast-changing world.

SUCCESS FACTORS

The challenges for the mature worker to find the next job are huge and require a dedicated effort. There are often concerns that employers have regarding older workers even though they may not be verbalized. For example, will the mature worker get along with younger workers and bosses? Also, some believe the older worker will only do things the way they have done them in the past, and not stay current with technology. Finally, some believe that mature workers no longer have the grit and drive to bring the necessary energy to the job.

However, older workers bring attributes to the table that are not offered by younger workers. According to data from *Time* magazine [2], seven out of ten human resource (HR) managers surveyed say older workers have a stronger work ethic than their younger counterparts. However, less than 5% of companies have a strategy for keeping older workers. In November 2015, long-term unemployment stood at 38% for those ages 65 to 69 — a higher rate than for every younger cohort. This means the older worker must take more steps than his or her younger counterpart to find the next job.

Input / output model

Making a career change, especially at a later stage, is never easy. It is possible to apply the well-known input/output model to this situation. If there is no input applied in terms of searching, networking and training, and applying for jobs, the output will likely be zero. If greater input is applied, it stands to reason that there will be some positive developments. The relationship is not linear and there is a complex set of variables, such as skills, location and market demand that will determine the eventual outcome. However, by not applying effort, the results can be guaranteed to be non-existent. Hence it is very important to have a plan and make the effort in a systematic and disciplined manner (Figure 3).

A few guidelines

Here are some tips for mature workers to consider in looking for that next job:

Networking. By networking, we mean both old-fashioned networking and the new way people are networking, which is through social media. People in the mature category have established a significant number of contacts over the years. Now is the time to use them. The experience of the authors is that most people contacted during the job search are helpful, and if they themselves do not have a definite opportunity, they may point you to another contact who may have a strong work prospect. Just like fishing, the more hooks you put into the water, the greater the chance of landing that prize (a job), or at least getting reliable leads.

If you are serious about finding that next job, being represented on LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) is a must. A study of HR managers showed that most employers use social networks as an integral part of the recruiting process. Among recruiters, nearly all said they use LinkedIn as their social network. But more than just being on LinkedIn, it is important that your information is current. Make sure you have a photo, and write a professional headline that is to the point.

Demonstrate knowledge of new technologies. A common complaint about older workers is that they do not stay current with the latest technologies, and insist on doing

things the old way. It is important for the mature professional seeking employment to demonstrate they are progressive with their thinking. This can be done by writing a blog about your industry or by setting up a Twitter account where you follow others in your industry. The authors have found it effective to write industry papers demonstrating their current knowledge. There is no universal way to show current knowledge, but it is important to demonstrate this attribute during the job seeking process.

Show your knowledge of an old skill. This may sound like double talk based on the last section, but the real value offered by the mature professional is a skill or skills that cannot be found with younger workers. For example, perhaps there is a technical area in which you have specific talents that can help a company solve significant problems. This may be important to companies that are production-based and cannot afford to be stalled by downtime. Also, at this

point in your career, you should be able to write clearly. This gives you a huge edge over the majority of younger applicants. The best way to highlight special skills is through a well written resume or a headline on LinkedIn.

Demonstrate your hustle and smart appearance. As pointed out earlier, there is often the perception that older workers no longer have an "A game." It is important that mature workers make it clear that they still have the passion. Also, make it clear that you can offer to work smarter than a new person with limited or no experience. Appearance is important, so make sure you do everything to show that you are a top player. You are selling the entire package of who you are, not just your work experience and talent. If you are not in shape, make an effort to get there. Update that wardrobe and come smartly dressed to interviews and networking meetings. You only get one brief moment to make that first impression, so make the most of it.

NEXT STEPS

Now that you made the choice of the path you would like to take, it is time to execute. Certainly much of the process is beyond your control because you cannot dictate outcomes. However, you can push things in your favor if you take the proper steps.

More than anything, know yourself. Emphasize accomplishments, not years of experience. We all have strengths and weaknesses, and it is easy to tout the positives. The real challenge is to buoy up your weaknesses so they do not become a detriment to being hired. Have discipline as you go through the hiring process. Finding that next job is difficult and particularly painstaking for the mature professional. Remain positive and approach the job search process as a full-time job. Creating daily "to do" lists and making daily accomplishments help to stay focused when there are setbacks along the way.

Finding another job

Finding a new job is similar to marketing a new product. You have to

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know your capabilities and match them against market needs. It is always important to provide value to the new employer and make sure that it is a win-win proposition. Otherwise, the arrangement will not last very long.

The first step is to get an interview. It must be remembered that the purpose of a resume is not to get a job, but to simply get an interview. For mature individuals who have been out of the job market sometimes for decades, it is important to prepare thoroughly for the interview. Being humble is not a virtue in the job market. At the same time it is important to be honest and not exaggerate your accomplishments. The deficiencies will soon be discovered anyway. It is a good idea to practice and be prepared with real life examples of success stories. Also, it is good to have a list of strengths and weaknesses with real examples illustrating these capabilities or lack thereof.

Once a job has been offered, it is good to consider all the features of the offer. This includes base pay, incentives, vacation, commute, flexibility, retirement plans, health insurance and other benefits. While most employers will be willing to negotiate some of these elements of the job offer, it is a good idea to always "step in the shoes" of the employer and make sure you are providing value in return for the total compensation package.

The first two to three weeks of a new job are very important. People are assessing the new hire and it is very important to make a good first impression. This includes bringing a good work ethic, professional bearing and a positive attitude. Most people will want the arrangement to be successful and will cooperate.

Independent contractors

If you have made the decision to become an independent contractor, there is a lot to consider. Above everything else, it is important to manage risk. Consider seeing an attorney who specializes in business startups, and also a business accountant. These individuals may recommend that you establish a limited liability company (LLC) to manage risk. However, this may not be sufficient to control risk and you may

want to consider liability insurance. You may find this costly, so the best bet is to structure your client contracts so that you remain risk free.

Through your networking you may find various consultant opportunities, some of which border on your areas of expertise. It is okay to say no to areas where you are not fully competent. There is no shame in this and clients will actually respect you more for not "selling them a bill of goods." Consultancy offers a lot of independence, but you never stop looking for work. Even when you have a plate full of work, you always must be looking for the next opportunity.

While the independence of a consultancy may be viewed as a huge benefit, there may be scary moments in being on your own. There is no longer a person down the hallway that you can go to with a question. You are the "one stop shop," and you even have to handle all of your information technology (IT) problems. Communications are very important and you will use every form available including meetings, phone, email and social media. Some engineering professionals may feel uncomfortable with this, but as time goes on and relationships are established, this becomes easier and you may actually enjoy this part of the independence. Being an independent contractor can be very satisfying, but you will have to balance the rewards against the demands and challenges.

Keep networking

After finding that corporate position, or if you have established your own consultancy, continue to network. There are a few sides to this. First, you just went through a job loss and there is no telling when it could happen again. The next time it would be a benefit to be better prepared. Secondly, networking can help you get business in your new job, particularly if you are an individual consultant. Finally, now is a good time to offer support to others who are facing a job loss situation. Maybe it is a lost art, but people helping people is what life should be all about. As an example, in southeastern Pennsylvania there is an organization called CPENG (Career Professional Executives Networking Group; www.cpengroup.wildapricot.org/) whose sole purpose is to facilitate the networking process. Other areas likely have similar organizations.

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The journey

An unexpected job loss can be devastating whenever it occurs, but for the older professional this can be particularly vexing because of the challenges of finding the next job at an advanced age. The mature authors of this paper faced a simultaneous job loss situation and took two separate paths in their job search, with both being successful. One re-entered the corporate world, but with a smaller company. The other chose to pursue consulting as an independent contractor. The key in both cases was extensive networking and intense focus in pursuing work. The authors were able to overcome the stigmas of the older workers by highlighting the benefits of their experience, and by "thinking young." Both authors continue to network and are always willing to help others on their journey. This is what professionalism is all about, and it should be a guiding principle for young and old. ■

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