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Ageism and the Mature Jobseeker

By **REBECCA KLEIN-COLLINS** and **PHYLLIS SNYDER**

When Michelle, a 63-year-old worker from Washington was recently laid off, she worried she'd never find another job at her age. And she was right. For months, she pursued leads and heard nothing back. Finally, she sought help from the state's WorkSource Center. She was offered an opportunity to learn new skills, and finished four computer-training courses.

Michelle's story is an increasingly common one. At an age when she could be coasting toward retirement, Michelle had to make herself more marketable to employers. Leading up to the recession, we saw increasing numbers of retirement-age workers delaying retirement and continuing to work well into their 60s and even 70s. For many, it was a choice: "I'm still healthy, I enjoy working, my job keeps me active and engaged with other people, so why not?" But during this recession, continuing to work past retirement age has become a financial necessity.

OLDER JOBSEEKERS IN DIRE STRAITS

Mature jobseekers face a number of challenges. Like Michelle, many lack the technology skills required in the workplace, and also face employers' age bias. Surveys of employers have revealed a clear reluctance to hire older workers. That reluctance, combined with the decrease in available jobs, has resulted in a dire situation for mature jobseekers.

The most recent data show that older jobseekers stay unemployed about 30% longer than their younger counterparts, and greater percentages of older unemployed workers remained unemployed for a year or more. When asked why they have a harder time finding a job, these older workers firmly believe that age discrimination is the main factor. (See sidebar for findings from recent studies.)

These issues can be compounded with mature women workers. Older women often appear to have less work experience than men because they have taken time off to attend to family issues, or have found meaningful work later in life. As a result, they may have a harder time convincing employers that they have the necessary skills and competencies. Once employed, recent research has shown that the gender pay gap is even greater for older women—they earn only 68 cents to every dollar earned by men the same age.

TRAINING HELP FOR MATURE WORKERS

In recent years, many programs nationwide have been designed to connect mature workers to skills training and work opportunities, reach out to employers to sell them on the contributions and value of mature workers, and help those wanting to start their own businesses.

Some programs have been launched by postsecondary education institutions, nonprofit organizations or public sector agencies. Since 2008, the U.S. Department of Labor and The Atlantic Philanthropies have collaborated on a new mature worker initiative, which has provided funding and assistance to 10 grantees across the country. The grantees are developing strate-

gies and programs to make their mature workforce an effective asset for their regional economies, and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning is working with the Council on Competitiveness to provide technical assistance to the different sites (for more information visit www.cael.org).

The assistance these grantees have been working to provide includes guidance in career and educational choices; computer training; retraining for new careers; training and support for new businesses; short-term work experiences in new fields; engaging employers in new ways; and raising awareness in the community about the contributions of mature workers.

WHAT MAKES A MATURE WORKER ATTRACTIVE?

Mature workers often benefit from support groups to help them cope with job loss and their struggles to interest potential employers. The 10 grantees are helping to provide moral support during the job search, and identifying how to help mature workers become more attractive to employers. Often, even the most industrious mature worker needs to develop basic skills for employability: computer skills, interview skills and English language skills are the most valuable.

Mature workers often need help understanding how to job search in today's market. They may not understand the importance of using existing contacts, informational interviews, social media and other newer job search strategies. And since they may be put at ease by the sight of another older face, many of the grantees have older staff.

One of the biggest lessons from these programs is that they can transform lives. After her training, Michelle began to get interviews. Finally, she was hired as a receptionist and office administrator at a sign and design company.

"When we met Michelle, we knew we had the right person," says her new employer. "She not only had a great personality, but she had so many computer skills that we decided to hire her on the spot—plus we increased our budget for the position by \$4 per hour."

Michelle says the training she received gave her both the confidence to apply and the skills to get a job she loves. "If I had not taken the classes, I wouldn't be working now. Or I would probably have another data-entry job," she says. Not only does her new job pay much more, Michelle says it is "a much more interesting job. I couldn't praise the program enough—I have a second lease on life and I'm in a better place." ❖

Phyllis Snyder is vice president for Healthcare Services and Mature Worker Initiatives at the Council for Adult & Experiential Learning (CAEL) in Chicago, Ill. She has conducted research for the Conference Board and Civic Ventures, helped to develop and implement the Tapping Mature Talent project, and created the Mentors 4 STEM program. Rebecca Klein-Collins is CAEL's director of research.