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Notes from the Field: Older Workers and the Job Market

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Editors Note: For some time now we have been throwing out cautionary signals that in the United States there is an impending knowledge worker shortage within the next five to seven years. We realize it may be difficult to believe that in the midst of record unemployment numbers.

But we still believe that a shortage of 10 million knowledge workers is coming—and soon. Demographics, retirements, and dramatic growth in health care, education, and environmental affairs will fuel the demand for more workers. But how will that gap be filled? Our guest columnist this month is an expert gerontologist who has a view that should be heard: a significant portion of that gap will be filled by seniors, but that age group has particular challenges and needs.

There is a TV commercial that has the dad going on a job interview, but he is first advised by his daughter to take the grey out of his hair. That is a good summary of a recent [MetLife Mature Market Institute](#) [MMI] study of the new realities of the job market for aging baby boomers.

Who are these “older” job seekers? Aside from age, are they different from the younger workers? The MMI study of the new realities of the job market for aging baby boomers is called “[Buddy Can You Spare a Job?](#)”

The report considers the 55-70 year-old group who are unemployed late in their careers but do not want to retire. In fact, given the rising costs of living in retirement, they need to keep working.

Clearly, age is the first difference, which is hard to hide even if you do not put dates in your resume. Both of my friends who have been without a job for months say that most job inquiries now require that you submit your material online by filling in the blanks. One says that once the online application is completed it appears to go into a “black hole.”

The second characteristic that matters is where you are located. States and cities vary in their potential for jobs. It is hard to move to another state just to find employment, especially with homes currently so difficult to sell or even rent.

The availability of jobs varies between zip codes in our metropolitan area (Phoenix, Arizona). Checking www.indeed.com for jobs paying \$40,000 or more in Scottsdale (zip code 85255) and Chandler (85225), Chandler shows 3,577 job

postings, which is more than twice as many as Scottsdale's 1,518 openings. You may have to cast a wider net to find a position.

Your skills set represents a vital variable. If you have specific skills that are in demand, your chances are better. If you left the field of marketing, you may have to upgrade your skills to include using social media like [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and others.

In the MMI study hiring managers reported that they perceive older job seekers as having relatively common skills and capabilities developed from years of working in fields such as sales and marketing, hospitality and food service, office administration, manufacturing, program management, and even information technology.

Yet Carleen MacKay, career coach and author of [*Boom or Bust: New Career Strategies in a New America*](#), says "For job seekers over 60, specialization is the key."

For those looking for full or part-time employment, MMI reports there is a consensus among Boomer job coaches and employment experts that by age 58 it becomes very difficult, though not impossible, to find full-time positions with benefits, particularly in large organizations.

Seeking work in small companies, non-profits, and/or going part time may be better options for the older job seeker. The MMI report suggests that it is very unlikely that you can re-create your old job. You may have to develop a new set of job skills, which will require training.

Brad Taft of Scottsdale and MacKay's coauthor says, "Look for part-time or project work as that may lead to full-time if you need it. In these economic times companies do not want to commit to full-time employment." In the past two months Taft has seen a number of his clients finding success with what he calls "contingent opportunities."

Richard and Teri Deems in their book, [*Make Job Loss Work for you: Get over it and get your career back on track*](#), recognize that losing a job is a major crisis but encourage you to move beyond. Richard Deems (also from Scottsdale) agrees with Taft: "Focus on smaller organizations. They are much more concerned about getting the job done than about the person's age."

The final characteristic cited in the MMI study echoes one of the goals for every course I ever taught: Be able to cope positively with change and adapt to it.

Is there any good news? The MMI report cites Department of Labor projections indicating that the 55-plus population will account for almost 93% of the net increase in the U.S. civilian labor force between 2006 and 2016.

That's because Gen X, which follows the Boomers, was the baby bust, and is just a bit more than half the size of the Boomer generation. That means that there are far fewer people to replace those who would normally retire from the workforce in the next five to seven years. Companies don't really have a choice; they will have to recruit and retain mature workers.

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