

TECHTARGET | IT Career Expert: Tips for climbing ladder
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GRAY IN A SEA OF GREEN

Make your middle age count -- for the better

by Terry Sweeney

Crow's feet and minivans may be two of the most common indicators of middle age, but for one IT professional, the reality check came during a recent job hunt.

After she was laid off by the online division of a cable TV network, she answered a want ad placed by America Online and landed an interview. So did lots of other applicants, as she discovered in the reception area.

"My hair is gray, but my competitors were all green," she mused, after surveying a sea of twentysomethings. "And I had no visible piercings."

She didn't get the job.

Was it her age? Salary demands? Wrong qualifications? These are a few of the questions that unemployed and under-employed IT professionals in midlife and mid-career ask as they try to land a full-time gig somewhere. Anywhere.

Employers and hiring specialists do have some suggestions for more experienced IT job seekers to improve their marketability, whether on the resume, in the job interview, or during other job-hunting activities. These suggestions from employers and recruiters can prove a more rational approach than a tsunami of resumes.

BUSINESS FIRST, IT SECOND

IT employers and recruiters aren't so interested in specific skills or recent vendor certifications. "That just brings you even with all the new college graduates," warned David Silversmith, CTO of Carfax Inc. in Fairfax, Va. Candidates should demonstrate an understanding of how their functions contribute to the bottom line.

"They need to show how they drive revenue or [can] be part of sales call," said Neal Bruce, director of recruiting at PTC, a Needham, Mass.-based software maker. He added that he's always on the lookout for IT people who can develop and build customer relationships. "It's

hard to find people who have both great technical skills and client skills."

Bruce also wants to see some political savvy and find out how candidates, in previous positions, overcame the challenges that inevitably come with any major IT initiative. "Lots of technology projects fail because of the politics of culture, not the politics of technology. We want to see how prospective employees have dealt with that," Bruce said.

BE FLEXIBLE AND REALISTIC

Signal your willingness to negotiate as early and prominently as possible. If you ignore the prospective employer's request for salary history or expectations, you risk being viewed as too expensive and your application might be filed in the trash can.

"Candidates should say in their cover letter or resume, 'Looking for fair compensation within your model,'" Bruce advised. "Do not throw out a figure up-front."

Do some research on the Web to learn in advance what the market -- or the employer -- will bear. Know that any prospective employer will be happy to crush any remaining sense of entitlement you have left.

KEEP BUSY

Volunteer with a local charity and consider that members of its board of directors might be hiring for positions at their day jobs. Take a class or two, or get a degree. Many candidates whose experience is in middle or upper management stopped being hands-on somewhere along their career path. Then in an interview, they claim that they can learn any skill or do any kind of work. "That's the kiss of death. Nobody buys it, even if it's true," said one recruiter.

ATTEND INDUSTRY MIXERS, AND WORK THE ROOM

Yep, it's networking time. But don't do it with a resume pasted to your lapel. Pretend you're a pollster, and get a single question answered by as many people as possible. These might get you started:

- What programming language or e-commerce initiative/quality control program is most strategic in your organization?
- Do you think there's a distinction between working long and working hard?
- Wireless is such an enigma to me. Can you see it ever being truly strategic at your company? How?

Sound too simplistic? Too much "been-there, done-that?" Maybe, but consider this: "Your chances of getting a job here are much higher if you come in on a referral," said PTC's Bruce. And that's not unique

to his company.

No amount of sugar makes today's job market any less sour. But regardless of the economy, the same rule applies when job seeking and interviewing: Don't do or say anything that disqualifies you.

"You're trying to get to the secret handshake you can give to the recruiter," said Silversmith. Or at the very least, use your professional "vintage" to your advantage. Project wisdom borne of experience and an understanding that IT must contribute to strategic objectives.

Show them that you're more than a touch of gray in a sea of green -- you're an island paradise.

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