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Don't let age become handicap in finding a job

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Few would deny that some level of bias exists against older workers. Advertisements, television shows and companies seem to value youth, energy and newness over experience, maturity and wisdom.

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So in an era when age can be counted against you, make sure your appearance doesn't betray your value.

The Age Discrimination in Employment Act covers workers 40 and older. Julie Bauke of Congruity Consulting, a Cincinnati-based executive coaching company, sees an increase in bias with her clients in their 50s. What is the more mature job seeker to do? What can we control to keep us looking as young as possible, aside from plastic surgery, of course, and sending the message that we are valuable employees and have much to offer? What strategies should be used to counter the age bias that the more mature employee or potential employee is not as valued?

Bauke says that in the current workplace turmoil, job seekers should work to manage what can be controlled. As I've written before, image is about the powerful messages we send. We want to send the message of experience, reliability, innovation and knowledge. So what exactly can we control?

Well, we can control our appearance. When we meet someone for the first time, 55 percent of their first impression comes from our appearance, according to a study by Albert Mehrabian, a UCLA professor who has conducted more than 40 years of research on first impression, communication, and impression management.

Aspects of our appearance we can control include our weight, hair, glasses and wardrobe. Bauke recommends "presenting yourself as an active, high-energy professional."

Hair is our most powerful accessory. Our hair frames our face, and we want all the attention on our face so that people will focus on what we are saying. Glasses are our second most powerful accessory. The right glasses can make someone look intelligent, hip and edgy, which would assist in sending the message they have up-to-date ideas.

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Finally, we can make sure that our clothes are crisp, fresh and current. Dated clothes send the message of dated ideas. Bauke stresses if everything about us seems dated, potential employers will assume our skills are outmoded as well.

In addition, Bauke says, "lack of technological skills will also scream passé." Invest your time and resources in training now.

The national unemployment rate for May rose 0.6 percent to 5.5 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. So for those of us over 40, we need to keep changing and evolving our appearance and our skills so employers and potential employers will see that experience and knowledge are just as important as youth and energy.

Jill Haney, founder of JH Image Consulting, is a certified image consultant. Reach her at 513-505-2732, jill@jhimage.net or <http://www.jhimage.net>

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