

Flying between Trapezes at 50... And way beyond



Gail Blanke

In a recent issue of the *Wall Street Journal*, there was a solid article by Loretta Chao called "Getting a Foot in the Door at 50-Plus." When the writer called to discuss what strategies people over 50 should employ when job searching, I recommended she interview several women I coached while they were "mid-flight." What they know firsthand is that all the "strategies" in the world don't add up to anything without one key ingredient: Courage.

It takes courage to reinvent yourself, courage to re-present yourself, courage to step forward yet again and say, "I'm here and I'm the right person to get the job done." So where do we find that precious commodity? How do we acquire it? Here's the good news. We already have it. Courage comes with action. The moment we decide, the moment we step forward, the moment we move out of the stands and onto the field, courage comes.

We've already demonstrated this time and time again. As I recommend to all the people I work with (whether they're over or under

fifty), it's a good idea to go back into our lives and take a look at our defining moments: those moments when we decided, when we said, "Here's how it's going to go," when we found something in ourselves we didn't know we had and pulled it out. Some defining moments happen when we won, or when we were promoted, or when they applauded when we walked into the room. But most defining moments happen when we lost, when we came up a little bit short, when our backs were up against the wall—and when we found the stuff inside ourselves to move forward anyway. I ask everyone to make a list of their defining moments and believe me, the exercise is worth it. Here are just a few defining moments of several people whom I've coached to get you jump-started in creating your own lists.

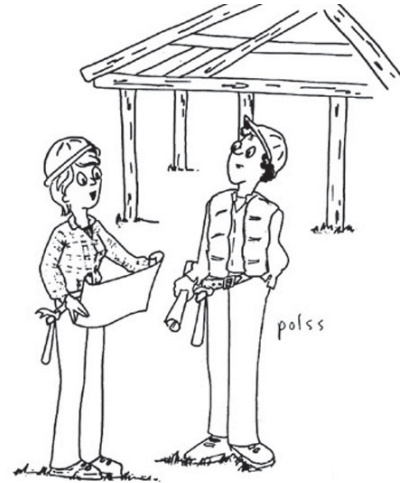
- Ran for president of the 9th grade class; ran my heart out and lost; had to reinvent my idea of myself
- My mother walked out on us when I was a teenager; had to go to school anyway
- Singing coach said my voice was "too old"; had to audition the next day for the part I'd been dreaming of
- I told my husband I wanted to go to law school. He said, "Are you kidding; do you know how old you'll be when you graduate? Fifty-five!" I said, "I'll be fifty-five anyway."

It takes courage to restart your engine.

It takes courage to re-start your engine just when you were eyeing "cruise control"; but of course, that's where the fun is, that's where the juice is and as George Eliot so famously said, "It is never too late to be what you might have been."

So if you know someone who's over fifty and looking for that next great trapeze bar, tell them this is the moment they've been waiting for. ●

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"I went from being a homemaker to being a house maker."

Human Resources

Hiring Wisdom Stop Judging a Book by Its Cover



Bonnie Cox, MA

I've been told that people form more than 11 judgments about you in the first seven seconds of meeting you. Sounds a bit unfair, don't you think? Especially if you happen to be the kind of person who is uncomfortable in social situations. Or if you are the kind of person who is more focused on content and context than on external appearances.

The problem is, many of us make hiring decisions based on those first few minutes with a job candidate. We have biases as well. We tend to like people like ourselves and favor candidates who see the world the way we do. Unfortunately, these biases can blind us and we can lose good candidates. I know because it has happened to me.

Two candidates applied for the same job. The first candidate was just out of college, had a perky haircut, and was dressed in Dockers, dress shirt and tie. His résumé boasted a BA from the University of California education system. He was engaging and animated during our brief interview. I was easily impressed.

The second candidate, equally qualified, was almost the opposite. Dressed more conservatively, she was not as engaging or outgoing. She was quiet and it was more difficult to draw information from her. The conversation didn't flow easily and it felt uncomfortable. All of these factors made it more difficult for me to see her value.

As managers, we face these kinds of decisions every day. And they are important decisions. Hiring the wrong person for the job is painful

and costly. Hiring the right one makes life easier. So here are three key things upon which we should rely when making our hiring decision:

APPLICATION

The entire screening process should start with a completed employment application. All prospective employees, regardless of the position for which they are applying, should fill out an application in their own handwriting. It should have all the blanks filled in, every section signed, and should never say "see résumé."

There are so many ways to uncover erroneous information in an application if one will just look closely. Red flags include blanks, gaps in employment, dates that don't match, and unsigned "release" statements. Refuse to hire anyone with an incomplete application.

INTERVIEW

It is not good enough to simply look for the proper skills, experience or good fit of an applicant. Employers must also determine if there are reasons not to hire a candidate.

Besides verifying names of references, dates of employment, and any unexplained gaps, use the interview to probe deeper into past performance. For example, behavior-based interviewing is a technique that probes below the surface of the question.

By asking a candidate questions such as "tell me about a time when you had to deal with a conflict in the workplace and what you did to resolve it," the candidate is required to "think below the surface." Even candidates who are well-practiced and adept at answering the typical interview questions will have to reach deep to come up with specific examples for you. This "reaching deep" and going off their

script will enable you to see the real person and how they could be expected to act in a similar real-life situation.

REFERENCES

"Why check references?" you might ask. Well, let me count the ways. Checking references not only verifies that the person you are hiring is who they say they are, but it helps to eliminate candidates who have given you false information. It is much better to discover this information before you hire the person than afterwards. Unwinding oneself from a bad hire can be costly and fraught with potential legal liability.

Which references should we check? All of them. Start with previous employment. If possible, talk to a previous supervisor or manager. If the candidate does not have previous work experience, call and talk to a former professor or coach. Call personal references... but always ask, "Do you know of anyone else who could provide me with a reference about Sam?" Then call those references too. Leave no stone unturned. Remember, past performance is the best indicator of future performance. Trust me, it will be worth the extra effort.

In my years in human resources, I've seen

many impressive candidates come and go. Unfortunately, when it was all said and done and the interview was over and the references were checked, many candidates were simply legends in their own minds. For example, titles and salaries are typically inflated, as well as levels of education. While most do not blatantly tell lies, there exists a great temptation to embellish the truth. After all, a job offer is usually at stake. And most employers do not check out the facts before they extend an offer.

SUMMARY

So, which candidate did we hire? Fortunately, we checked all of the references! After talking to previous employers about work history and reliability, we hired the second candidate. Oh, she wasn't as flashy as the first but she turned out to be solid as a rock, and a great fit for our organization. Time proved that it was the right choice. She stayed with us a number of years and consistently performed above expectations. See, you really can't judge a book by its cover.

Do you want to save yourself time, money, and months of agonizing grief over poor hiring decisions? Follow these three recommendations: get a completed application, conduct a behavior-based interview, and then check every last reference.

You'll be glad you did, and so will your company's legal department. ●

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