

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/older-workers-have-a-big-secret-their-age-11574046301>

JOURNAL REPORTS: RETIREMENT

Older Workers Have a Big Secret: Their Age

Afraid of being rejected by younger managers and colleagues, they hide things that might reveal their true age

By Carol Hymowitz

Updated Nov. 17, 2019 10:05 pm ET

Peppy Dubno worked for 23 years for a large financial-services company in New York. And during that time, she didn't tell anybody her age.

Ms. Dubno, who retired last year at 70 as a vice president specializing in data and information architecture, didn't talk about when she went to college or other life events that might reveal her age. She didn't correct colleagues who thought she was far younger, because of her proficiency in technology and because she's fit and very youthful looking with shoulder-length light brown hair.

She knew she was highly regarded by her bosses and colleagues. But she worried about fitting in to a workplace where many employees are in their twenties and managers two or three decades younger than her. "I didn't want anyone to think of me as their parents' age," she says.

Employees in their 50s, 60s and 70s, though outnumbered in the workforce by millennials, are the only group whose labor-force participation rates are growing. Yet they are the least visible in offices, retail outlets and other workplaces. That is because many conceal their ages. Worried they'll be avoided or rejected by younger managers and co-workers, they often go to great lengths to try to appear younger—by doing such things as getting cosmetic surgery, shortening their work histories on social-media accounts and in conversations, not citing past accomplishments and not displaying photographs of their grandchildren.

"Older employees are in the closet today in much the same way gay employees used to be," says Ruth Finkelstein, director of the Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging at Hunter College. "There's pressure to pretend not to be aging in order to succeed while aging—and employers who don't

celebrate their contributions or give them opportunities for new assignments and promotions as they do young talent are complicit in this deception.”

Internalized ageism

Such internalized ageism is rampant, with many baby boomers dreading being called “old,” fearing it will undermine their ability to be accepted and compete in workplaces where youth is prized. They worry they’ll be stereotyped as unable to learn new things or understand technology, or they’ll be considered slow, old-fashioned, too costly and likely to become ill—and subsequently denied promotions and raises or laid off.

Their fears aren’t unfounded. About 56% of U.S. workers who are 50 or older are pushed out of jobs before they plan to retire, and only one in 10 who find new work ever again earn as much, according to a recent study by Urban Institute economist Richard Johnson. Although it is illegal for employers to discriminate against workers, it is difficult to prove; employees must show they lost a job or didn’t get an assignment solely because of their age.

For older employees who have lost a job, hiding their age seems especially important as they search for new employment.

Michael Snizek, a 63-year-old financial-services-products manager, was among 15 employees laid off in 2017. Earlier in his career he worked at such companies as Merrill Lynch and UBS Financial Services, he has learned that disclosing his college graduation date on a job interview “is a disqualifier,” as is mentioning jobs that go back more than 15 or 20 years.

“I’ve never felt better in my life, plus now that my kids are grown, I have more time to jump on a plane and be away from home for long stretches of time,” says Mr. Snizek, who last year made 15 trips to Copenhagen as a consultant to a company. “Too many employers think that if you’re older, you’ll never be able to stay awake after 7 p.m.,” says Mr. Snizek, who wants to work for five to 10 more years.

As he looks for new employment, he has adopted a youthful image. He carries a backpack instead of a briefcase, has discarded his old leather shoes for a trendier, two-tone pair of Allbirds, and asks his daughter what podcasts and Netflix shows she and her friends like most so he can converse easily with young managers.



Michael Snizek PHOTO: BRYAN ANSELM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Feeling devalued

Patti Temple Rocks knows how tough it can be for older workers. Now 60, she was moved from an executive position at a Chicago-based communications company last year to a less influential job, despite having received strong performance reviews, she says. “I felt devalued when I least expected it—when I felt I was at the height of my skills and knowledge,” says Ms. Rocks. When she told her boss she wasn’t happy with her new position, he asked, “How long do you plan on working anyway?” she says. (Ms. Rocks’s ex-company declines to comment on her tenure.) She left the company, wrote “I’m Not Done,” a book about ageism in the workplace, and now is working as chief client officer at ICF Next in Chicago, a unit of ICF International.

“They wanted me for my experience, which makes them the exception,” she says.

JOURNAL REPORT

- • [Read more at WSJ.com/Encore](#)
-

MORE IN ENCORE

- • [What Science Tells Us About Preventing Dementia](#)
 - • [What It's Like to Retire Abroad](#)
 - • [Ask Encore: How to Decide Whether to Stay in Your Home](#)
 - • [There's a New Type of Senior on College Campuses](#)
 - • [Revealing Words People Use to Describe Retirement](#)
 - • [Best Books of the Year About Aging and Retirement](#)
-

Concealing one's age is an understandable tactic, but it is stressful and takes a psychological toll. "If you're in hiding, you're never fully present and you're worried about being found out," says Ellen Langer, a psychology professor at Harvard University who has studied and written about aging, decision making and mindfulness.

Employees who are afraid to talk honestly about themselves and the knowledge they have accumulated over long careers are apt to lose confidence and withdraw, says Ms. Langer, 72. This, in turn, can result in them being overlooked and excluded by bosses

and colleagues from strategy meetings or social gatherings—precisely what they need to avoid happening if they want to keep working.

Employers go along with the secrecy by avoiding conversations about employees' ages and tenure. They worry that if they inquire about or mention anyone's age, they'll be accused of discrimination. Just 8% of CEOs surveyed by PricewaterhouseCoopers in 2015 said their diversity and inclusion strategies included a conversation about age.

"There hasn't yet been a groundswell of consciousness-raising about age the way there is about gender, race and sexual preference," says Kathleen Christensen, director of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's working longer project, which researches older Americans' employment patterns.

Looking ahead

This is likely to change as the labor force gets grayer and employers increasingly need to use older employees. About 27% of 65- to 74-year-olds had full- or part-time jobs in 2016, and by 2026, 30% are expected to be employed, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. By 2030, Americans who are 65 and older will outnumber those 18 and younger.

"The demographics will help older employees come out—if only because there will be so many of them—and force companies to better leverage their experience," says Joe Casey, an executive coach at Retirement Wisdom in Princeton, N.J., and a former human-resources manager at Merrill Lynch.

For now, though, many older employees think they are prudent to conceal their ages. When a 73-year-old program director at a nonprofit in New York overheard her millennial colleagues

talking about the 50th anniversary of the Woodstock music festival, she bit her tongue and restrained herself from telling them she'd been there. She regularly gets Botox injections to smooth wrinkles and steps away from her office cubicle when she needs to make a doctor's appointment, because she doesn't want to be overheard providing her date of birth. Although her boss has encouraged her to keep working, she worries younger colleagues who learn her age will complain that she should vacate her position for one of them to fill.

Older employees need a "come-out-about-age" campaign, says Ms. Finkelstein of the Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging, who tells everyone she works with and meets through her job that she's 65. "Staying in the closet and going through contortions to try to appear younger makes it harder to change the belief that you can't be old and still working effectively," she says.

Ms. Hymowitz is a writer in New York. She can be reached at reports@wsj.com.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Have you or anyone you've known taken measures to hide their age in the workplace? How has that worked out? Join the conversation below.

-
- **College Rankings**
 - **College Rankings Highlights**
 - **Energy**
 - **Funds/ETFs**
 - **Health Care**
 - **Leadership**
 - **Retirement**
 - **Small Business**
 - **Technology**
 - **Wealth Management**

Copyright © 2019 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.