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Position yourself in best light for late career switches

Janet Kidd Stewart The journey

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By desire or economic necessity, jumping into a new career not long before retirement is increasingly common.

But it's by no means easy. In addition to the usual obstacles for older workers, including age discrimination, there's the pressure of making hiring managers see your skills transfer.

Often, workers just don't effectively reposition their resume, or they fumble interview questions about being overqualified for a lower rank in a new industry, said Gail Geary, principal of Atlanta Career Transition and author of "Your Next Career: Do What You Always Wanted to Do."



Geary has been a high school English teacher, corporate lawyer, sales vice president and career-management consultant. Her transitions have taught her the importance of pruning resumes and interview answers to the most relevant, applicable experience.

In a 10-month period of joblessness that ended just before Labor Day, Patrick Haugen, 53, used rejections to hone interview answers.

Over time, he said, "you become smarter at articulating what your gifts are. You get to the point where you can say concisely that "This is what I can do to help you move forward.' "

Having spent most of his career in sales and marketing with chemical companies, Haugen now is in a business-development role with a testing and inspection services company that serves the chemical industry. Through the jobless period, the Aurora resident kept working on a master's degree in management, taking on student loans. He'll graduate next spring from National-Louis University.

When interviewing, he said, he learned to give specific accomplishments related to the proposed job, such as when he was on a team that built new business with an existing client to generate an additional \$30 million in revenue.

Staying in the degree program and networking in industry, community and church-sponsored job seeker groups prevented the self-doubt that can creep in, he said.

"First you're mad and bitter and angry. You tell yourself it's not you, it's the economy," he said. Hiring managers can smell a bitter attitude a mile away, he said.

One of his National-Louis professors, Maria Malayter, was so impressed by his attitude that she asked him to lead a class session on cultivating a life mission. She plans to ask him to teach leadership courses after he graduates.

A recent Geary client left a six-figure career to become a medical technician at about a third the pay. The rationale: less stress and the knowledge he has a marketable skill in a growth industry. Eventually, Geary said, this client could incorporate his business skills into an entrepreneurial health-care venture.

The constant in all these examples: People took only the best of what they did and applied it to the future, with little expectations of a quick payoff.

Two final tips from Geary for career switchers:

--Speak the language: Collect five or six job postings that sound like your ideal position in a different industry, then use the key action words in them in your cover letters and to position previous jobs in a resume, she said.

--Blend: Second careers often are part-time traditional work and self-employment. "There's huge growth in these hybrid careers," Geary said, so don't worry if you need to keep one foot in your old industry while you venture into the new.

Have a retirement question? Write to yourmoney@tribune.com, or via mail at Your Money, Chicago Tribune, 435 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60611. We may include you and your question in a future column.

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