ASK ELLEN – being interviewed by someone younger than you / age discrimination

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(I have been getting a lot of questions about age discrimination and related topics lately. Here are two, and the second one I have been asked in varying forms quite a few times.)

Q: Do you have any suggestions about [being interviewed by someone] younger than you?

I have applied/interviewed for a number of jobs and have not received any offers. I know it must be age discrimination – what can I do?

A: In most cases, you won’t know ahead of time the age of the interviewer(s), nor will you know if a younger interviewer has any preconceived ideas about hiring those who are older. Even if you knew somehow, that knowledge would not give you any control over that aspect of the interview. So, the advice for interviewing for older applicants/interviewees is not much different from the advice for all applicants. Your goal is to convey with confidence how well you are qualified for that specific job. Employers have concerns about any employee keeping his/her skills up-to-date and being adaptable to constant change, so you want to emphasize your skills, how you keep them current, and your flexibility. Of course you should avoid talking about work experience or technology or other things from years and years in the past. Remember that the interviewer is interested in recent and relevant info: roughly within the last 10 years or so, and pertaining to to that job specifically. You don’t want to make any reference to your age, or to the difference in age between you and the interviewer, but that applies to everyone – no applicant should be discussing his/her age in an interview.

While discrimination against older applicants does occur, it is not in the applicant’s best interest to expect it or assume it. As it occurs in the mind of the interviewer, and in almost all cases you can’t be sure if it is happening (unless the interviewer is asking questions related to your age, and even then you might just have a clueless interviewer), there’s really not much you can do about it. Most of the time, though, when someone is interviewed and not hired, it is because the employer has simply decided to hire someone else. This happens to job hunters of all ages. It is not age discrimination or any other kind of discrimination. Right now, because of the economy, there are many more job hunters than jobs, and there are often many qualified applicants for a job – dozens or even hundreds. Each employer will interview multiple people for each job, so most interviews will not be followed by a job offer. The odds are against it for any applicant, no matter how well the interview goes or what he/she has to offer. The assumption that it must be age discrimination each time an older applicant is not offered the job is inaccurate, and only serves to make the experience of the job search more difficult for those job seekers.
Younger employees and new professionals are often concerned that they don’t have enough experience. Job seekers with a gap in employment worry that another candidate without such a gap will have a better chance of getting hired. Each job hunter has advantages and weaknesses. Each has things he/she can control and other things that cannot be influenced.

Do what you can to reduce the obstacles you can control (for example, by acquiring a specific in-demand skill). Focus on your assets rather than your disadvantages, as you write your cover letters, modify your resume for a particular job, and prepare for an interview. If you are confident and positive and emphasize your strengths, there’s a greater chance the interviewer will focus on them too, whatever your age may be.

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Thank you and good luck!

Ellen Mehling  
Director, Westchester Program and Internships  
ellen.mehling@liu.edu