

## TOO YOUNG, TOO OLD, TO WORK?

Just this week three incidents at work have made me reflect on the issue of age in the workplace.

- 1) I short-listed a 54-year old candidate for client interviews. During the interview, he was asked how he would feel working in an organization that were mostly in their 30s, including his potential boss. He wisely said that to perform the team's role and responsibilities must be considered, not their ages.
- 2) Another interview for a different client and role: this time the short listed candidate was in her late 20s and had been supervising a team of 9, some of whom are old enough to be her grandfather! The client was intrigued- how did she ensure the team accepted her, and how could she ever discipline? Again, she stressed the importance of teamwork, earning their respect and encouraging two way learning.
- 3) I was giving feedback to a candidate on our career guidance programme, and she was worried because she is turning 35 this year. Her friends are telling her that most women do not get short-listed beyond the age of 35 unless the position is very senior. She asked me "am I too old?"

Age in the workplace has become a big issue. A lot of jobs advertised mention age, but amongst our clients cultures vary radically, with some hesitant to recruit people in their late 30s, whilst others consider early 30s too young for senior management roles. Does this mean you are only truly employable within a 5 to 10 year span of a normal 30 to 40 year working life? Another point that made me smile is how much emphasis is placed on age in the recruitment world when perhaps not enough when electing those to run the whole country.

But there are times at work when age does matter- especially when all the experience lies with one person and all the power with another. Especially tricky situations combine both age and gender issues, such as when a young, female manager is recruited to manage an older, male dominated team. Of course, most older workers tend to react totally professionally to such scenarios, but there are always exceptions to prove the rule! In such cases both manager and employee can end up feeling threatened or undermined, and the challenge for the 'new kid on the block' is to somehow get the old 'know it all' onside.

Young managers tend to try to over compensate, but must learn to say 'it is not about me, it is about them'. In most cases, over time age issues become irrelevant, especially if the young manager has the full backing of their supervisors and the team knows it.

What the young manager must guard against is the temptation to behave as if they are superior. They may be higher up the hierarchy but the employees already know that the manager has a different status and better pay- so arrogance will only backfire.

But the question remains- when do you get too old to work, or stop being a young manager? Instead of trying to answer the impossible, I would say that (within reason) when recruiting, age is not as important as qualifications, experience, ability, personality, outlook and competence.

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