

## Job market is especially cruel for older workers

*More Americans 55 and older are working longer, and those who are looking for jobs face a technologically transformed market where potential employers may deem them overqualified.*

By Tiffany Hsu

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Their savings in shambles from the economic downturn, jobless seniors are dusting off their briefcases and trying to head back to work. Many, like Jim Mitchell, a 63-year-old former sales executive, are finding a merciless job market where decades of experience aren't necessarily an asset.

The Long Beach resident rises daily before dawn and dresses neatly in business attire to keep himself motivated. He pops in brilliant blue contacts to brighten his eyes and combs back his graying hair to look more youthful.

Not that it matters. He's not getting much face time.

Many recruiters these days want only e-mail applications and refuse to take phone calls. Mitchell is at sea when it comes to using online sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook for networking. He leaves his college graduation date off his resume. But in two years of full-time job hunting, he hasn't gotten a single callback.

"I don't want to think it's about age, but sometimes you suspect it is," he said. "But 60 is supposed to be the new 40. I just want a fair hearing."

The recession has not been kind to older workers. With their 401(k)s battered, home values deflated and healthcare costs rising, many have resigned themselves to staying on the job indefinitely. The trend was well underway before the downturn as many continued working to pad their savings or to stay active.

Now it's about necessity. Over the last two years, the number of Americans age 55 and older who are still working has climbed by nearly 1.5 million to just over 26 million in March, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Those are the lucky ones.

The number of people 55 and older who want a job but can't find one has more than doubled over the same period to nearly 1.8 million. Many are struggling in a largely digital job search process that's vastly different from what they have experienced before.

Millions entered the workforce straight from high school or college, earning steady promotions and salary increases. Some, like Mitchell, hadn't updated their resumes in years. There was no need.

But with unemployment the highest it has been in more than a quarter of a century -- 8.5% nationally in March and 10.5% in California in February -- older job seekers are competing with younger, cheaper rivals.

"You better know that the kids are chasing your job, that they want your \$95,000 salary," said Tom Fallon, 62, of Seal Beach. He has been searching for a sales position in material handling for three months.

America's youngest workers aren't faring well either. In March, the unemployment rate for U.S. workers ages 16 to 24 hit 16.3%. But these youths aren't saddled with mortgages and dependents to the same degree as their elders, nor do they have the same medical and retirement concerns.

And though joblessness among older workers is lower than that of the overall labor force, it is growing much faster. In March, 6.2% of workers 55 and older were unemployed, up from 3.4% in March 2008.

For mature workers who spent years building up stellar credentials and largely defined themselves by their careers, the ego-crushing inactivity of unemployment can be unbearable, said Steven J. Greenberg, founder of Jobs 4.0, a listings site for job seekers over age 40.

"For many, it's a brutal experience -- like going through a divorce," he said.

Up until two years ago, Mitchell had worked steadily since joining General Motors Corp. in 1968 as a production foreman straight out of college. He eventually gravitated to sales and marketing, where he figures he has sold more than \$150 million worth of consumer products over the years, including toothpaste and trash bags.

In 2006 when his brother took ill, Mitchell took a leave from his job as a national sales manager at a brokerage representing pharmaceutical and healthcare products suppliers to run the family grocery business in Connecticut. When he returned to Southern California the next year, he said, he found himself squeezed out of the full-time job that had paid more than \$100,000 annually.

He's been looking ever since.

The daily hunt begins around 7 a.m. in his tidy home office, where Mitchell scans online job leads. He admits he isn't a whiz with computers. Secretaries at his previous posts handled that. Many positions now require Excel and PowerPoint fluency, skills he's trying to master with help from friends.

"It's not that I didn't want to learn -- I just never needed it," he said.

Robust and gregarious, he projects the earnest enthusiasm of a born salesman. But gone are the days of cornering an executive in an elevator and pitching yourself in person.

Over the last two years, Mitchell has blown through \$80,000 in retirement savings to cover his mortgage and living expenses. He has retreated from his large social network, save for the occasional Friday-morning coffee with friends. The sunny mask is starting to slip.

"The hardest time is at night, when the TV goes off and the lights go down and it's quiet and there's nothing else in my head," he said. "I have to think positively then, because otherwise the agony will come out in phone conversations."

Older employees are often wrongly perceived as being overqualified, overpriced, technologically challenged and inflexible, said Gene Burnard, publisher of the job-listing website Workforce50.com.

Some recruiters assume that because older applicants are vying for jobs that pay less than their previous positions, they'll jump ship as soon as the economy improves.

"In this market, it's twice as hard for older job seekers, because however desirable they were at 27, they just aren't as much at 54," said Greenberg of Jobs 4.0. "Recruiters don't give much of an opportunity to go into your life story. They give your resume two seconds."

Jeanne Feder has felt the sting despite a "resume that could choke a horse." At 59, she worries that she's past an unspoken cutoff age.

"I apply for jobs online with a description that exactly matches my resume, but the classic expression you hear when they see you is 'Oh gee, you're overqualified,' " she said. "That's job-speak for 'You're too old.' I've heard it 20 times in the past year."

Since 2006, she has worked at a marketing and PR agency. But with her son entering college, she said, she needs a higher income. Her expenses have risen dramatically, and she's depleted her savings to augment her salary.

She stays up late to shoot resumes to job boards. To boost her skills, she attended a grant-writing seminar and hopes that her volunteering leads to a job offer.

"I didn't plan for this," she said. "Lucky thing I'm tough."

Driven by people like Feder, senior job-search sites have boomed in popularity. RetirementJobs.com had 500,000 more unique visits in February than it did in August, while traffic to Jobs 4.0 doubled.

RetireeWorkforce.com traditionally has attracted older workers looking to make a few extra bucks working part-time or seasonal jobs. But with retirement savings hammered by the downturn, seniors looking for full-time posts have pushed traffic up 150% in six months.

Graying job seekers are flocking to technical and community colleges to improve their skills, experts said. Many are tapping reservoirs of discipline accumulated from decades in the workplace to keep themselves focused.

Since the start-up firm he worked for collapsed, Fallon has spent 60 hours a week job hunting. He wears a dress shirt and tie and carries business cards everywhere. He never turns off his BlackBerry. He checks his car's tank each night to be available to recruiters.

What he won't do is give up. His 401(k) is down 60% and his savings are running out.

"Maybe in a year I'll be too tired to do this," he said. "But right now I feel like I'm 39."

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