

CAREER QUANDARIES

Whether dealing with ageism, discussing failure or switching sectors, every job candidate faces some difficult issues—so be ready.

BY LINDSAY SCOTT

I'm in my late 50s and suspect I'm having no luck finding a job because of my age. What steps can I take?

ANSWER: There are often laws to protect you against blatant discrimination, but the setbacks you're experiencing could just as easily be a product of the economic downturn.

Now is the time to reach out to all those contacts you've made along the way. Also, make sure your CV is clear, concise, and highlights your successes and specialities relevant to the role you're applying for. Seasoned project veterans often present a hefty CV, making it difficult for a prospective employer or recruiter to easily see what they're getting. Although organizing a 25-plus-year career into a small space can be daunting, your CV shouldn't run more than three pages.

Also, remove your date of birth from your CV. Make sure every opportunity remains open and gets you to the point where a face-to-face meeting can take place.

To that end, does your interview approach need to be refreshed? It's not uncommon in the job-hunting process to feel defeated and negative, and this will come through in interviews—whether you believe that to be the case or not.

If you can't get a full-time position, many experienced project managers find that contract or consultancy opportunities are much easier to secure and allow them to:

- Choose projects that fit their experience and skills
- Be rewarded specifically for those skills built up over a number of years
- Leave time to pursue other interests

When I spoke to a number of organizations about their views on hiring senior project managers, their response was: "What's important is not how old you are, but rather how fresh and relevant you are." Hiring managers evaluate candidates not only by the usual selection criteria (qualifications, domain experience, etc.), but also on how they'll fit within the organization or project team.

In a recent interview, I was asked a series of questions about project failures and the part I played in them. What advice do you have for answering these types of questions?

ANSWER: With all the press around projects that fail, I'm surprised project managers don't get more questions

like this in interviews. Even a project deemed a "success" may have experienced some failure that was addressed and corrected during the delivery cycle. That must mean there are many project managers who have encountered failure and consequently managed it in their own projects.

These interview questions aren't designed to be negative but rather to explore your *response* to failure: how you managed it, what actions you took, if it resulted from an unmanaged risk, etc. Interviewers are really just trying to learn about your experience in handling sponsors, executives, project teams, suppliers and contractors.

Organizations are more likely to employ project managers who can recognize and candidly discuss their experience of failure and who are confident they have learned from the experience. Indeed, those hiring would be a little suspicious of a project manager who doesn't admit to *some* kind of failure.

The key is preparation. Make a note of all those projects or situations where some element of failure occurred. Next to each, make a note of the reasons for the failure. (And remember, it's not always because of your individual actions!) Then list the steps you took, the outcome and the lessons learned. Pick three or four of these scenarios that display a different reason for failure. That way, you'll be able to easily recall the examples while ensuring your answers are not repetitive.

I'm concerned my position in the public sector will come under threat of redundancy, so I'm considering making a switch to the private sector. Is there anything I need to be aware of that might make that difficult?

ANSWER: Project management is a collection of transferable skills. Over the last two years, however, we've seen an increase in companies demanding experience in a specific sector. A lingering impact of the recession is that many employers have become more risk-averse when it comes to hiring. They want candidates who can hit the ground running.

There's also a perception that the downturn translates to more candidates in the marketplace, which makes

employers believe they can find exactly what they need with no difficulty.

As such, making the move from public- to private-sector project management will invariably have its difficulties. To make the case, highlight what you have to offer in direct relation to an organization's expressed need.

The project environment may differ when it comes to accountabilities, decision-making, profitability, client management, legal and contractual requirements, pace and domain knowledge. Try to zero in on specific opportunities where your current experience is applicable: Organizational change, systems integration, new service introductions and outsourcing, for example, apply to both sectors.

Reflect upon your current relationships and contacts. Does the project you work on have private-sector suppliers and third-party contractors who would welcome working with you?

I'd also recommend tweaking your CV to appeal more to the private sector. Browse current vacancies and corporate

websites to get a better feel for their requirements. Gather clues about the language to use on your résumé and ways to highlight your wins.

The mistake most people make in trying to switch sectors is focusing too much on what they *don't* have instead of doing a brilliant job selling what they *do*.

Plenty of project professionals have made the switch. And you can, too—you just need to have answers to the inevitable questions you will receive along the way: What similarities and differences do you perceive about making the transition to working in the private sector? The more thought you put into this, the better your chances of making the move into a new sector. **PM**

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