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Your Career Is NOT Over at 50! Specific Strategies for Breaking the Barriers of Aging

by Helen Harkness, Ph.D., Career Design Associates, Inc.
Author of Career Chase, Don't Stop the Career Clock and Capitalizing on Career Chaos.

Millions of Americans suffer from the "finished at 50" syndrome. Based on the numerous negative myths that aging automatically brings irreversible mental, physical, psychological, and creative decline, this belief is foolish and potentially deadly for continuing career success.

Unfortunately, much of Corporate America is nourishing this notion and pushing more mature employees out the door. However, there are strategies that we can use to advance one's career far beyond society's limits which are based upon concepts of age. The truth is that absolutely no research has validated that chronological age is reliable in determining one's "functional" age.

While age discrimination is illegal and organizations have paid millions in legal fees and settlements, the beliefs that erect age-related barriers in the workplace still exist. For instance, much research has reported that older workers stayed unemployed for a longer time than their younger counterparts.

What does this mean for a job seeker beyond the age of 50? Should you simply give up, fade out and "go gently into the good night?" No way! Here are some concepts you may have never thought about:

Focus on functional age: forget chronological age. In redesigning and enhancing your career, ask the following question: *"Knowing what I know now about myself and the world, what would I do if I were 20 years younger?"*

The challenge is to free yourself from the clock and calendar – use a compass instead so that you can begin to answer this question, then devise a successful action strategy to navigate toward it.

Successful aging and working in the 21st century will require that you:

- Stop the chronological clock! Learn a new way to tell time.
- Take control of the 20 extra years promised by healthier lifestyles and the innovations in medical science.
- Subtract 20 years from your current chronological age. Visualize what you would do if you were 20 years younger, knowing what you know now;
- Design a strategic action plan to accomplish this!
- Reset your Career Clock – insert those extra 20 years now – don't add them to your old age.
- Rethink retirement – re-career to what you love to do.
- Grow to be one of age, wisdom, creativity, and purpose.
- Live long, die fast! Be "old-old" a shorter time.

Combat the myths of aging – Look Inward, Look Outward, and Look Forward:

LOOK INWARD: Thoroughly know yourself – your "Brand You, Inc." This is a real challenge for most professionals at mid-life, since it has not been a necessity in the workplace of the past.

- Assess and verbalize your skills.
- Identify achievements where you successfully used skills to bring successful outcomes for an employer.
- Know your Success Criteria, the fundamental essentials necessary for your success and motivation.
- Align these with the direction and needs of your organization or profession.
- Shatter your own stereotypes of age based on earlier beliefs of what you can and can't do. Defy "conventional wisdom."
- Exude energy, intensity, stamina, and flexibility. Stress enthusiasm for challenges and the ability to creatively cope with complexities created by change.
- Lead – don't merely follow! Act – don't always wait to react.
- Know and continually update your critical job skills, both technical and "soft skills."
- Stay in good physical shape. Be healthy.
- Become a Type CC Chaos Catalyst – one who deals successfully with ambiguity, change, and complexity. Type A, the compulsive workaholic, or Type B, the laidback, passive employee, are both passé today. This personality of the future thrives on cooperation, competence, challenge, creativity, and faces the world with curiosity, confidence, commitment, common sense, and courage.
- Lastly, the Type CC maintains a sharp "*crap detector*" to burrow through the belief barriers barring their continuing contributions.

LOOK OUTWARD and LOOK FORWARD: Use your knowledge, foresight, and intuition to track coming trends affecting your life and work. Know that:

- The values and rules of the 20th century workplace, such as "Do a day's work – don't expect to enjoy it," and "Higher management jobs spell success," will differ greatly from those of the 21st century.
- You must continually manage your career.
- Innovative, strategic thinking is rapidly becoming more valued in the workplace.
- Pay, annual bonuses and profit sharing will vary according to performance and contribution rather than to seniority.
- Scope and quality of one's work, not time on the job, will be rewarded.
- Constant re-grouping of skills, regular career check-ups and strong interpersonal skills will be required.
- There will be a break from: 1) hierarchical to innovative thinking; 2) solo to collaborative mindsets; 3) status quo "we have always done it this way," to speed-of-change "just in time" thinking; 4) local to global competition.
- For many, corporate success at any cost will be replaced by lifestyle-driven careers.

Take control of your worklife at mid-life in the new workplace. Ageism can be diminished or overcome with a conscious and skillful self-marketing strategy.

About the author: A pioneer in the development and implementation of career management programs, **Helen Harkness, Ph.D. is president of Career Design Associates, Inc. (CDA)** founded in 1978 in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area. She has provided career counseling services to over 6,000 individual clients and numerous organizations during her career as a futurist, educator, researcher, and entrepreneur. She is author of *Best Jobs for the Future*; *The Career Chase: Taking Creative Control in a Chaotic Age*; *Don't Stop the Career Clock: Rejecting the Myths of Aging for a New Way to Work in the 21st Century*; and *Capitalizing on Career Chaos*. To

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