



Am I Too Old to Switch Careers?

Eight reasons why career transitions later in life are possible despite lingering age discrimination.

Gayle worked her whole life at HP, mirroring her mother's long stint at IBM. She moved up the corporate ladder until finally there was one painful reorganisation too many, and destiny stepped in. At age 56, she leapt at an opportunity for a "phased retirement", all the while trusting her career was far from over. She took up an "encore" role at a local food bank, both for the pleasure of returning to strategic and operational work and the chance to have a real impact on her community. She earned less money, but it was more than enough. During her year at the food bank, she acquired new skills, not to mention that her acumen, wisdom and openness garnered her an invitation to join the board. Since then, Gayle has become a "cookie artist" and launched her own company selling home-baked creations. Her thirst for constant reinvention, experimentation and exploration is a source of inspiration and learning for many of us.

The world of entrepreneurship presents a special opportunity for older workers. Let us remember that Colonel Sanders first franchised Kentucky Fried Chicken (now known as KFC) at 62 and Gordon Bowker – who began as a writer – co-founded Starbucks at 51. Of course, other work spheres are also open to older professionals. Take Julia Child, who worked in intelligence in the precursor to the CIA before she became a celebrity chef in her fifties. Regardless of your worst fears, your most successful years may well be ahead of you.

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However, many professionals still wonder if they are too old to switch careers. In a recent survey we ran prior to a **career transition webinar**, numerous participants revealed their concerns about age discrimination. In particular, they perceived 50 as a critical cut-off age. We explore here the realities surrounding ageism in the workplace.

Talent shortages

In the movie *The Intern*, a retired widower in his 70s, played by Robert De Niro, becomes a senior intern at a fashion start-up in New York. He soon finds himself in an open workspace filled with millennials, forced to get a grip on technology and learn the fast-paced work style of the 21st century. The film serves to highlight an important issue in today's workplace: Many organisations disvalue older workers and recruitment practices remain rife with age-related bias.

Recent **studies** reveal widespread stereotypes against older workers, who are presumed to be less motivated, adaptable, healthy and focused. HR executives complain that older workers are expensive and take more sick leave. According to a U.S. **survey**, 64 percent of older workers (aged 45-74) have seen or experienced age discrimination in the workplace. On the flip side, meta-analyses suggest that job performance does not strongly decrease with age, and emotional resilience and

innovation do not falter with advancing years.

We have good reasons to be optimistic about changing careers in midlife and beyond. As talent shortages increase in many parts of the world, employers slowly realise they can tap the large reservoirs of skilled mature workers who are underused or actively looking for new professional opportunities. Companies that have taken action in that direction are reporting significant benefits. Our experience as talent managers and career agility coaches has shown us that it is entirely possible to switch careers at any age. Here is why and how.

Eight reasons why it's never too late to transition, and how to pull it off

1. Your ability to change isn't related to age.

Companies view learning agility – the ability to learn from experience – as a key indicator of leadership potential. Interestingly, **research** by management consulting firm Korn Ferry showed that there is no correlation between age and potential: Learning agility remains constant, regardless of age. What truly matters is your attitude. Do you see yourself as an adaptable person or do you put limitations on yourself?

2. Talent shortages are increasing worldwide, while the number of older workers is also on the rise.

According to a **Mercer study**, “By 2050, the number of people over 65 years old will triple worldwide and those over 80 will quadruple. Some countries will be more affected than others, but this demographic change is inescapable. Combined with reduced birth rates, the result is severe skills shortages, which are already impacting employers. Companies will need to understand this change and prepare to survive.” With the right attitude, you can take advantage of these demographic changes.

3. A growing number of companies are starting to value mature workers and acting on it.

“Encore” careers such as Gayle’s are a burgeoning phenomenon, as are employers’ strategic initiatives to attract and retain mature workers. Examples include Daimler AG’s “Take experience into the future” project, and IKEA’s “silver recruitment” drive, which aim to derive value from experience, but also to reflect the demographics of their clients, who have grown in age and wealth over the last decade.

4. Leverage the fact that your vast experience gives you an edge over younger professionals.

Traits of mature workers include flexibility,

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confidence, cool-headedness, resilience and objectivity. In *The Intern*, De Niro’s character becomes something of a Mr Fix-it and a father figure to several of his younger colleagues. With his quiet confidence and broad competence, he also becomes an advisor to the young start-up CEO, eventually helping her solve issues at work and at home.

5. Ignore the naysayers and focus on “age-friendly” managers.

If questioned or challenged, be ready to address age-related biases head on. Read up on relevant research and use your wisdom to discuss facts and eliminate worry and bias. Be selective by deliberately targeting hiring managers who appreciate and value experience. Hint: You are probably better off sending your CV directly to your future boss than to HR.

6. Upgrade your technology savvy.

This may go without saying, but you need to tackle the task fearlessly. Create your own customised tech training. Good methods, beyond the obvious self-study, include peer-learning and inter-generational mentorship. Remember to not let stereotypes fool you: Older workers can **embrace new technologies** just as well, if not better, than younger people.

7. Network and seek support.

Get in touch with your existing network and create new connections relevant to your proposed new industry. Join professional groups online and offline. Coaching might also help you with your search or entire career transition.

8. Express your energy and passion.

Do your best to highlight the active, passionate part of your personality during interviews and networking activities. Prepare in advance by thinking about your wardrobe, appearance, energy level and topics you will bring up in conversations. Enjoy the journey and the feeling that you have found something meaningful to do and which can have a positive impact on people’s lives.

One of our **book** subjects, Daniel, provides a great case study for the points above. At 58, he left behind a career in real estate development to run a large charitable foundation. He built on his network, using his canny, solution-focused approach as he went along. Now aged 70, he is planning to learn a new language and to travel more in order to monitor the work of his foundation. While the transition involved a few bumps, he continues to take full ownership of his career. It is definitely *not* too late for you!

*The first article in this three-part series focused on the **4 Es of successful career transitions**. The last instalment will provide tips on how to get your foot in the door when switching industries.*

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