

OUTWITTING AGEISM TO LAND, HOLD, AND MOVE ON TO BETTER WORK

By Jane Genova



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- ▶ Dedicated to Jack O'Dwyer, John O'Dwyer, and Kevin McCauley whose mission at Odwyerpr.com has been to help seasoned professionals remain marketable

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Over-50: Outsmarting Your Comfort Zone

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INTRODUCTION



Andrew Altenburg, a 53-year-old global event planner, became an accidental celebrity. His unexpected starring role is in the Huffington Post documentary “Aging Out” (<https://bit.ly/2LITRs6>). That captures both the suffering and determination of the aging who hit a wall called “bias” when looking for work.

On paper and on the phone, Altenburg comes across as the kind of professional employers want to hire. Then when he shows up in person for the job interview, what’s palpable is a “mood shift.” That’s because of ageism in recruiting, hiring, promoting, firing, laying off, and forcing into retirement.

Ageism is a diversity issue and the last form of bias employers are getting away with. It operates on the belief that those assessed as “not young” can’t do the job as well as a 30-year-old, haven’t kept up with technology, are inflexible, command too high compensation, and/or will get very sick and increase employers’ healthcare insurance premiums. At the time the video was being made, Altenburg was out of work but the last time I contacted him he was employed again.

According to AARP, age bias can begin in the 40s but most of those surveyed are convinced it starts in the 50s. Yet, ironically, the two fastest growing age groups in the U.S. labor force, documents the Department of Labor, are those 65 to 74 and 75 and older.

Despite age bias, they are landing work or opening their own businesses. The report from the Transamerica Center for Retirement Studies indicates that half of U.S. Baby Boomers plan to work beyond age 65 or not retire at all.

There is also The New Retirement. That entails transitioning from a demanding career to a less pressured way of earning income. Moreover, the Federal Reserve Board found that one-third of those who do retire unretire. The term for that is “reverse retirement.”

Therefore, what's obvious is that, yes, age discrimination exists. But, many older than 40 are managing to outwit the system. This book describes the gameplans which are effective in landing, holding, and moving on to better work.

The classic career guide “What Color Is Your Parachute? 2018” hammers: In the post-2008 economy (after The Great Recession) financial survival for working people means becoming skilled in job-hunting. It cites the statistic that for even those who assume they are on a secure career path, the odds are that for 69% their job will disappear in less than five years. And, it’s those best skilled in the job search who get the offer, not necessarily the most qualified.

In many ways the economy has returned to the hunting ethos of caveman times.

Just as caveman had to learn to discern the bear among the trees, the financial survival of those beyond 40 consists of being able to spot opportunity and then figuring out how to transform it into earned income.

CHAPTER 1 – AGEISM NOT OUR FIRST RODEO



Fortunately, every living generation in the U.S. which is determined to work, despite the age bias, has plenty of experience in overcoming adversity. Ageism, as the saying goes, isn't their first rodeo.

The Silent Generation experienced the slim pickings of The Great Depression and the carnage of World War II.

One of them, Jack O'Dwyer, who founded public relations/marketing information site J.R. O'Dwyer in 1968, was born in 1933. At age 85, he continues to put in 45 hours a week. He was among the early adopters who transitioned his directories and newsletters from print to digital. And, he survived when others in his niche went the way of the Selectric typewriter.

Jack O'Dwyer



Baby Boomers started out strong, the first U.S. generation to attend college en masse. Then, as the film “The Graduate” captured, they bumped into the reality that they had to find their place in the world of work. During the 1980s, many of them who had found that place in Corporate America were knocked out of the box in the Stalin-like purge of Middle Management. Some retooled for other kinds of corporate functions. Others became entrepreneurs. Collectively, during that upheaval Baby Boomers got very smart very fast.

The oldest of Generation X stood in the shadow of Baby Boomers. They didn't have the force of numbers which the 76 million Baby Boomers did to push to get what they wanted.

But, many figured out how to turn their superiors into mentors and advocates. Eventually, they did become partners and principals in professional services and took advantage of short stays in Corporate America to develop marketable skills. Most importantly, they didn't balk about 18-hour days. They became the generation of unexpected successes.

So, all those generations arrived at young old age or old age with the insight about how the world really operates. However, we were still shocked that there was that “mood shift” Andrew Altenburg describes in the Huffington Post documentary (<https://bit.ly/2LITRs6>). We showed up for job interviews or to pitch for assignments for our enterprises. And, there they were: the dropped jaws and the bug eyes. Those reactions signaled that we were being written off as professionally less-than.

Over time, we've processed that. And we have been reaching back into our primitive survival instincts to put together strategies and tactics to land, hold, and move on to better work. Then, like caveman, we sit around the 21st century version of the campfire and tell our stories. We are the loudest voices in the room insisting we will work work work.

CHAPTER 2 – BREAKING OPEN TO OPPORTUNITY



The shift has been from being told by “The THEM” where opportunity is to being forced to find it on our own. From the get-go, The THEM hammered the young with success formulas. Get into the management training program at P&G. Go to law school. Yes, start careers on the coasts. At night, study for the M.B.A. Publish a book. Network. Get on boards of non-profits. Entertain.

Then The THEM didn't have much – at least not of use – to tell generations as they hit age 50. Most of recommendations were platitudes such as seek out jobs in smaller companies and color the gray. During The Great Recession, some of the guidance for the unemployed older professional was downright counterproductive: Invest lots of time and even money in networking. The reality has always been that entrance to a network requires having something to trade. Those sidelined usually didn't have much of that.

The good news is that the over-50 professionals have become alert at discovering new positions of strength. That is, we are spotting, creating, and exploiting our own opportunities.

Sure, the old-line traditional opportunities still exist for some.

One 62-year-old corporate communications professional I coach has been able to navigate the old-line jobs game. Like so many he has been laid off continuously during hard times, changes in the corporation's leadership, and mergers & acquisitions. But he has always been able to land another well-paying full-time job with benefits. He has done that by making it his business to develop contacts in executive search.

He gives them updates about what's happening in the field, knows how to size up candidates candidly without being sued, passes on their names to stars in the profession, and gives them positive publicity on his social media.

Another, a cunning political animal, understands the power of knowing where the bodies are buried and pretending that she doesn't. No one will dare suggest forcing this 68-year-old into retirement from a corporate executive position.

A third, a 72-year-old in professional services, has down cold how to bring in new business.

Given the fierce competition and the high churn among current clients, that has become the most important role in law, management consulting, accounting, and public relations.

They aren't the typical role models, though. Whom we learn from are those who transitioned from being closed systems following success formulas others created for them to being open systems sucking in realities and seeing in them the new kind of opportunity.

The emerging heroes are Betty White who transformed old age itself into the platform for a lucrative career in making light of the aging process.

In the process she has leveraged her former goofy persona into helping the aging not get stuck internalizing the world's message that they are unmarketable.

Clint Eastwood has taken advantage of the freedom which comes in the second phase of a career to exit his signature action-packed film genre and create serious art such as “Unforgiven.” That was a risk that panned out.

Bill Clinton, at 70, combined his brandname with his creativity to become a best-seller author in the mystery genre. His book is “The President Is Missing.”

Jack O'Dwyer, in his mid-80s, has put a new wrinkle on an old tactic. That is, positioning and packaging an anniversary, which LinkedIn also exploits, for news and branding. On his global site Odwyerpr.com, leaders in public relations and marketing are observing how, over the past 50 years, O'Dwyer has been a force field in the industry and direct help in their careers.

Also, there's me. In 2009, the law market crashed and 6,000 lawyers were put on the street. As an altruistic gesture I provided career guidance on my syndicated legal blog. Also, I lectured at the New York Bar Association to unemployed Baby Boomers. I did pro bono telephone coaching. That was based on my research and writing on careers for AOL and Wall Street Jobs Report. Eventually, I got it: Coaching the over-50 was a new profit center. I was the one who had to connect the dots on that one. The world had told me that I was forever only a communications player.

I didn't listen. Obviously, we are the ones responsible for identifying opportunity. To be able to do that we have to shake off the mindsets of the past about how to make a good living. No, we can't listen to what the world tells the aging.

A mantra among The New Aging is: How Is Your Now!

CHAPTER 3 – THE START-UP CALLED “MAKING A GOOD LIVING”



No one from my generation I personally or professionally know and no one I have coached has had a linear career path, at least not after about age 40.

For all, there has been start-overs – multiple ones. The aging professionals have had to become the entrepreneurs of the start-up called “Making a Good Living.” That might have begun in outplacement, after their industry such as traditional journalism collapsed or downsized as with law.

The ah-ha moment has been realizing three realities:

What I am selling fewer are buying.

Eventually, maybe no one will be buying.

I have to find another way to make a good living.

There is no one best way to start over. Actually, the process is messy, time-consuming, and filled with disappointments. But, those of us who stick with it, wind up making a good living again.

Here are proven gameplans you can try out.

Relocation. Because Manhattan is very expensive and extremely age-biased, those like Andrew Altenburg could immediately improve the odds of finding work and lowering their fixed costs by simply uprooting.

The internet is jam-packed with information about the median ages in locations and the cost of living.

In April 2014, I did just that, donating all my household goods to charity and heading west from the New York Metro area to Tucson, Arizona.

The then (it's gone up) low cost of living gave me the financial wiggle room to figure how to sell the services for my two businesses more effectively.

Because of the lack of age bias, I picked up three part time jobs through which I learned software packages “on the company.” That was my objective.

Taking a survival job. In the old days, it was called “starting in the mail room.” Currently, it could be labeled “Trying Out Other Ways of Making a Living.” That’s the full-time survival job which often, surprisingly, does provide benefits, after a probation period. They range from loss prevention in retail to manning an inbound call center.

At the very least, they keep the wolf from the door and the search for other kinds of work can take place on the side.

But the payoffs are usually greater. Aging professionals learn new skills and frequently discover that their work ethic gets noticed. That re-builds confidence.

Since the survival job category usually has high turnover, upward mobility is rapid. Those who begin on the front lines at the call center could become management.



Disrupting. Giant corporations pull it off all the time: disrupting. Microsoft and IBM have been among the companies which got stuck. Now they are back. Individual players can also blow up and put together a new game. Mostly it simply takes the courage to leave one identity and create a fit in a new one.

In prison, former lawyer in the Nixon Administration Chuck Colson embraced spirituality. After his release he created a ministry serving ex-convicts. When he died he was celebrated as a hero.

It was in middle age that English professor at a small woman's liberal arts rural college JoAnne Boyle shifted to leadership. She became the longest serving president of Seton Hill in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, transforming it into a coed university.

Odds are it will survive when the balloon bursts in higher education.

Gig Work. Employers may be reluctant to hire full or part time a professional with extensive expertise.

However, for a special project or for crushing deadline, they will pay well for contract or freelance help.

That arrangement only locks in that compensation for specific experience for a defined period.

Finding and being hired for those “gigs” had not required advanced marketing and sales skills.

Platforms such as Upwork are devoted to featuring all the possibilities and the prospective vendors bid on the assignment.

In addition, most job sites, ranging from generalist Craigslist to the specialized Journalismjobs.com, now include gig opportunities.

One medical doctor in her late 50s currently only takes gig assignments.

That's serving as a holding pattern and source of income as she is exploring other kinds of work in which she can use her scientific background without practicing medicine per se.

The obvious drawback on that is she is responsible for her own healthcare insurance.

One gig worker, 60 years old with a non-working wife and two teenage children, pays \$2,500 a month for that insurance. However, he bills for his communications consulting skills at \$50 to \$75 an hour.

Certification. At this stage of the game, investing in a formal degree program probably doesn't make sense.

One woman in her early 50s I coached regretted going all the way for the M.B.A. in her late 40s.

Employers weren't willing to pay for that degree and she wound up having to default back to her former core skill: scientific communications.

What does make sense is earning a certification.

Increasingly, help-wanted ads require certifications in, for example, Google AdWords, or indicate it's a plus.

Certifications are usually affordable and instruction can be delivered online.

Retraining for blue-collar work. Through one of those professional perfect storms a former pharmacist had to find his way back to earning, as he said, “decent money.” At age 58, he made the decision to enroll in a six-week program, with tuition of \$7,000, training him in long-distance truck driving. Student loans are available.

For the first year out his choice of routes was limited and the pay was about \$27 an hour.

After that, he was in charge of the terms and conditions of his employment.

Eventually he may leave the road and become an instructor.

Telecommuting. Not only can more functions be done remotely. The whole application process can take place online.

No, there is no Skype or facetime iPhone interview. Usually the format consists of hypothetical questions. The “right” answer consists of balancing company policy with an authentic commitment to customer/client service. Also, values such as honesty and integrity get evaluated.

Telecommuting jobs have become sophisticated, including full-time high-skill tasks such as being responsible for sales in the Midwest or troubleshooting in customer service for a mid-sized software firm.

There are often benefits.

And the territory is global.

Regularly, seasoned remote workers in the U.S. check the help-wanted on Craigslist for Canada, China, and Mexico.

Becoming a business owner. Older entrepreneurs have the advantage of understanding business and how the world really does work.

No surprise then, a number of enterprises which have become BigBusiness had been created by those over-50. They include McDonald's, Coca-Cola, and Kentucky Fried Chicken.

According to EasyLifeCover, the over-50 are creating one out of every three new businesses.

The most active age category in the past 10 years has been between 55 and 64.

Not everyone is starting from scratch. Some are investigating purchasing a franchise. There, due diligence is required.

It's not enough to take the company's description of how easy success is. Personally interrogate others who have purchased the franchise.

Even those who succeeded can warn of factors to avoid.

For example, at the outset one food vendor didn't understand the importance of location. It wasn't until he fought for a different one that his enterprise caught fire.

Minimalism. The less expensive a lifestyle, the more work options are available to try out.

For professionals burdened with being financially overextended downshifting a lifestyle is appealing.

In the book “Making Toast,” essayist Roger Rosenblatt observes that as we get older we don’t need much. He lived that when he and his wife crammed into small space to be there for their three young grandchildren. Their daughter, a medical doctor, had died suddenly.

What they gave the children was not material but the comforting ritual of having toast made lovingly every morning.

The encouraging news about the process of starting over is that during it we shake off the rigidity of the past.

Never again will we accept expert opinion about how a search for making a good living ought to play out.

And we develop a phobia about job-finding platitudes. As soon as someone begins uttering them, we panic – and flee the force field.

CONCLUSION



The Baby Boomer generation used their numbers to change the world to a version they preferred.

For the aging, the numbers are also on our side and will continue to be.

According to the Population Reference Bureau, currently those 65 and older number 46 million. That age group represents 15% of the total population of the U.S.

So, we shouldn't be bullied into
perceiving ourselves as less-than.

We can push back on those dropped jaws and bug eyes by doing end runs around the traditional world of work.

Meanwhile, we smirk at those who dish up tired clichés about professional success in The New Aging.

This is our game and every day we set out there with a playbook fitted for shifting realities.

MEET YOUR COACH – JANE GENOVA



Are you in outplacement? Or, maybe you are uncertain how long your current employment or project will last. You are weary of the “rat race.” You might want to start a business. I listen. You tell me where you are now, what you need/want, what you have tried already, how all that is panning out, and then we can go on from there – together.

Complimentary initial consultation. Then sliding scale fees.

You can develop a new playbook for outwitting ageism. Please contact Jane Genova at janegenova374@gmail.com, for an appointment for a free introductory session.

TESTIMONIALS:

Mark Misercola – Speechwriter

“For the past two years, Jane has helped me age more gracefully by opening my eyes to new opportunities and endeavors that will serve me well when I eventually retire. And some – like writing about my passion for collectible cars – I’ve already started on.”

TESTIMONIALS (cont):

Tara Belsare – Physician

“Jane encourages me to examine aging with depth and wit. She encourages me to write about the process. She has opened my eyes to the fact that I am, in fact aging.”

Name Confidential – Disbarred Lawyer

“Nearly 70, I was able to move onto a new career path.”



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