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Washed up at 40?

More IT workers say age discrimination is an increasing factor in the denial of jobs

By Lisa B. Song

Tribune staff reporter

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Forty-eight-year-old Alan Ezer is a perpetual paradox in the information technology industry: With over 10 years of computer programming experience under his belt and hundreds of thousands of IT positions unfilled yearly, he couldn't find a job to save his life.

"It's actually been a detriment to have all this experience," said Ezer, of Albany, N.Y. "We are considered fossils in the industry."

Ezer represents a growing number of veteran IT professionals, specifically programmers or software engineers, asserting age discrimination in a field they say increasingly views workers as obsolete by 40, inflexible in a dynamic digital world, and therefore less marketable than cheaper foreign imports and newly minted college graduates.

Ezer's extensive background should logically have been his trump card in a thirsty job market, his skill set an alphabet soup of languages dating back to the earlier Cobol, Fortran, C and SQL, along with the now-in-demand Java. As it turns out, he said, his past knowledge was seen as unwanted baggage.

The computer industry is of a different ethos, Ezer explained: "Where earlier knowledge would be revered in other fields, it is detested in the computer industry. It was hard to even just use a computer in the early '70s, and the industry wants to rid itself of those memories as fast as it can."

The industry's attitude is that an increase in age correlates to a decrease in newer technologies and the ability to learn them, said Dr. Norman Matloff, a professor of computer science at the University of California at Davis.

'Old' in the IT world starts as early as 35, Matloff said. "The bias just gets more visible after 40."

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The market has become more difficult for older workers since Congress passed a bill in 1998 that doubled the number of foreign high-tech workers from 65,000 to 115,000 that could be brought into the country under "H1-B" work visas, Matloff said. The cap has since been raised to 195,000.

Companies would be forced to dip into the large pool of older workers in the U.S. if they didn't have access to scores of low-priced foreign talent, he said.

According to the Information Technology Association of America, an industry-funded organization, 843,000 IT jobs went unfilled last year, with about 20 percent of them programming positions.

But this flurry of open jobs is not easily attainable for older candidates who are faced with a Catch-22, Matloff said. They are too old to have been groomed in the programming acronyms of the moment--Java, C++ or XML--yet employers require actual "paid" work experience in these technologies, he said.

Software training courses--even a graduate degree--are often not considered experience, Matloff said.

"The demand now is not just to know Java, but Java and XML coupled with work experience where you've used them together," he said. "Put it this way, if a programming skill shows up in the 'Dummies' series books, then it's already too late."

At least one company begs to differ.

A job ad for a Java/C++ programmer on the Web site of MegaForce LLC, a consulting/recruiting agency in Overland Park, Kan., reads: "Looking for 1-2 years of programming in either Java or C++. If you do not know Java or C++ you will have an opportunity to learn these skills."

"The 'opportunity to learn' part is written as a selling point to attract older workers who have mainframe experience, but want to learn newer technologies," said Ryan Mac Donald, MegaForce's directing manager of recruitment, who places high-tech workers at Fortune 50 companies.

"The perception out there is that nobody wants to train, which is untrue," Mac Donald said, adding that companies he's worked with have accepted training courses as experience.

MegaForce's recruiting ethics are in the minority, according to a recent nationwide survey of 200 IT managers conducted by Information Week, a business technology magazine. Only 2 percent of managers would hire an applicant with more than 10 years of experience, the survey found, while almost half of them preferred to hire a worker with four to 10 years' experience.

"In a technical universe, years don't matter--it's the flexibility," said local high-tech pioneer Sam Phelps, president and chief executive officer of Technium, a technology consulting firm.

"You can be a 25-year-old or a 55-year-old and face age discrimination," said Phelps, 47.

Most valuable to companies now are workers who have traveled through the ebbs and flows of a fluctuating market, he said.

"It's the total experience that a person brings, and not just focusing narrowly on technical skills," Phelps said.

To widen older programmers' chances of getting past the first job screening, it has become standard practice for them to remove age-identifying information such as job dates on resumes, said Ken Daubenspeck of Chicago-based Daubenspeck & Associates Ltd., an executive IT recruiting firm.

"(Companies) set a bandwidth for someone they are looking for," he said. "A job description may ask for someone with, say, 10 years of experience so that recruiters won't even bring in someone who has 20 years behind them."

Two recent studies on ageism in the industry have come up inconclusive.

An Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers-USA survey last year found that IT workers 45 years and older were rated as better problem solvers, communicators and equivalent to younger workers on technical knowledge and teamwork skills. At the same time, the study found older workers were viewed as weaker in adapting to new assignments and staying abreast with the latest tech developments.

A National Academy of Sciences report stated, "workers who lose their jobs for whatever reason . . . may inaccurately attribute the cause of this action to age discrimination."

The report also found that while older IT workers were more likely to lose their jobs than younger workers, older displaced workers were just as likely to find new jobs as younger workers.

Seasoned workers who understand and can manage programs of the past are valuable, said John Montgomery, president of Northbrook-based Technomic International, a consulting firm specializing in software, telecommunications, and medical and pharmaceutical companies.

"I would not put the older worker at a disadvantage," said Montgomery, 65. "As more companies migrate their businesses from mainframe systems to modern client server formats, older programmers will be needed."

Older programmers often fit better in project management roles, and younger programmers are better for working on the actual technologies, he said.

Still for many middle-aged programmers, getting back into what they say is an unstable, short-lived field isn't worth it, so some reach for the next best thing: tech-support jobs.

Douglas Kretzmann, 40, remembers when he and all 20 of his mainframe programmer friends were employed. That was in the 1980s; today only four remain in the field.

"The rest of us are on the fringes now, doing tech support, training and sales," said Kretzmann, of Denver.

Kretzmann said he settled on a support job at a software company after he was unable to find steady programming work. It also required him to take a 30 percent pay cut from his previous \$80,000 a year salary.

After being snubbed relentlessly by private sector recruiters, Ezer, the 48-year-old programmer, took the advice of a friend to take a New York civil service test for computer programming.

He aced it. Ten interviews awaited him. He accepted a programming position at a state agency.

Then a surprising thing happened: Ezer was recently offered an opportunity to interview with a talked-about start-up in the Silicon Valley. The trip to the industry's paragon was paid for and stock options waited in the wings.

But the possibility of losing a job in an unstable tech market was so vexing Ezer declined the interview.

"At least where I am now, there is a semblance of security," he said.

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