



AGE DISCRIMINATION

How Not to Get Pushed Out of Your Job

Yes, those old prejudices exist. No, they don't have to derail your career. CARLA MURPHY tells how to survive and thrive.

Ginny O'Brien will not reveal her age. "Late 50s" is the most the founding president of the Columbia Consultancy, a Massachusetts-based executive coaching firm, will muster. It's a curious response from an otherwise straight-talking and driven woman who counsels female professionals aiming to climb the corporate ladder. Then again, O'Brien is in a good position to know that age discrimination definitely exists in the workplace. Almost 18,000 charges were filed in 2004, according to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Of these, around 41 percent were filed by women; the average age, 51.

Some industries are worse than others. "Women in broadcasting, cosmetics, consumer products, environments where you have to represent a certain look and statement to the public" are typically more vulnerable to being squeezed out as

they get older, says Julie Goldberg, senior client partner at the global headhunting firm Korn/Ferry International. In advertising and public relations, "once you're past 40, you should be looking for another occupation," says Scott Kane, founder of Gray Hair Management, a Deerfield, Illinois, coaching firm. Much more age-friendly are professions such as law, medicine, and accounting, where experience and maturity work to your benefit, says attorney Lisa Klerman, a Southern California mediator in employment law cases.

No matter what industry you're in, though, it's never too early to start age-proofing your career, the experts advise. ■ **Network.** "There's better than an 80 percent chance," says Kane, "that your next position is going to come from someone you know." Joining a trade or professional association, a job ministry at church, or the National Association for

Female Executives will help you stay connected and up-to-date in your field.

■ **Think young.** Both O'Brien and Kane say that if you're worried about coming off "too old," it's likely others will start to worry as well. Leave short skirts to the 28-year-olds, but learn the new computer programs, technology, and industry standards as they evolve.

■ **Don't step entirely off the career track.** If you're planning to raise children, consider working part-time, reducing office responsibilities, or creating other flexible options with your employer, advises Sylvia Ann Hewlett, PhD, founding president of the Center for Work-Life Policy in New York City. Her research, published this year in the *Harvard Business Review*, found that white-collar women's salaries decreased an average of 18 percent when returning to work after two-year leaves. "If they're out three years or more," says

Hewlett, "the penalty goes up to 37 percent."

TO KEEP YOUR SALARY HIGH, don't break for babies: Work part-time instead of taking a long leave.

And if you lose your job? Organizations such as

40 Plus (40plus.org) and Gray Hair Management (grayhairmanagement.com) are set up to help mature professionals find employment. If you suspect you've been the victim of age discrimination and want to file charges, start by going to the EEOC (eoc.gov). Recent laws have made it easier to protect your rights as an older worker.

