

Free Agents

Experienced Workers Search for Next Opportunity

By Matt L. Ottinger

For many Baby Boomers, getting back into the workforce after a brief exit is proving quite challenging. In addition to wanting to find the right opportunity for themselves, companies are sometimes looking for youthful perspectives – or simply to pay lower salaries to younger workers.

And, as two experts in the field cautioned when we started this series of stories in our January-February issue:

- “The biggest problem is age bias. Ageism is still a huge barrier.”
- “Older workers are the last to be let go, but in the hardest position to find work. If they are laid off, then they are at a disadvantage compared to younger workers.”

The two people profiled here won’t go that far. They agreed to talk to *BizVoice*® not to complain about any unfair treatment, but as simply another step in their process to find meaningful employment.

Meet Dick and Phil

Dick Isenhour is a man with a bevy of years and accolades to his credit in the world of journalism. A Ball State University graduate and 59-year-old journalist living in Greenwood, Isenhour currently does freelance writing for publications by Kiwanis International (his latest employer, which let him go in 2010), as well as the alumni magazine for Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis and several non-profits.

“I either want a full-time job, or to go out on my own (as a permanent freelancer),” he explains. “My preference is finding a full-time job; I like the team atmosphere.”

Isenhour was part of at least one truly winning team early in his career. While writing for *The News-Sentinel* in 1982, the Fort Wayne native and his colleagues were awarded a Pulitzer Prize for general local reporting based on their coverage of the community’s battle with devastating floods. Isenhour has also earned other awards of excellence for his work on magazines and corporate communications projects.

Phil Mercier, 54, is not a writer (although he also graduated from Ball State and currently calls Fort Wayne home). However, he too has gained a great deal of recognition in his field of orthopedic and medical device sales. Between 1984 and 2003, Mercier worked his way up the ranks of Warsaw-based DePuy, turning around struggling territories in his region en route to winning such awards as Sales Associate of the Year and Distributor of the Year.

He left DePuy in 2003 and has worked as both an employee and employer (operating his own recruiting business among other initiatives). Mercier voluntarily vacated his most recent position in Memphis, Tennessee in 2010 in order to return to Fort Wayne following his father’s

Dick Isenhour, 59, was part of the 1982 Pulitzer Prize winning news team (Isenhour is standing behind the man with the T-shirt and tie) at *The News-Sentinel* in Fort Wayne. The paper earned the award for its coverage of historic flooding in the area.





Phil Mercier, 54, is waiting to find the right career opportunity. He's earned several prestigious awards for his work in orthopedic sales over the years, although he is not opposed to changing fields.

death and to be near his two children – both graduate students at Indiana universities.

He's now looking for a position that will fuel his passion above all else.

"I'm at a stage where I'd like to find a job where I feel like a volunteer rather than a mercenary," Mercier surmises. "I want to do work I'm passionate about that's associated with growth – and it doesn't necessarily have to include the industry I've been most associated with ... a new industry would be welcomed at this point. I view it as much as an opportunity as a predicament. It gives me the opportunity to look at things in a fresh perspective."

A mysterious process

As any job seeker knows, the application process today is far removed from what it used to be. Employers are now bombarded with thousands of resumés for jobs posted online. One almost has to wonder: Do potential employers see ages of some applicants and simply move on?

"I haven't had any explicit challenges," Mercier responds, when asked if he's felt discriminated against. "I do think there is a challenge associated with aging from both an employer's standpoint, as well as my own. Often, the presence of experience can be a barrier with younger managers who may not feel comfortable having someone 20 years older (as a subordinate), for example. But I haven't faced any circumstances where it's been an explicit issue."

Having worked as a recruiter, however, has exposed him to the fact that younger candidates are preferred by some.

"You can clearly see a trend when you're working with employers to fill positions that it's better for them to have someone younger – a so-called 'clean sheet of paper,' he describes. "It's understandable."

Isenhour has applied for a minimum of three job openings in marketing, public relations or related fields each week since March 2010. He's noticed younger applicants have been awarded jobs that he's interviewed for on a couple of occasions, but believes that could just be anecdotal. The challenge has been a lack of in-person opportunities.

"Out of the more than 200 jobs for which I've applied, I've had two interviews – one by phone and the other in person," he relays. "I believe I was more than qualified for those two, but lost out to candidates who are considerably younger and, I'm guessing, less expensive."

Isenhour adds that with applications being online, candidates have no idea who's reviewing their materials. He says job seekers seldom receive replies.

"Because of the nature of job hunting in these times, it's nearly impossible to follow up on applications, so I don't really know why I'm not being considered."

Traditional networking

Mercier says that when it comes to resources, nothing trumps personal connections that have been made over the years.

"I've enlisted a professional resumé writer to help me consolidate my experience and make it most relevant in terms of the past 10 years," he notes. "I obviously use the Internet for reviewing job boards and industry-specific web sites, but the biggest resource any of us have is personal networking and contacts of past experience."

Isenhour also points to personal contacts and online resources, although he's also used trade organizations and met with an outplacement counselor.

When asked about a timetable, he says it's largely predicated on unemployment support.

"I have three more months of unemployment (checks) left, and I'd like it to be resolved by then," he explains, reiterating that freelancing full-time is still something he'd consider.

Isenhour would prefer to stay in Central Indiana, although he would consider leaving if a worthwhile opportunity arrived. He qualifies that he'd enjoy moving back to Fort Wayne, although opportunities there are even fewer than in Indianapolis.

Mercier explains he and his wife "downsized their home" in the past year, moving into a house half the size – and half the expense. Having had a career as a successful salesman, he's been afforded the ability to wait for the right opportunity.

"I don't think a timetable is a good way to make a decision about the next 10 years of my life," he asserts. "I want to make sure it's something I can be enthusiastic about and has long-term potential – not a short-term gap filler."

He adds that working 15 hours a day while growing up on a farm has left him squeamish about having idle time.

"I like to work and I like to get my hands dirty," Mercier says. "I still have a lot of energy; I'm physically fit and don't feel like I look like an old guy. Older people offer a lot of experience that doesn't fit every situation. You have to look where experience is valued."

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Dick Isenhour at www.disenhour.com

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