

Age discrimination and contractors

The passage of the [Age Discrimination Act](#) in October, 2006 has not changed much for the older working contractor. Although the new law does provide redress for contractors who believe that they have not been given work because of their age, proving all that remains a very nasty can of worms.

"Contractors who lose out because of age discrimination have no clear way of proving it," says Martin Brampton, director of the York-based IT consulting firm [Black Sheep Research](#). "How can you show that you've been passed over for a job because an agency doesn't call you?"

Younger Managers Fear Older Contractors

This is a shame because, as Brampton points out, everyone in the industry has seen age discrimination at work. "Age discrimination is rife," Brampton says, "and there is no good reason for it."

There are no good reasons for it, but there are causes for it, as Brampton explains: "Often it's just a case of younger managers on staff being afraid to work with contractors older than they are. It could be awkward for young people when the contractors have far more experience and broader skills range than they do." Although in fact managers should be taught to work with people of all ages, as the age discrimination legislation points out, that doesn't happen much in practice.

But The Work Force Gets Older

Research from the [IT Job Board](#) has found that 71.9% of the UK's IT professionals believe there to be more age discrimination in the IT sector than other industries. Whether this will lead to a number of age discrimination lawsuits or not is not clear. We do not know how these statistics apply to contractors, and Brampton notes that we have no good statistics on age of contractors in the workplace today. This is happening at a time when the entire work force in the UK is getting older: according to the UK Ministry of Labour, not only is the working population getting older - with an anticipated 37 million of us working into our 50s by 2030 - but as a nation we're also working until later in life.

"It's ironic that we hear so much about the skills shortage, but almost nothing about using older contractors who have great skills to fill the gap. Older contractors are likely to be very experienced and very skilled, so what's wrong with them? They work in a wide variety of sites, technologies, and languages, so would seem to be even more desirable than younger ones," Brampton adds.

Nonetheless, a group of older IT workers has set up an online support group because they have so much difficulty finding work. Older contractors are sometimes forced to lie about their age if they expect any attention from agency recruiters.

What You Can Do

There are things an older contractor can do to help ensure such attention. Improved marketing and sales skills will always make a difference and can overcome latent age discrimination. Concentration on the most desirable skill set will of course prove helpful—watch this space for our Market Report to stay up-to-date.

Networking is also a skill that can keep you connected with contracting offers. Knowing where the greatest demand is will always put you in the driver's seat. Last, as one older contractor suggests, "don't look old. Dye your hair and carry an iPod."

That's an extreme suggestion, but the world we live in is, alas, an imperfect one, even for skilled IT contractors.

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Research-IT Job Board