



The 50+ Challenge

In the light of evidence that employers tend to discriminate against older employees, preferring to recruit candidates under 40 and frequently laying off those over 50 – and that this phenomenon applies to women more than to men – the Career Women's Forum launched the "50+ *autrement*" initiative at the beginning of this year. The name was selected to position the 50+ workforce in a more positive light than the present Swiss market tends to portray.

With more than 40 percent of our members 45 or over, the initiative was met with enthusiasm.

Our objective is to support and coach members faced with the challenge of maintaining and adapting to professional careers, as well as obtaining new employment, after the age of 50 in today's demanding job market and to help change common misconceptions in the workplace. At the same time, we hope to raise awareness among CWF's younger managers of some of these issues and to consider what role they can play.

It is interesting to note that Switzerland is the only western democracy to have nothing on the statute books to prevent discrimination on the grounds of age in the workplace or to protect older employees. They are often seen as less flexible and more costly, clichés that have proved to be unfounded. What has been overlooked is the fact that they are both more experienced and reliable and have considerable knowledge, which they are willing to share to help the company bottom line.

Phase One aimed at CWF members

The first step of Phase One of this project was a survey designed to determine CWF members' own experiences and attitudes on age-related issues. It drew an excellent response and produced no fewer than 300 constructive comments. It supported our assumption that women are more affected by age discrimination than men and clearly demonstrated that our members' attitudes to later-life careers were more focussed on quality of life and relationships, and openness to sharing experience, than on making it to the top.

These findings formed the basis for a series of four workshops. "Legacy Circles", facilitated by Marie-Christine Willemin, who initiated this concept, dealt with transmitting personal knowledge and wisdom as a key to long-term business and personal success. This was followed by "Financial Planning", led by Lucille Cormorèche, which addressed one of the main concerns voiced by members – how to plan personal finances – and "Branding Me", led by Joanne Freeman, during which participants learned how to "market" their skills to obtain desired results.

The fourth workshop, "Rethinking the Concept of 'Career'", facilitated by Eva von Rohr and myself, explored how to reconsider career options in the face of business realities and make creative adjustments to increase job opportunities and, at the same time, maintain a more holistic approach to life.

Centrepiece of Phase One of 50+ *autrement* is our upcoming October 22 luncheon, at which Véronique Morali, an influential French businesswoman who has championed the feminist cause in a modern way, will speak on "Strength through Solidarity and Mutual Help". You can read about her achievements and contributions to supporting women over 45 in the workplace in the accompanying profile.

Phase Two will seek to engage business community

Initial plans for Phase Two are aimed at involving the Geneva business community to help identify and address the issue of age discrimination and recognize the value of hiring and retaining qualified workers approaching or past 50. Clearly, efforts to improve the situation for older employees are handicapped at the moment by the background of the recession and by the growing number of unemployed.

The Steering Group will re-assess the situation before proceeding with Phase Two. That will come when the market is more receptive to our message as it gears up to leverage opportunities during an economic recovery. The input of our members – particularly those involved in Phase One of 50+ *autrement* – will help us to reach a decision on how to proceed.

We see the 50+ phenomenon both as a challenge and as an opportunity and remain positive. It has been said, "Recessions are the time for ideas to flourish." I firmly believe that.

Pamela Grant,
50+ *autrement* Steering Committee