

In the past, I prioritized my responsibilities to others as higher than taking care of myself. When I first came to GE, I was finishing my master's thesis. At the same time, I also was strongly committed to reinvigorating our SWE section and helping my husband find friends in our new city. To accomplish all this, I sacrificed my exercise time and I postponed getting involved with horses again, or focusing on any hobbies. This caught up to me in the form of an infected gallbladder only eight months into my job. I had to have my gallbladder removed, which

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certainly forced me to slow down for a few weeks.

Over time, I've realized that for the sake of my health and well-being, I must make my own happiness a priority. Although an employer can provide work/life balance support, I have to draw the line on how much of my time is given to others. Employers will always want as much of your time as you are willing to give, and the same can be said for family and anyone else who depends on you. One of the most valuable lessons — to be responsible to my own needs so that I can serve others — was key to my transition from collegiate to young professional. ■

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Make Your Age Your Ally

Whether in the early stages of your career or a veteran of the work force, you can create an environment in which age is a non-issue, and position yourself to be perceived as "just right."

BY JILL S. TIETJEN, P.E., F.SWE AND MARY D. PETRYSZYN, SWE

Does it seem that Goldilocks and the Three Bears have entered your place of employment? They have categorized you as "too young" or "too old." Their skepticism to the contrary, no matter your age, you can be viewed as "just right." Following are some tips to convince Goldilocks and the Three Bears (aka your management) that with the skills you have today, your flexibility to adapt to new situations, and your passion for lifelong learning, you really are "just right."

Your current skills

When was the last time you did a skills inventory? Many of us do not take the time to consider our skills on a regular basis, but there truly is no time like the present. Over your career, you will change positions, and possibly even industries. Maybe you found your passion in service to our country, and did a tour in the military or government. Maybe you've been in both private industry and academia.

You probably developed skills even at those jobs you had during college. Remember them? Did you serve as a teaching or research assistant, laboratory aide, or computer service tech to help make ends meet and pay for tuition, books, and room and board?

In developing your inventory, remember to include all of the skills you acquired through your experience in the Society of Women Engineers and other volunteer organizations. It is quite

possible that your job hasn't yet provided you the opportunity to prove out the skills that you have already demonstrated in SWE. Have you organized all of the volunteers, coordinated with corporations, and balanced the budget for an Evening with Industry? In thinking through your volunteer activities, you might discover, for example, that you have skills that include leadership, project management, budgeting, and working with people.

When assessing your abilities, there are indeed various dimensions — beyond breadth and depth — to consider. And it is important to think through an area that might be particularly challenging: the "translatable" element. For instance, it may be fairly easy to jot down skills from your current and past jobs (and volunteer positions) — systems engineering, project leadership, people management, conflict resolution, negotiation skills, financial acumen, and the like. And you may be able to succinctly describe your depth of knowledge and experience in specific areas of environmental health and safety, medical equipment sales, or power distribution system design. But it may take some ingenuity to translate these skills and experiences to articulate your true talents.

For example, characterize your project leadership skills in combination with your power distribution system design experience in such a way to establish that you have managed a team of engineers through design of a system deliv-



ered to a customer's requirements. By presenting your experience in this manner, you may have just demonstrated your ability to perform a subcontract management role by applying these skills in a different domain. Be creative in your characterizations.

Flexibility to adapt

Change is inevitable, in both our personal and professional lives. Being able to respond and adapt as a situation changes is a highly desirable trait. Even better is the ability to anticipate changes coming and adjust in advance. Do you ever marvel at those people who always seem to be in the right place at the right time? Or do you find yourself amazed at the ability of that person from accounting who just became the head of contracts? That could be you, if you can translate your skills effectively and are courageous enough to accept the challenges of situational change.

Here are some things you can do to improve your adaptability:

- Anticipate
- Pay attention to the signs that can provide you some clues, such as new idioms being used or changes to your company's strategic focus
- Stay attuned to the culture and the direction leadership is taking, and acclimate accordingly

Your alignment and positive approach will go a long way in showing your understanding and keeping you attuned with the future. In the end, these characteristics show a level of maturity and business acumen — irrespective of age or experience.

Your passion for lifelong learning

While your acquired skills and adaptability can position you well, over your career you can expect some gaps as you determine what you'd like to do next and where you'd like to position yourself in the longer term. In addition, we've already said that change is inevitable. Even in industries or areas that might be viewed as sta-

ble and static, look below the surface and you'll see that change is everywhere.

Thus it is mandatory that you develop or nurture your zeal for lifelong learning. First, define the gap you need to fill or an area in which you want to learn more. Then, read as much on the subject as you can. Take training courses and continuing education classes. Be sure to find a mentor — maybe even several. Ensure that you put all of this learning into practice; this is what translates knowledge to wisdom. And wisdom is not a function of age — it is timeless.

As you translate your skills and experience in a way that aligns you with your desired goals, you create an environment that gives you much more influence over your own journey. In addition, your ability to adapt to changes and strive for continuous learning all along the way will help ensure that age or length of service are no longer issues, making you "just right." ■

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Solution to puzzle from p. 70

