

BARRIERS THAT SABOTAGE THE JOB HUNT

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At troubling time for older workers, Hudson heroes' experience resonates

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Experience and teamwork saved the day.

When Flight 1549 landed in the Hudson River, 155 lives were saved because the aircraft was well-built, and the crew did what it had been trained ... and trained ... to do.

As soon as news of the "miracle on the Hudson" identified the captain, co-workers began dropping by my desk to comment.

"Let's hear it for experience!"

"That's the guy I want flying my plane."

One could fairly make the case that talented neophytes could have done the same. Ability and calm under pressure know no precise age boundaries. And everyone can cite examples of veteran workers who haven't kept up.

But in a time across the American workscape when older (more expensive) workers are being jettisoned to save money, the performance of the seasoned crew resonated.

According to the US Airline Pilots Association, these are the crew members who knew what to do and did it:

Capt. Chesley Sullenberger, 29 years of flying with US Airways and, before that, with the military.

First Officer Jeffrey Skiles, 23 years with the airline (previously US Air) and before that with a cargo carrier.

Flight attendant Sheila Dail, 28 years with the airline and Piedmont Airlines.

Flight attendant Doreen Welsh, 38 years with the airline and Allegheny Airlines.

Flight attendant Donna Dent, 26 years with the airline and Piedmont.

The veteran status of the crew was noted with some irony by a group of even more experienced pilots who can no longer command U.S. commercial air carriers.

These pilots were forced to retire because they had reached the then-mandatory retirement age of 60.

Congress overturned that Federal Aviation Administration rule in December 2007, putting the United States' rules on par with international rules that set 65 as commercial pilots' retirement age.

But the new rule contained language that prevented thousands of pilots, who had been forced to retire between late November 2006 and mid-December 2007, from reclaiming their jobs at their prior seniority levels.

The new rule even contained a "no legal recourse" provision to prevent the forcibly retired group of pilots from launching a court challenge.

Some did anyway but have been rebuffed in their efforts so far.

The pilots association didn't back the older pilots' efforts to fly again. With the "white hairs" gone, younger pilots rose in the seniority ranks and obtained better access to choice flights and schedules.

The new rules gave the over-60 but under-65 pilots the right to reapply and start over at the bottom of the seniority ranks — *if* and when they could even get hired.

"When I'm going down, I want a 'Sully' at the controls," said one colleague, referring to the Flight 1549 captain.

But, as some of the senior pilots graciously have noted, the skill and calm in the face of calamity wasn't the captain's alone.

It was a group effort. And in that we find applicability to all lines of work. Everyone knows the adage about the weakest link.