

Losing your job at 50

Left unemployed because of Covid, many people in their fifties are battling an ageist corporate India, while trying to reinvent themselves to get back in the game

| Labonita Ghosh
@timesgroup.com
TWEETS @laboghosh

The Choluteca bridge in Honduras is popularly known as the 'bridge to nowhere'. It was built in 1998 to withstand the natural disasters the area was prone to. Later that same year, when Hurricane Mitch ravaged the region, the bridge survived with minor damage but the area around it was completely wasted. The roads to and from the bridge were gone, and even the river flowing underneath it changed course. So today the bridge stands tall and strong, but largely unused.

Until recently, when corporate coaches claimed it for a parable on adaptability in these Covid times. In posts that have gone viral, they say the bridge signifies the need to change to stay relevant. Kiran Lakshminath, CEO of the staffing firm Head Hunters India, says there's a very good lesson here for senior executives who have been laid off during the pandemic. "A lot of older people who are at the peak of their careers have been affected as whole sectors, like hospitality or travel, have been wiped out," says Lakshminath. "But today, it's the survival of the fittest. Those who are in their 50s and suddenly find themselves jobless, must reskill and reinvent themselves to become re-employable — and not be like the Choluteca bridge."

"This is the worst time in your life to get laid off," says Kolkata-based sales and marketing professional Nirjan Nandy. "At this age, we usually have more responsibilities than

“People in their 50s or even 40s, if they are in roles that don't add value to the business, will always be in a vulnerable position, which will affect their re-employability in the job market

—Prashant Pandey of Right Management India



Former restaurant manager Bernard Alexander now works as a dump truck helper

younger colleagues. We may have school or college-going children who are not yet ready for the job market, or elderly parents and relatives to take care of. Our health also starts deteriorating so there are our own medical bills." And, at time when you're winding down and looking forward to retirement, you might find yourself trying to restart your career. After over 20 years of experience in various sectors, Nandy, 50, found himself jobless in June, when the Kolkata division of the company he worked in, shut shop. "If we want a professional for our need we accept experienced guy - doctor, lawyer, IT consultant etc. But for sales or business development we have age limit. Why?... We can also handle clients, channel partners, issues, and bring business. Why [will] our experience not be considered?" Nandy

wrote on LinkedIn last week. The responses to his post ranged from outrage to 'hang in there' messages. But not a single headhunter has reached out to him yet. "I have applied to over a 100 jobs," he says. Most didn't respond. "With some, when I got to the call stage, I realised they have an age criterion which instantly disqualifies me. Everybody is looking for only younger people." Unfazed, Nandy is plugging

on with his search. "There is a difference between chronological age and mental age," he says. "I feel mental age is more important at the workplace. I could be as tech savvy as any young person, and certain functions, like data analysis, can be carried out by anyone. So why is there an age bar?"

Desperation has driven Bernard Alexander, the former general manager of China Garden, to extreme lengths. The 52-year-old was relieved of duty in April, after operations closed down. After spending months trying to unsuccessfully find a job, Alexander now works as a helper to BMC's dumpster drivers. When *Mirror* tried to reach him, his sister Danielle said he is untraceable. "He sleeps in a discarded container somewhere on the Eastern Express Highway, and flags down dumpsters that are on their way to the Kanjur dumping ground," she says. "The drivers usually need someone to accompany them to the dumping ground, and my brother acts as the ride-along." Alexander, who used to make Rs 70,000 a month, now gets Rs 50 for every truck he rides in — and it's never more than five a day, adds Danielle. "We have no contact with him either, because he has left his

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8



THE SUNDAY READ

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

mobile phone at home, for fear of it getting stolen.”

“Bernard has tried for a job at quite a few places, but everywhere he was told they were looking for younger people, mostly between 35 and 40 years,” says Danielle. One day, while feeding the strays near the highway, he heard about the work with the dumper trucks and decided to take it up. “My brother has become unrecognisable,” says Danielle. “He used to be a restaurant manager but after living on the streets and losing a lot of weight, he now looks like a vagrant.” Alexander was the primary breadwinner of the family, which now depends on the munificence of friends and relatives. “My brother has had more than 25 years of experience in the hospitality sector, and even worked abroad. He’s hoping that when things open up again, he’ll find something better,” Danielle adds.

“In Goa, we’ve heard of senior managers trying to sell fish on the streets,” says Lakshminanth. “People have gone down to any level to feel useful and reconnect after being fired. Today, companies want CXOs with 10 to 15 years of experience or a CEO who is no more than 45 years old. Sadly, even on a good day, anyone above the age of 45 is in a vulnerable category.” And in a pandemic, all bets are off. “The peak of your employment life is now considered to be between 25 and 45. Which means by 50, you’re well past your prime,” she adds. “If by 45, you haven’t hit the CXO level and are still in the second rung, you may be unemployable if you lose your job.”

According to Vijay Karkare, managing director of the executive search firm Cornerstone India, there’s no getting around India Inc’s ageism. “The retirement age in many countries is getting pushed to 65-70. But here, we feel that a person is of no use to the corporate world once he is 50. Overnight, he becomes an untouchable.” According to Karkare, Indian companies typically take a very narrow view of hiring. “Companies only want a like-to-like hiring,” he says. “They look for similar skill sets, similar backgrounds and therefore a similar age range when scouting for a position. They don’t realise that hiring a different sort of candidate can bring a lot of diversity of thought and ideas to the role.” This almost always leaves out older potentials. “Companies believe that only someone with a similar background can get the job done, which is not true” adds Karkare. “They should, for the same reason, not discount senior candidates.”

There is another, peculiarly Indian issue, says the HR manager of a top, Mumbai-based FMCG company: That of insecurity. “If you are in your 50s, your experience will probably be commensurate with that of C-suite leaders. CEOs in India usually want to

“Today, companies want CXOs with 10 to 15 years of experience or a CEO who is no more than 45 years old



— Kiran Lakshminanth of Head Hunters India



Nirjan Nandy has applied to over 100 jobs since he lost his job in June

hire someone younger so that they can build a second line of leadership and create a succession plan. But it’s also true that they feel threatened to onboard someone whose age and abilities are similar to theirs for fear of being dethroned. They would much rather look at a less experienced deputy.” Some deep-rooted biases, she says, need to be up-ended right away: The idea that older people won’t be able to keep up in a VUCA world, or that they are less agile and less open to learning, especially when it comes to technology. “This sort of typecasting is simply wrong,” she says. “Today, there are people who are learning even at the age of 80.”

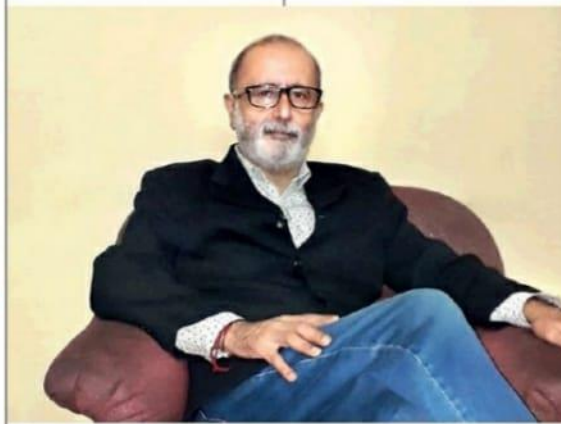
Like Biswajit Banerjee. The 57-year-old Delhi-based marketing professional who works in advertising lost his job in March. “I have some savings to fall back on but I do have some constraints,” he says, admitting that he’s applied to over 300 jobs by now and even considered taking up some internships he came across on the internet. “The only offers I’ve been getting are from small companies saying that they will pay me a part of the salary now and the rest later, or asking me to work on a project basis, which I don’t want to do. Most people have not even responded to my mails. HR people post these jobs online but they never even get back to the candidate. In the few conversations I’ve had, I’ve got the feeling that I have ‘too much experience’ for the



K. Vanessa sees being laid off as an opportunity to try something new

role — which is probably management speak for the fact that they want younger people.” Banerjee’s two children are in college and his wife suffers from multiple sclerosis. Fed up of chasing after jobs, Banerjee has decided to start his own venture. Since he is passionate about art, he’s opened his own online art portal. “I’ve taken my situation in my stride and I’ve decided to do something on own thing,” he adds.

Prashant Pandey, country manager



Biswajit Banerjee has started his own art-related venture after losing his job

“The retirement age in many countries is getting pushed to 65 or 70. But here we feel a person is of no use once he is 50



—Vijay Karkare of Cornerstone India

of Right Management India, which is part of the Manpower Group, says: “Just because you are in your 50s does not make you more vulnerable compared to someone else. Your vulnerability quotient, so to speak, depends on your specialisation and the function you present. People in their 50s or even 40s, if they are in roles that don’t add value to the business, such as support functions or administration, will always be in a vulnerable position, and this will affect their re-employability in the job market. On the other hand, you may be 59 and in a niche mergers and acquisitions role; that will always keep in great demand in the job market.” In other words, says Pandey, if you are in a value-adding function or have a specialised skill, you are in a better place when redundancy hits than someone who is in a more general role, no matter what your age. Then here are factors like payscale. “By virtue of spending eight or 10 years in a large conglomerate, you might end up in a position where your salary and your job component are not in sync with each other. That’s when your point of vulnerability starts,” adds Pandey. “So always re-evaluate yourself and make sure your salary and job content are in line. And don’t necessarily be happy with the extra increment you receive. That makes you build up liabilities, and one day you may suddenly find the rug pulled from beneath your feet.”

K. Vanessa has, however, landed on her feet. After spending 18 years in a company which was into educational books for children — and heading the Bengaluru South division and handling training, sales, workshops, liaising with parents and children and a hundred other responsibilities — Vanessa thought she would retire in her role. But in the beginning of September, she learnt that the India office was winding up operations. “It happened very suddenly,” she says. “As soon as I heard that I no longer had a job, I called up my friend in HR and asked her to help me update my CV. Since then I’ve sent out my CV to many companies and even done a telephone interview. I’m still wrapping up my old job so I haven’t gone full throttle yet.”

While there is a sense of loss, Vanessa, a single mom, tries to put things in perspective. “My younger son, who had just finished college, was planning to take a gap year. But when he heard I had lost my job, he got a job in three days. I think this is also a good opportunity for me to do something new. I don’t see my age as a disadvantage and I don’t think hiring managers should either. With age, comes emotional strength, a certain courage to be decisive and experience, among other things. You bring a lot to the table as you grow older.”

With inputs from Anupama Bijur, Bangalore