

You know, it can't hurt to get out and meet people

Looking for a new job when you're 25 or 35 may be tough but entering the job search at 45 and beyond? That can be a real challenge.

"People look at me differently now," says

Gregory Wilke, a 47-year-old "in-between-jobs" risk analyst who is moving from Dayton, Ohio, to Omaha, Nebraska. "I've had a few interviews with people younger than me and I feel like a relic. I know I'm not but if I feel that way, I assume they do, too."

Wilke, who is moving to be with his wife, who began working at Creighton University last year, says he feels like the "proverbial fish out of water, the guy who stands in the corner at parties" when he attempts to network with others in person so he says he's going to create a strong online presence, which will be the main weapon in his job-search arsenal. "I've been with the same company for 24 years and my wife took a one-year position that turned into a full-blown offer, and it's her dream job, so I'm moving," Wilke says. "But I am completely unprepared. I had a job so I saw no reason to even be on LinkedIn, which was probably a mistake. Now, it's different. I'm just relieved I can use the internet to find work because 24 years ago, that wasn't the case."

Social, not solo

Wilke shouldn't put all his job-search hopes in online connections. In fact, Marty Gilbert, founder and CEO of the NorthShore Executive Networking Group, says overly relying on the internet and online connections to find a job isn't enough.

Gilbert, who has a background in marketing and sales, has worked at the executive level for Motorola, STATS Inc., Dentsu Inc. and Utopia Global Inc., among others. He began the NorthShore group nine years ago when he was looking for a job and assessing what he wanted to do next. "I knew I had a strong background and that I'd worked with some great companies but I also had a chance to run some custom businesses — large, and midsized companies — and I wasn't completely sure about how to proceed," he says.

After doing some research, Gilbert says he realized there were numerous people facing the same challenge. "If you're over the age of 45, you realize there are fewer opportunities to plant your ladder in places where you climb to the top of your profession," Gilbert says. "At that point in your life, you may have kids in college, more expenses and more challenges in general. Or it can be the opposite. You may have fewer responsibilities so your expenses may actually decrease. Either way, you're going to find yourself in a new situation. If you're not working, the situation can be difficult. You may find yourself facing emotional, financial and career challenges because there just aren't as many opportunities as there may have been in the past."

Gilbert says he reached out to five others in similar situations and formed an accountability group. "We were all in the latter stages of our career, had done well, but because of our age and our amount

of experience, knew we had a challenge in front of us," says Gilbert. "The idea was to meet each week, bounce ideas off of each other, share information and try to help each other out."

The group of six soon expanded to 12, then 25, then more. Today, the NorthShore Executive Networking Group, or NSENG, has more than 5,400 members. Gilbert hosts webinars, training sessions, presentations and more, all aimed at providing both active and passive job seekers with the tools they might need to improve or expand their careers.

People first

While acknowledging that online tools and groups can be essential parts of one's career development and job search, Gilbert fears that older job seekers rely too much on online assistance. "The majority of people think that the job search is all about answering online job boards. I tell people not to be consumed by it. Focus your time on productive activities like networking, targeting and messaging to companies that interest you," he says. "People spend so much time worrying about getting through the applicant tracking system but the truth is, the applicant tracking system doesn't have a voice here. You have to go around the system. You have to go to the source, to the people that have the power, the influence, the money, and the position to make a decision."

You can find many of those sources on LinkedIn, Gilbert says. "Take a look through your contacts on LinkedIn and you're going to be surprised at the people some of your contacts know," he says.

But view some of those contacts with caution. One trap Gilbert thinks job seekers succumb to is an over-reliance on friends and family. "Those are people who know you really well — in most cases, too well. They may not feel comfortable mixing their professional and personal lives if a job comes up in their department that would be an ideal fit for you," he says. "It's usually better to use those contacts to introduce you to other contacts. You can use them to grow your network."

Human touch

Gilbert says NSENG meetings are structured to give people face-to-face time at the onset, followed by a scheduled block of time for a speaker and then breakout sessions in small groups where people share information about themselves and their experiences.

It's that last part, the sharing, that Gilbert thinks is key to the midlife job search. "Looking for a job can be an extremely lonely experience when you're going through it alone," he says. "But if you realize there are so many other people like you, people who are going through the very same thing and experiencing the very same symptoms, it sort of lessens the burden. You meet people who can help, both by providing information but also by providing support. NSENG was an accountability group at the beginning but then it evolved into something far bigger than that. For a lot of people, it's always been about hope."

— Marco Buscaglia, *Careers*