



To the judges,

Age bias in employment was once considered in much the same category as race and gender discrimination — as an affront to the nation's goal of equal opportunity. But increasingly, rulings by courts have given employers more latitude to push out or not hire older workers, just as competition has prompted more layoffs, forced retirements and other forms of displacement.

ProPublica reporter Peter Gosselin, with help from engagement reporter Ariana Tobin, explored this changing landscape in a series that reflected in new detail and specificity the experience of Americans who are working while older. Their stories captured employers' playbook for shedding older workers, as well as the toll these tactics are taking on the lives of those in their 40s, 50s and beyond.

First — prompted by information submitted by thousands of people responding to an online callout on age discrimination — Gosselin and Tobin focused on the practices of IBM, a company long seen as offering the closest thing to lifelong employment. Using a trove of internal documents as well as employee accounts, the reporters showed how IBM had eliminated more than 20,000 U.S. employees ages 40 and over in the last five years, flouting or circumventing laws meant to protect later-career workers.

Among the most eye-opening findings: The company used a point system to pick older workers for layoffs even when they had been top performers; it demanded that other longtime employees move to keep their jobs, knowing full well many would quit; in some cases, workers forced out of full-time permanent positions were brought back as contractors at lower rates of pay. Spurred by the story, the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which administers the nation's anti-discrimination laws, launched a nationwide investigation of age bias at IBM.

Subsequently, Gosselin teamed with Richard Johnson of the Urban Institute to do a groundbreaking data analysis on people who entered their 50s in long-term full-time jobs. They found that the tactics used by IBM are pervasive throughout the U.S. labor market — and that a majority of workers over 50 experience an involuntary job loss, regardless of their education or income level, geographic location or industry. Gosselin reported the findings of the analysis in both a news story and a technical report. Alongside the data, the story presented, in moving detail, the lived experience of older worker after older worker who, despite seemingly doing everything right, had suffered painful financial setbacks from which they could never fully recover.

The series had incredible resonance with readers. The IBM story and a related ProPublica-Vox video attracted more than a million views. The story of older workers being pushed out across the economy attracted more than 1.5 million views. Ultimately, this response reflects the jarring disparity between the dream Americans have been sold about cruising gently into their golden years and the far more bruising and difficult economic reality.

We are proud to enter this work for a Loeb Award in beat reporting.

Sincerely,

Robin Fields
Managing Editor, ProPublica

News Organizations: ProPublica and Vox

Entry: Age Discrimination

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Cutting ‘Old Heads’ at IBM

As it scrambled to compete in the internet world, the once-dominant tech company cut tens of thousands of U.S. workers, hitting its most senior employees hardest and flouting rules against age bias.

by Peter Gosselin and Ariana Tobin, ProPublica
March 22, 2018



This story was co-published with Mother Jones.

For nearly a half century, IBM came as close as any company to bearing the torch for the American Dream.

As the world's dominant technology firm, payrolls at International Business Machines Corp. swelled to nearly a quarter-million U.S. white-collar workers in the 1980s. Its profits helped underwrite a broad agenda of racial equality, equal pay for women and an unbeatable offer of great wages and something close to lifetime employment, all in return for unswerving loyalty.

But when high tech suddenly started shifting and companies went global, IBM faced the changing landscape with a distinction most of its fiercest competitors didn't have: a large number of experienced and aging U.S. employees.

The company reacted with a strategy that, in the words of one confidential planning document, would "correct seniority mix." It slashed IBM's U.S. workforce by as much as three-quarters from its 1980s peak, replacing a substantial share with younger, less-experienced and lower-paid workers and sending many positions overseas. ProPublica estimates

that in the past five years alone, IBM has eliminated more than 20,000 American employees ages 40 and over, about 60 percent of its estimated total U.S. job cuts during those years.

In making these cuts, IBM has flouted or outflanked U.S. laws and regulations intended to protect later-career workers from age discrimination, according to a ProPublica review of internal company documents, legal filings and public records, as well as information provided via interviews and questionnaires filled out by more than 1,000 former IBM employees.

Among ProPublica's findings, IBM:

- Denied older workers information the law says they need in order to decide whether they've been victims of age bias, and required them to sign away the right to go to court or join with others to seek redress.
- Targeted people for layoffs and firings with techniques that tilted against older workers, even when the company rated them high performers. In some instances, the money saved from the departures went toward hiring young replacements.
- Converted job cuts into retirements and took steps to boost resignations and firings. The moves reduced the number of employees counted as layoffs, where high numbers can trigger public disclosure requirements.
- Encouraged employees targeted for layoff to apply for other IBM positions, while quietly advising managers not to hire them and requiring many of the workers to train their replacements.
- Told some older employees being laid off that their skills were out of date, but then brought them back as contract workers, often for the same work at lower pay and fewer benefits.

IBM declined requests for the numbers or age breakdown of its job cuts. ProPublica provided the company with a 10-page summary of its findings and the evidence on which they were based. IBM spokesman Edward Barbini said that to respond the company needed to see copies of all documents cited in the story, a request ProPublica could not fulfill without breaking faith with its sources. Instead, ProPublica provided IBM with detailed descriptions of the paperwork. Barbini declined to address the documents or answer specific questions about the firm's policies and practices, and instead issued the following statement:

"We are proud of our company and our employees' ability to reinvent themselves era after era, while always complying with the law. Our ability to do this is why we are the only tech company that has not only survived but thrived for more than 100 years."

With nearly 400,000 people worldwide, and tens of thousands still in the U.S., IBM remains a corporate giant. How it handles the shift from its veteran baby-boom workforce to younger generations will likely influence what other employers do. And the way it treats its experienced workers will eventually affect younger IBM employees as they too age.

Fifty years ago, Congress made it illegal with the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, or ADEA, to treat older workers differently than younger ones with only a few exceptions, such as jobs that require special physical qualifications. And for years, judges and policymakers treated the law as essentially on a par with prohibitions against discrimination on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation and other categories.

In recent decades, however, the courts have responded to corporate pleas for greater leeway to meet global competition and satisfy investor demands for rising profits by expanding the exceptions and shrinking the protections against age bias.

"Age discrimination is an open secret like sexual harassment was until recently," said Victoria Lipnic, the acting chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, or EEOC, the independent federal agency that administers the nation's workplace anti-discrimination laws.

“Everybody knows it’s happening, but often these cases are difficult to prove” because courts have weakened the law, Lipnic said. “The fact remains it’s an unfair and illegal way to treat people that can be economically devastating.”

Many companies have sought to take advantage of the court rulings. But the story of IBM’s downsizing provides an unusually detailed portrait of how a major American corporation systematically identified employees to coax or force out of work in their 40s, 50s and 60s, a time when many are still productive and need a paycheck, but face huge hurdles finding anything like comparable jobs.

The dislocation caused by IBM’s cuts has been especially great because until recently the company encouraged its employees to think of themselves as “IBMers” and many operated under the assumption that they had career-long employment.

When the ax suddenly fell, IBM provided almost no information about why an employee was cut or who else was departing, leaving people to piece together what had happened through websites, listservs and Facebook groups such as “Watching IBM” or “Geographically Undesirable IBM Marketers,” as well as informal support groups.

Marjorie Madfis, at the time 57, was a New York-based digital marketing strategist and 17-year IBM employee when she and six other members of her nine-person team — all women in their 40s and 50s — were laid off in July 2013. The two who remained were younger men.

Since her specialty was one that IBM had said it was expanding, she asked for a written explanation of why she was let go. The company declined to provide it.



Marjorie Madfis was among seven women in their 40s and 50s laid off from their IBM marketing team in White Plains, New York, in 2013. The two members who remained were younger men. “The only explanation is our age,” says Madfis. (Demetrius Freeman for ProPublica)

“They got rid of a group of highly skilled, highly effective, highly respected women, including me, for a reason nobody knows,” Madfis said in an interview. “The only explanation is our age.”

Brian Paulson, also 57, a senior manager with 18 years at IBM, had been on the road for more than a year overseeing hundreds of workers across two continents as well as hitting his sales targets for new services, when he got a phone call

in October 2015 telling him he was out. He said the caller, an executive who was not among his immediate managers, cited “performance” as the reason, but refused to explain what specific aspects of his work might have fallen short.

It took Paulson two years to land another job, even though he was equipped with an advanced degree, continuously employed at high-level technical jobs for more than three decades and ready to move anywhere from his Fairview, Texas, home.

“It’s tough when you’ve worked your whole life,” he said. “The company doesn’t tell you anything. And once you get to a certain age, you don’t hear a word from the places you apply.”

Paul Henry, a 61-year-old IBM sales and technical specialist who loved being on the road, had just returned to his Columbus home from a business trip in August 2016 when he learned he’d been let go. When he asked why, he said an executive told him to “keep your mouth shut and go quietly.”

Henry was jobless more than a year, ran through much of his savings to cover the mortgage and health insurance and applied for more than 150 jobs before he found a temporary slot.

“If you’re over 55, forget about preparing for retirement,” he said in an interview. “You have to prepare for losing your job and burning through every cent you’ve saved just to get to retirement.”

IBM’s latest actions aren’t anything like what most ex-employees with whom ProPublica talked expected from their years of service, or what today’s young workers think awaits them — or are prepared to deal with — later in their careers.

“In a fast-moving economy, employers are always going to be tempted to replace older workers with younger ones, more expensive workers with cheaper ones, those who’ve performed steadily with ones who seem to be up on the latest thing,” said Joseph Seiner, an employment law professor at the University of South Carolina and former appellate attorney for the EEOC.

“But it’s not good for society,” he added. “We have rules to try to maintain some fairness in our lives, our age-discrimination laws among them. You can’t just disregard them.”



‘Old Heads’ Needn’t Apply

For much of its history, IBM viewed its fate and that of its predominantly U.S. workforce as inseparable. By the late 1960s, the company’s grip on the mainframe computer business had grown so great the Justice Department sued it for monopolizing the industry, a case that dragged on for years before being dropped as “without merit.” Such dominance convinced executives they could deliver extraordinary workplace stability in return for loyal service.

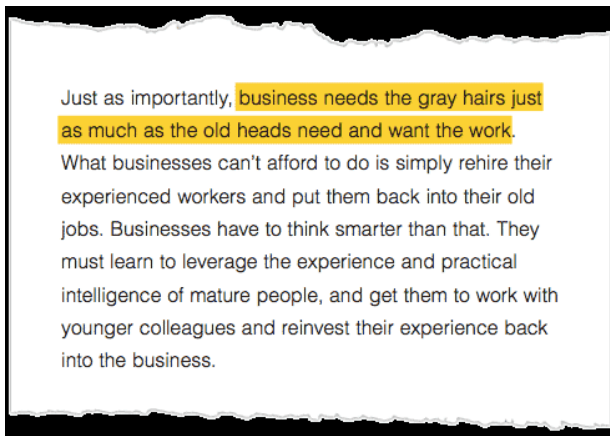
“When recessions occur or there is a major product shift, some companies handle the resulting workforce imbalances by letting people go,” explained an employee handbook of the 1980s. By contrast, IBM “retrains, reassigns and even relocates employees.”

For their part, continued the handbook, employees must be “flexible, willing to change, work overtime, and adapt to new situations quickly.” The logic behind the bargain was that “people are a treasured resource.” At IBM, “they are treated like one.”

But within a decade, IBM had stumbled not once but three times, in ways that would come to cost both the company

and its workers. First, it failed to appreciate the “major product shift” behind a new chip technology that first entered people’s lives as the guts of pocket calculators and cheap digital watches and was making possible increasingly powerful and networked personal computers that undercut the company’s mainframe business. Second, it misjudged its employees’ reaction to switching to a kind of pension that no longer rewarded older, long-service workers. IBM workers responded with a lawsuit that forced the company to settle by paying more than \$300 million and reinstating expensive traditional pensions for more than 100,000 of them.

And by the early years of the new century, IBM was falling behind again by failing to quickly devise innovative uses for the internet like its new rivals, Google, Facebook and Amazon. As it slipped, the company began having second thoughts about the price of unbending loyalty to its long-serving workforce.



This excerpt from a 2006 IBM Business Consulting Services paper titled “The Maturing Workforce” refers to baby-boomer employees as “gray hairs” and “old heads.” Read the full report.

In a little-noticed paper issued in 2006 by the London office of one of the company’s consulting arms, executives praised boomers’ experience, but described them as “gray hairs” and “old heads.” While recognizing that older workers were important to high-tech employers such as IBM, it concluded that “successor generations ... are generally much more innovative and receptive to technology than baby boomers.”

The paper was subsequently cited in an age discrimination lawsuit in U.S. District Court in Pennsylvania. Before the complaint was settled last year, the plaintiffs alleged in a filing: “IBM’s Boomer employees — being labeled by IBM’s own research as uncollaborative, skeptical of leadership, technologically unsophisticated, less innovative and generally out of touch with IBM’s brand, customers and objectives — were shown the door in droves.”

By the time IBM’s current CEO, Virginia “Ginni” Rometty, took over in 2012, the company had shifted its personnel focus to millennials.

Rometty launched a major overhaul that aimed to make IBM a major player in the emerging technologies of cloud services, big data analytics, mobile, security and social media, or what came to be known inside as CAMS.

At the same time, she sought to sharply increase hiring of people born after 1980.

“CAMS are driven by Millennial Traits,” declared a slide presentation for an invitation-only IBM event in New York in December 2014. Not only were millennials in sync with the new technologies, but they were also attuned to the collaborative, consensus-driven modes of work these technologies demanded, company researchers said they’d discovered. Millennials “are not likely to make decisions in isolation,” the presentation said, but instead “depend on analytic technologies to help them.”

By contrast, people 50 or over are “more dubious” of analytics, “place less stock in the advantages data offers,” and are less “motivated to consult their colleagues or get their buy in ... It’s Baby Boomers who are the outliers.”

The message was clear. To succeed at the new technologies, the company must, in the words of the presentation, “become one with the Millennial mindset.” Similar language found its way into a variety of IBM presentations in subsequent years.

Even before the New York conference, IBM had begun a major effort to recruit millennial employees. It launched a blog, “The Millennial Experience,” and a hashtag on Twitter, #IBMillennial.” It began an online and print advertising campaign primarily featuring young people. It established a “Millennial Corps,” a network of more than 5,000 young

IBMer whom Rometty and other top executives said they'd regularly consult before making business decisions. And it sharply improved benefits, like parental leave, especially important to younger employees.

Its initiatives won IBM plaudits from women's groups; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender organizations; human rights and disability associations; indeed advocates for just about every class of people protected under U.S. equal employment opportunity laws.

And the entire effort was guided by something that then-IBM brand strategist Bill Grady told the 2014 conference: "What's good for Millennials is good for everyone."

Exit Strategy

As IBM trained its sights on younger workers, it also took steps to change the way it dealt with those who'd spent many years on the job. It embraced a legal strategy that made it much easier for the company to dismiss older workers, and to do so in ways that minimized legal consequences and largely avoided public attention.

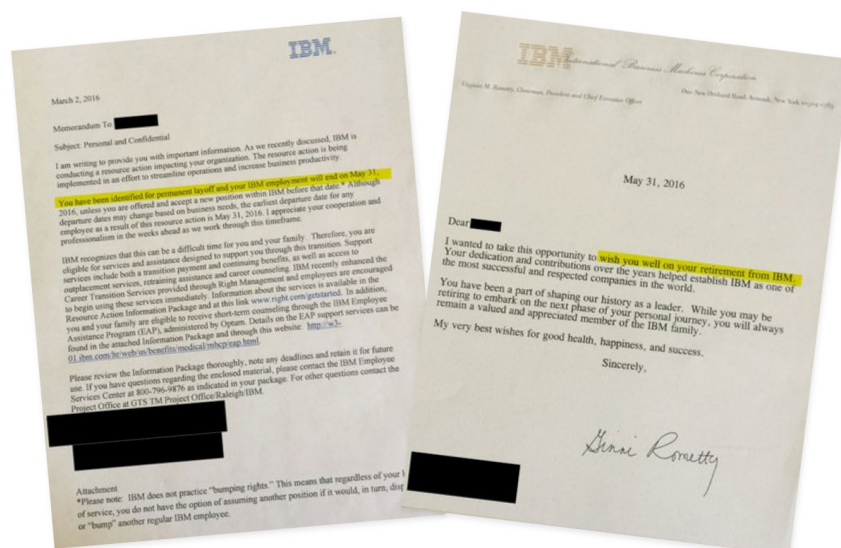
Until 2014, IBM had provided two lists to workers getting laid off. One showed the positions and ages, but not the names, of all the people laid off from their business units at the same time. The other showed the positions and ages of all those staying on. For example, Madfis, the digital marketing strategist, got a list when she was let go in July 2013.

Such lists are common in corporate layoffs, thanks to a disclosure requirement added to the ADEA in 1990. The reason for the new rule was that virtually all employers had begun making severance pay and other parting benefits contingent on a laid-off worker signing away the right to sue the company. Congress wanted to make sure that before employees signed such waivers they understood enough to make "knowing and voluntary" decisions about whether they might have been targeted because of their age.

IBM complied with the disclosure requirement for more than two decades. As a result, even when the company stopped disclosing its U.S. employment totals — and thus its job cuts — the numbers still became known as employees collected and tallied the number of layoffs from lists provided to workers by various company units.

One Departure, Two Letters

Just a few months after receiving a layoff notice, the same employee received a congratulatory letter about retiring.



So after it ran into political flak for its workforce reductions, IBM decided to stop giving out the lists. When Diane Moos, 62, of Long Beach, California, lost her job as a systems security specialist in May 2016, she had no way of knowing how many people had been laid off with her, or their ages.

IBM spokesman Doug Shelton said at the time the company was acting out of concern for its workers who had complained the disclosures “infringed on employee privacy” — even though the lists contained no names.

How did IBM get around the legal requirement for the disclosures? With a move that even critics acknowledge is ingenious.

The company’s pre-2014 layoff documents required employees receiving severance to waive all bias claims based on “race, national origin, ancestry, color, creed, religion, sex, sexual orientation, pregnancy, marital status, age ... disability, medical condition, or veteran status.” The new documents deleted “age” from the waiver list. In fact, they specifically said employees were not waiving their right when it came to age and could pursue age discrimination cases against the company.

But, the new documents added, employees had to waive the right to take their age cases to court. Instead, they had to pursue them through private arbitration. What’s more, they had to keep them confidential and pursue them alone. They couldn’t join with other workers to make a case.

With the new documents in place, IBM was no longer asking laid-off workers to sign away their right to complain about age bias so, the company’s lawyers told the EEOC, the disclosure requirement in the 1990 amendments to the age act no longer applied.

Critics say the company’s argument is hard to square with the statute’s clear requirements.

“You have a law that says older workers being laid off need this information and employers are obligated to provide it. You have a company that’s not providing it,” said David Lopez, the former general counsel for the EEOC. “How can this not be undercutting the intent of the law?”

In their relationships with both workers and customers, American corporations are making increasingly heavy use of arbitration, contending the process is fair and saves all parties time and legal costs. The Supreme Court has repeatedly expanded the right of companies to require that disputes be settled by arbitrators rather than judges.

When it comes to employment claims, studies have found that arbitrators overwhelmingly favor employers. Research by Cornell University law and labor relations specialist Alexander Colvin found that workers win only 19 percent of the time when their cases are arbitrated. By contrast, they win 36 percent of the time when they go to federal court, and 57 percent in state courts. Average payouts when an employee wins follow a similar pattern.

Given those odds, and having signed away their rights to go to court, some laid-off IBM workers have chosen the one independent forum companies can’t deny them: the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. That’s where Moos, the Long Beach systems security specialist, and several of her colleagues, turned for help when they were laid off. In their complaints to the agency, they said they’d suffered age discrimination because of the company’s effort to “drastically change the IBM employee age mix ... to be seen as a startup.”

In its formal reply to the EEOC, IBM said that age couldn’t have been a factor in their dismissals. Among the reasons it cited: The managers who decided on the layoffs were in their 40s and therefore older too.

Tilting the Table

Whether IBM is staying within U.S. age laws as it cuts from and adds to its workforce turns largely on how and why the company chooses individuals to be eliminated. While executives say they never target older workers, internal company documents and interviews suggest otherwise.

Consider, for example, a planning presentation that former IBM executives said was drafted by heads of a business unit carved out of IBM's once-giant software group and charged with pursuing the "C," or cloud, portion of the company's CAMS strategy.

The presentation laid out plans for substantially altering the unit's workforce. It was shown to company leaders including Diane Gherson, the senior vice president for human resources, and James Kavanaugh, recently elevated to chief financial officer. Its language was couched in the argot of "resources," IBM's term for employees, and "EP's," its shorthand for early professionals or recent college graduates.



Among the goals: "Shift headcount mix towards greater % of Early Professional hires."

Among the means: "[D]rive a more aggressive performance management approach to enable us to hire and replace where needed, and fund an influx of EPs to correct seniority mix."

Among the expected results: "[A] significant reduction in our workforce of 2,500 resources."

A slide from a similar presentation prepared last spring for the same leaders called for "re-profiling current talent" to "create room for new talent." Presentations for 2015 and 2016 for the 50,000-employee software group also included plans for "aggressive performance management" and emphasized the need to "maintain steady attrition to offset hiring."

IBM declined to answer questions about whether either presentation was turned into company policy. The description of the planned moves matches what hundreds of older ex-employees told ProPublica they believe happened to them: They were ousted because of their age. The company used their exits to hire replacements, many of them young; to ship their work overseas; or to cut its overall headcount.

Ed Alpern, now 65, of Austin, started his 39-year run with IBM as a Selectric typewriter repairman. He ended as a project manager in October of 2016 when, he said, his manager told him he could either leave with severance and other parting benefits or be given a bad job review — something he said he'd never previously received — and risk being fired without them.

Albert Poggi, now 70, was a three-decade IBM veteran and ran the company's Palisades, New York, technical center where clients can test new products. When notified in November of 2016 he was losing his job to layoff, he asked his bosses why, given what he said was a history of high job ratings. "They told me," he said, "they needed to fill it with someone newer."

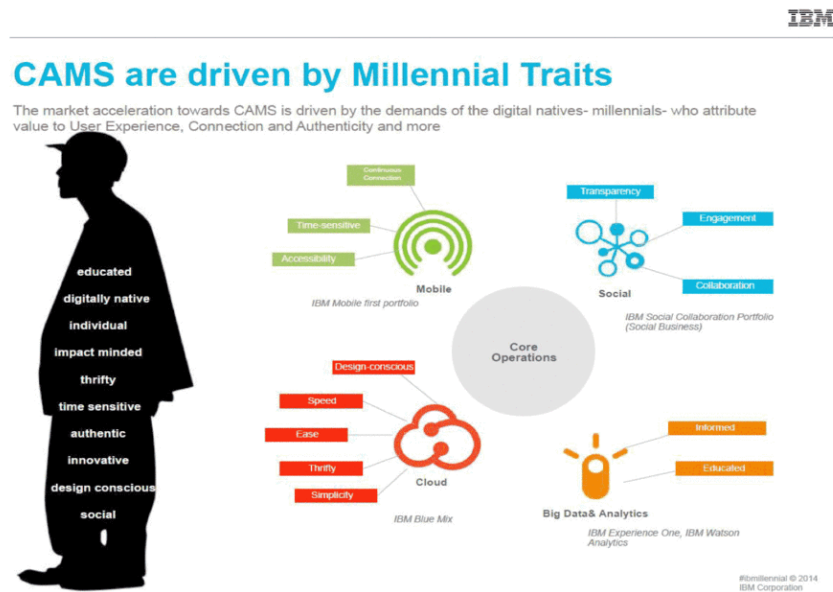
The presentations from the software group, as well as the stories of ex-employees like Alpern and Poggi, square with internal documents from two other major IBM business units. The documents for all three cover some or all of the years from 2013 through the beginning of 2018 and deal with job assessments, hiring, firing and layoffs.

The documents detail practices that appear at odds with how IBM says it treats its employees. In many instances, the practices in effect, if not intent, tilt against the company's older U.S. workers.

For example, IBM spokespeople and lawyers have said the company never considers a worker's age in making decisions about layoffs or firings.

But one 2014 document reviewed by ProPublica includes dates of birth. An ex-IBM employee familiar with the process said executives from one business unit used it to decide about layoffs or other job changes for nearly a thousand workers, almost two-thirds of them over 50.

Documents from subsequent years show that young workers are protected from cuts for at least a limited period of time. A 2016 slide presentation prepared by the company's global technology services unit, titled "U.S. Resource Action Process" and used to guide managers in layoff procedures, includes bullets for categories considered "ineligible" for layoff. Among them: "early professional hires," meaning recent college graduates.



This slide, from an invitation-only IBM conference in New York in December 2014, suggests that the company's future success in marketing emerging technologies depended on how well it understood and embraced the generation born after 1980.

In responding to age-discrimination complaints that ex-employees file with the EEOC, lawyers for IBM say that front-line managers make all decisions about who gets laid off, and that their decisions are based strictly on skills and job performance, not age.

But ProPublica reviewed spreadsheets that indicate front-line managers hardly acted alone in making layoff calls. Former IBM managers said the spreadsheets were prepared for upper-level executives and kept continuously updated. They list hundreds of employees together with codes like "lift and shift," indicating that their jobs were to be lifted from them and shifted overseas, and details such as whether IBM's clients had approved the change.

An examination of several of the spreadsheets suggests that, whatever the criteria for assembling them, the resulting list of those marked for layoff was skewed toward older workers. A 2016 spreadsheet listed more than 400 full-time U.S. employees under the heading "REBAL," which refers to "rebalancing," the process that can lead to laying off workers and either replacing them or shifting the jobs overseas. Using the job search site LinkedIn, ProPublica was able to locate about 100 of these employees and then obtain their ages through public records. Ninety percent of those found were 40 or older. Seventy percent were over 50.

IBM frequently cites its history of encouraging diversity in its responses to EEOC complaints about age discrimination. "IBM has been a leader in taking positive actions to ensure its business opportunities are made available to individuals without regard to age, race, color, gender, sexual orientation and other categories," a lawyer for the company wrote in a

May 2017 letter. “This policy of non-discrimination is reflected in all IBM business activities.”

But ProPublica found at least one company business unit using a point system that disadvantaged older workers. The system awarded points for attributes valued by the company. The more points a person garnered, according to the former employee, the more protected she or he was from layoff or other negative job change; the fewer points, the more vulnerable.

The arrangement appears on its face to favor younger newcomers over older veterans. Employees were awarded points for being relatively new at a job level or in a particular role. Those who worked for IBM for fewer years got more points than those who’d been there a long time.

The ex-employee familiar with the process said a 2014 spreadsheet from that business unit, labeled “IBM Confidential,” was assembled to assess the job prospects of more than 600 high-level employees, two-thirds of them from the U.S. It included employees’ years of service with IBM, which the former employee said was used internally as a proxy for age. Also listed was an assessment by their bosses of their career trajectories as measured by the highest job level they were likely to attain if they remained at the company, as well as their point scores.

The tilt against older workers is evident when employees’ years of service are compared with their point scores. Those with no points and therefore most vulnerable to layoff had worked at IBM an average of more than 30 years; those with a high number of points averaged half that.

Perhaps even more striking is the comparison between employees’ service years and point scores on the one hand and their superiors’ assessments of their career trajectories on the other.

Along with many American employers, IBM has argued it needs to shed older workers because they’re no longer at the top of their games or lack “contemporary” skills.

But among those sized up in the confidential spreadsheet, fully 80 percent of older employees — those with the most years of service but no points and therefore most vulnerable to layoff — were rated by superiors as good enough to stay at their current job levels or be promoted. By contrast, only a small percentage of younger employees with a high number of points were similarly rated.

“No major company would use tools to conduct a layoff where a disproportionate share of those let go were African Americans or women,” said Cathy Ventrell-Monsees, senior attorney adviser with the EEOC and former director of age litigation for the senior lobbying giant AARP. “There’s no difference if the tools result in a disproportionate share being older workers.”

In addition to the point system that disadvantaged older workers in layoffs, other documents suggest that IBM has made increasingly aggressive use of its job-rating machinery to pave the way for straight-out firings, or what the company calls “management-initiated separations.” Internal documents suggest that older workers were especially targets.

Like in many companies, IBM employees sit down with their managers at the start of each year and set goals for themselves. IBM graded on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being top-ranked.

Those rated as 3 or 4 were given formal short-term goals known as personal improvement plans, or PIPs. Historically many managers were lenient, especially toward those with 3s whose ratings had dropped because of forces beyond their control, such as a weakness in the overall economy, ex-employees said.

But within the past couple of years, IBM appears to have decided the time for leniency was over. For example, a software group planning document for 2015 said that, over and above layoffs, the unit should seek to fire about 3,000 of the unit’s 50,000-plus workers.

To make such deep cuts, the document said, executives should strike an “aggressive performance management posture.” They needed to double the share of employees given low 3 and 4 ratings to at least 6.6 percent of the division’s

workforce. And because layoffs cost the company more than outright dismissals or resignations, the document said, executives should make sure that more than 80 percent of those with low ratings get fired or forced to quit.

Finally, the 2015 document said the division should work “to attract the best and brightest early professionals” to replace up to two-thirds of those sent packing. A more recent planning document — the presentation to top executives Gheron and Kavanaugh for a business unit carved out of the software group — recommended using similar techniques to free up money by cutting current employees to fund an “influx” of young workers.

In a recent interview, Poggi said he was resigned to being laid off. “Everybody at IBM has a bullet with their name on it,” he said. Alpern wasn’t nearly as accepting of being threatened with a poor job rating and then fired.

Alpern had a particular reason for wanting to stay on at IBM, at least until the end of last year. His younger son, Justin, then a high school senior, had been named a National Merit semifinalist. Alpern wanted him to be able to apply for one of the company’s Watson scholarships. But IBM had recently narrowed eligibility so only the children of current employees could apply, not also retirees as it was until 2014.

Alpern had to make it through December for his son to be eligible.

But in August, he said, his manager ordered him to retire. He sought to buy time by appealing to superiors. But he said the manager’s response was to threaten him with a bad job review that, he was told, would land him on a PIP, where his work would be scrutinized weekly. If he failed to hit his targets — and his managers would be the judges of that — he’d be fired and lose his benefits.

Alpern couldn’t risk it; he retired on Oct. 31. His son, now a freshman on the dean’s list at Texas A&M University, didn’t get to apply.

“I can think of only a couple regrets or disappointments over my 39 years at IBM,” he said, “and that’s one of them.”



‘Congratulations on Your Retirement!’

Like any company in the U.S., IBM faces few legal constraints to reducing the size of its workforce. And with its no-disclosure strategy, it eliminated one of the last regular sources of information about its employment practices and the changing size of its American workforce.

But there remained the question of whether recent cutbacks were big enough to trigger state and federal requirements for disclosure of layoffs. And internal documents, such as a slide in a 2016 presentation titled “Transforming to Next Generation Digital Talent,” suggest executives worried that “winning the talent war” for new young workers required IBM to improve the “attractiveness of (its) culture and work environment,” a tall order in the face of layoffs and firings.

So the company apparently has sought to put a softer face on its cutbacks by recasting many as voluntary rather than the result of decisions by the firm. One way it has done this is by converting many layoffs to retirements.

Some ex-employees told ProPublica that, faced with a layoff notice, they were just as happy to retire. Others said they felt forced to accept a retirement package and leave. Several actively objected to the company treating their ouster as a retirement. The company nevertheless processed their exits as such.

Project manager Ed Alpern's departure was treated in company paperwork as a voluntary retirement. He didn't see it that way, because the alternative he said he was offered was being fired outright.

Lorilynn King, a 55-year-old IT specialist who worked from her home in Loveland, Colorado, had been with IBM almost as long as Alpern by May 2016 when her manager called to tell her the company was conducting a layoff and her name was on the list.

King said the manager told her to report to a meeting in Building 1 on IBM's Boulder campus the following day. There, she said, she found herself in a group of other older employees being told by an IBM human resources representative that they'd all be retiring. "I have NO intention of retiring," she remembers responding. "I'm being laid off."

ProPublica has collected documents from 15 ex-IBM employees who got layoff notices followed by a retirement package and has talked with many others who said they received similar paperwork. Critics say the sequence doesn't square well with the law.



David Harlan worked for IBM for 15 years from his home in Moscow, Idaho, where he also runs a drama company. Early last year, IBM offered him a choice: Move 2,600 miles to Raleigh-Durham to begin working at an office, or resign. He left in June. (Rajah Bose for ProPublica)

"This country has banned mandatory retirement," said Seiner, the University of South Carolina law professor and former EEOC appellate lawyer. "The law says taking a retirement package has to be voluntary. If you tell somebody 'Retire or we'll lay you off or fire you,' that's not voluntary."

Until recently, the company's retirement paperwork included a letter from Rometty, the CEO, that read, in part, "I wanted to take this opportunity to wish you well on your retirement ... While you may be retiring to embark on the next phase of your personal journey, you will always remain a valued and appreciated member of the IBM family." Ex-employees said IBM stopped sending the letter last year.

IBM has also embraced another practice that leads workers, especially older ones, to quit on what appears to be a voluntary basis. It substantially reversed its pioneering support for telecommuting, telling people who've been working from home for years to begin reporting to certain, often distant, offices. Their other choice: Resign.

David Harlan had worked as an IBM marketing strategist from his home in Moscow, Idaho, for 15 years when a manager told him last year of orders to reduce the performance ratings of everybody at his pay grade. Then in February last year, when he was 50, came an internal video from IBM's new senior vice president, Michelle

Peluso, which announced plans to improve the work of marketing employees by ordering them to work "shoulder to shoulder." Those who wanted to stay on would need to "co-locate" to offices in one of six cities.

Early last year, Harlan received an email congratulating him on "the opportunity to join your team in Raleigh, North Carolina." He had 30 days to decide on the 2,600-mile move. He resigned in June.

After the Peluso video was leaked to the press, an IBM spokeswoman told the Wall Street Journal that the “vast majority” of people ordered to change locations and begin reporting to offices did so. IBM Vice President Ed Barbini said in an initial email exchange with ProPublica in July that the new policy affected only about 2,000 U.S. employees and that “most” of those had agreed to move.

But employees across a wide range of company operations, from the systems and technology group to analytics, told ProPublica they’ve also been ordered to co-locate in recent years. Many IBMers with long service said that they quit rather than sell their homes, pull children from school and desert aging parents. IBM declined to say how many older employees were swept up in the co-location initiative.

“They basically knew older employees weren’t going to do it,” said Eileen Maroney, a 63-year-old IBM product manager from Aiken, South Carolina, who, like Harlan, was ordered to move to Raleigh or resign. “Older people aren’t going to move. It just doesn’t make any sense.” Like Harlan, Maroney left IBM last June.

Having people quit rather than being laid off may help IBM avoid disclosing how much it is shrinking its U.S. workforce and where the reductions are occurring.

Under the federal WARN Act, adopted in the wake of huge job cuts and factory shutdowns during the 1980s, companies laying off 50 or more employees who constitute at least one-third of an employer’s workforce at a site have to give advance notice of layoffs to the workers, public agencies and local elected officials.

Similar laws in some states where IBM has a substantial presence are even stricter. California, for example, requires advanced notice for layoffs of 50 or more employees, no matter what the share of the workforce. New York requires notice for 25 employees who make up a third.

Because the laws were drafted to deal with abrupt job cuts at individual plants, they can miss reductions that occur over long periods among a workforce like IBM’s that was, at least until recently, widely dispersed because of the company’s work-from-home policy.

IBM’s training sessions to prepare managers for layoffs suggest the company was aware of WARN thresholds, especially in states with strict notification laws such as California. A 2016 document entitled “Employee Separation Processing” and labeled “IBM Confidential” cautions managers about the “unique steps that must be taken when processing separations for California employees.”

A ProPublica review of five years of WARN disclosures for a dozen states where the company had large facilities that shed workers found no disclosures in nine. In the other three, the company alerted authorities of just under 1,000 job cuts — 380 in California, 369 in New York and 200 in Minnesota. IBM’s reported figures are well below the actual number of jobs the company eliminated in these states, where in recent years it has shuttered, sold off or leveled plants that once employed vast numbers.

By contrast, other employers in the same 12 states reported layoffs last year alone totaling 215,000 people. They ranged from giant Walmart to Ostrom’s Mushroom Farms in Washington state.

Whether IBM operated within the rules of the WARN act, which are notoriously fungible, could not be determined because the company declined to provide ProPublica with details on its layoffs.

A Second Act, But Poorer

With 35 years at IBM under his belt, Ed Miyoshi had plenty of experience being pushed to take buyouts, or early retirement packages, and refusing them. But he hadn’t expected to be pushed last fall.

Miyoshi, of Hopewell Junction, New York, had some years earlier launched a pilot program to improve IBM’s technical troubleshooting. With the blessing of an IBM vice president, he was busily interviewing applicants in India and Brazil to

staff teams to roll the program out to clients worldwide.

The interviews may have been why IBM mistakenly assumed Miyoshi was a manager, and so emailed him to eliminate the one U.S.-based employee still left in his group.

“That was me,” Miyoshi realized.

In his sign-off email to colleagues shortly before Christmas 2016, Miyoshi, then 57, wrote: “I am too young and too poor to stop working yet, so while this is good-bye to my IBM career, I fully expect to cross paths with some of you very near in the future.”

He did, and perhaps sooner than his colleagues had expected; he started as a subcontractor to IBM about two weeks later, on Jan. 3.

Miyoshi is an example of older workers who’ve lost their regular IBM jobs and been brought back as contractors. Some of them — not Miyoshi — became contract workers after IBM told them their skills were out of date and no longer needed.

Employment law experts said that hiring ex-employees as contractors can be legally dicey. It raises the possibility that the layoff of the employee was not for the stated reason but perhaps because they were targeted for their age, race or gender.

IBM appears to recognize the problem. Ex-employees say the company has repeatedly told managers — most recently earlier this year — not to contract with former employees or sign on with third-party contracting firms staffed by ex-IBMers. But ProPublica turned up dozens of instances where the company did just that.



Only two weeks after IBM laid him off in December 2016, Ed Miyoshi of Hopewell Junction, New York, started work as a subcontractor to the company. But he took a \$20,000-a-year pay cut. “I’m not a millionaire, so that’s a lot of money to me,” he says. (Demetrius Freeman for ProPublica)

Responding to a question in a confidential questionnaire from ProPublica, one 35-year company veteran from New York said he knew exactly what happened to the job he left behind when he was laid off. “I’M STILL DOING IT. I got a new gig

eight days after departure, working for a third-party company under contract to IBM doing the exact same thing.”

In many cases, of course, ex-employees are happy to have another job, even if it is connected with the company that laid them off.

Henry, the Columbus-based sales and technical specialist who’d been with IBM’s “resiliency services” unit, discovered that he’d lost his regular IBM job because the company had purchased an Indian firm that provided the same services. But after a year out of work, he wasn’t going to turn down the offer of a temporary position as a subcontractor for IBM, relocating data centers. It got money flowing back into his household and got him back where he liked to be, on the road traveling for business.

The compensation most ex-IBM employees make as contractors isn’t comparable. While Henry said he collected the same dollar amount, it didn’t include health insurance, which cost him \$1,325 a month. Miyoshi said his paycheck is 20 percent less than what he made as an IBM regular.

“I took an over \$20,000 hit by becoming a contractor. I’m not a millionaire, so that’s a lot of money to me,” Miyoshi said.

And lower pay isn’t the only problem ex-IBM employees-now-subcontractors face. This year, Miyoshi’s payable hours have been cut by an extra 10 “furlough days.” Internal documents show that IBM repeatedly furloughs subcontractors without pay, often for two, three or more weeks a quarter. In some instances, the furloughs occur with little advance notice and at financially difficult moments. In one document, for example, it appears IBM managers, trying to cope with a cost overrun spotted in mid-November, planned to dump dozens of subcontractors through the end of the year, the middle of the holiday season.

Former IBM employees now on contract said the company controls costs by notifying contractors in the midst of projects they have to take pay cuts or lose the work. Miyoshi said that he originally started working for his third-party contracting firm for 10 percent less than at IBM, but ended up with an additional 10 percent cut in the middle of 2017, when IBM notified the contractor it was slashing what it would pay.

For many ex-employees, there are few ways out. Henry, for example, sought to improve his chances of landing a new full-time job by seeking assistance to finish a college degree through a federal program designed to retrain workers hurt by offshoring of jobs.

But when he contacted the Ohio state agency that administers the Trade Adjustment Assistance, or TAA, program, which provides assistance to workers who lose their jobs for trade-related reasons, he was told IBM hadn’t submitted necessary paperwork. State officials said Henry could apply if he could find other IBM employees who were laid off with him, information that the company doesn’t provide.

TAA is overseen by the Labor Department but is operated by states under individual agreements with Washington, so the rules can vary from state to state. But generally employers, unions, state agencies and groups of employers can petition for training help and cash assistance. Labor Department data compiled by the advocacy group Global Trade Watch shows that employers apply in about 40 percent of cases. Some groups of IBM workers have obtained retraining funds when they or their state have applied, but records dating back to the early 1990s show IBM itself has applied for and won taxpayer assistance only once, in 2008, for three Chicago-area workers whose jobs were being moved to India.

Teasing New Jobs

As IBM eliminated thousands of jobs in 2016, David Carroll, a 52-year-old Austin software engineer, thought he was safe.

His job was in mobile development, the “M” in the company’s CAMS strategy. And if that didn’t protect him, he figured he was only four months shy of qualifying for a program that gives employees who leave within a year of their three-decade mark access to retiree medical coverage and other benefits.

But the layoff notice Carroll received March 2 gave him three months — not four — to come up with another job. Having been a manager, he said he knew the gantlet he'd have to run to land a new position inside IBM.

Still, he went at it hard, applying for more than 50 IBM jobs, including one for a job he'd successfully done only a few years earlier. For his effort, he got one offer — the week after he'd been forced to depart. He got severance pay but lost access to what would have been more generous benefits.

Edward Kishkill, then 60, of Hillsdale, New Jersey, had made a similar calculation.

A senior systems engineer, Kishkill recognized the danger of layoffs, but assumed he was immune because he was working in systems security, the “S” in CAMS and another hot area at the company.

The precaution did him no more good than it had Carroll. Kishkill received a layoff notice the same day, along with 17 of the 22 people on his systems security team, including Diane Moos. The notice said that Kishkill could look for other jobs internally. But if he hadn't landed anything by the end of May, he was out.

With a daughter who was a senior in high school headed to Boston University, he scrambled to apply, but came up dry. His last day was May 31, 2016.

For many, the fruitless search for jobs within IBM is the last straw, a final break with the values the company still says it embraces. Combined with the company's increasingly frequent request that departing employees train their overseas replacements, it has left many people bitter. Scores of ex-employees interviewed by ProPublica said that managers with job openings told them they weren't allowed to hire from layoff lists without getting prior, high-level clearance, something that's almost never given.

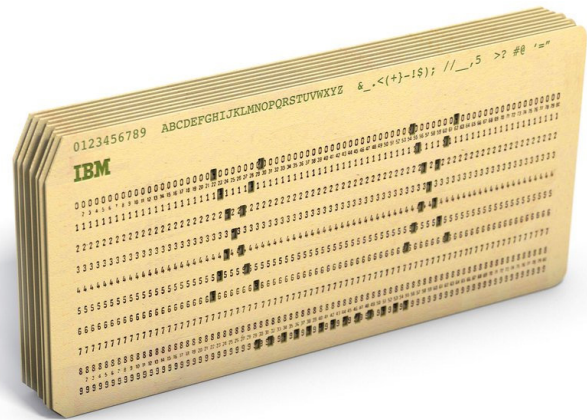
ProPublica reviewed documents that show that a substantial share of recent IBM layoffs have involved what the company calls “lift and shift,” lifting the work of specific U.S. employees and shifting it to specific workers in countries such as India and Brazil. For example, a document summarizing U.S. employment in part of the company's global technology services division for 2015 lists nearly a thousand people as layoff candidates, with the jobs of almost half coded for lift and shift.

Ex-employees interviewed by ProPublica said the lift-and-shift process required their extensive involvement. For example, shortly after being notified she'd be laid off, Kishkill's colleague, Moos, was told to help prepare a “knowledge transfer” document and begin a round of conference calls and email exchanges with two Indian IBM employees who'd be taking over her work. Moos said the interactions consumed much of her last three months at IBM.

Next Chapters

While IBM has managed to keep the scale and nature of its recent U.S. employment cuts largely under the public's radar, the company drew some unwanted attention during the 2016 presidential campaign, when then-candidate Donald Trump lambasted it for eliminating 500 jobs in Minnesota, where the company has had a presence for a half century, and shifting the work abroad.

The company also has caught flak — in places like Buffalo, New York; Dubuque, Iowa; Columbia, Missouri, and Baton Rouge, Louisiana — for promising jobs in return for state and local incentives, then failing to deliver. In all, according



to public officials in those and other places, IBM promised to bring on 3,400 workers in exchange for as much as \$250 million in taxpayer financing but has hired only about half as many.

After Trump's victory, Rometty, in a move at least partly aimed at courting the president-elect, pledged to hire 25,000 new U.S. employees by 2020. Spokesmen said the hiring would increase IBM's U.S. employment total, although, given its continuing job cuts, the addition is unlikely to approach the promised hiring total.

When The New York Times ran a story last fall saying IBM now has more employees in India than the U.S., Barbini, the corporate spokesman, rushed to declare, "The U.S. has always been and remains IBM's center of gravity." But his stream of accompanying tweets and graphics focused as much on the company's record for racking up patents as hiring people.

IBM has long been aware of the damage its job cuts can do to people. In a series of internal training documents to prepare managers for layoffs in recent years, the company has included this warning: "Loss of a job ... often triggers a grief reaction similar to what occurs after a death."

Most, though not all, of the ex-IBM employees with whom ProPublica spoke have weathered the loss and re-invented themselves.

Marjorie Madfis, the digital marketing strategist, couldn't land another tech job after her 2013 layoff, so she headed in a different direction. She started a nonprofit called Yes She Can Inc. that provides job skills development for young autistic women, including her 21-year-old daughter.

After almost two years of looking and desperate for useful work, Brian Paulson, the widely traveled IBM senior manager, applied for and landed a position as a part-time rural letter carrier in Plano, Texas. He now works as a contract project manager for a Las Vegas gaming and lottery firm.

Ed Alpern, who started at IBM as a Selectric typewriter repairman, watched his son go on to become a National Merit Scholar at Texas A&M University, but not a Watson scholarship recipient.

Lori King, the IT specialist and 33-year IBM veteran who's now 56, got in a parting shot. She added an addendum to the retirement papers the firm gave her that read in part: "It was never my plan to retire earlier than at least age 60 and I am not committing to retire. I have been informed that I am impacted by a resource action effective on 2016-08-22, which is my last day at IBM, but I am NOT retiring."

King has aced more than a year of government-funded coding boot camps and university computer courses, but has yet to land a new job.

David Harlan still lives in Moscow, Idaho, after refusing IBM's "invitation" to move to North Carolina, and is artistic director of the Moscow Art Theatre (Too).

Ed Miyoshi is still a technical troubleshooter working as a subcontractor for IBM.

Ed Kishkill, the senior systems engineer, works part time at a local tech startup, but pays his bills as an associate at a suburban New Jersey Staples store.

This year, Paul Henry was back on the road, working as an IBM subcontractor in Detroit, about 200 miles from where he lived in Columbus. On Jan. 8, he put in a 14-hour day and said he planned to call home before turning in. He died in his sleep.

Correction, March 24, 2018: Eileen Maroney lives in Aiken, South Carolina. The name of her city was incorrect in the original version of this story.

How the Crowd Led Us to Investigate IBM

Our project started with a digital community of ex-employees.

by Ariana Tobin and Peter Gosselin, ProPublica
March 22, 2018



Today, we are reporting that over the past five years IBM has been removing older U.S. employees from their jobs, replacing some with younger, less experienced, lower-paid American workers and moving many other jobs overseas.

We've got documentation and details — most of which are the direct result of a questionnaire filled out by over 1,100 former IBMers.

We've gone to the company with our findings. IBM did not answer the specific questions we sent. Spokesman Edward Barbini said: "We are proud of our company and our employees' ability to reinvent themselves era after era, while always complying with the law. Our ability to do this is why we are the only tech company that has not only survived but thrived for more than 100 years."

We don't know the exact size of the problem. Our questionnaire isn't a scientific sample, nor did all the participants tell us they experienced age discrimination. But the hundreds of similar stories show a pattern of older employees being pushed out even when the company itself says they were doing a good job.

This project wasn't inspired by a high-level leak or an errant line in secret documents. It came to us through reader engagement. Our investigation took us beyond some of our usual reporting techniques. We'd like to elaborate on this because:

- We know readers will wonder how we sourced some pretty serious claims.
- Many ex-employees trusted us with their stories and spent many hours in conversation with us. We think it's good practice to let them know how we've used their information.
- This is the probably the first time we've been pointed to a big project by a community of people we found through digital outreach. We hope that by sharing our experiences, we can help others build on our work.

IBMers found us ...

This project started as a conversation between the two of us, both reporters at ProPublica. Peter had taken on the age discrimination beat for reasons both personal and professional. Ariana was newly minted into a job called "engagement reporter."

Ariana suggested that Peter write up a short essay on his own experiences of being laid off at 63 and searching for a job in the aftermath. We attached a short questionnaire to the bottom and headlined it: "Over 50 and looking for a job? We'd like to hear from you."

Dozens of people responded within the first couple of weeks. As we looked through this first round of questionnaires, we noticed a theme: a whole lot of information and technology workers told us they were struggling to stay employed. And those who had lost their jobs? They were having a really hard time finding new work.























Of those IT workers, several mentioned IBM right off the bat. One woman wrote that she and her coworkers were working together to find new jobs in order to "ward off the dreaded old person layoff from IBM."

Another wrote: "I can probably help you get a lot more stories, contact me if you want to discuss this possibility."

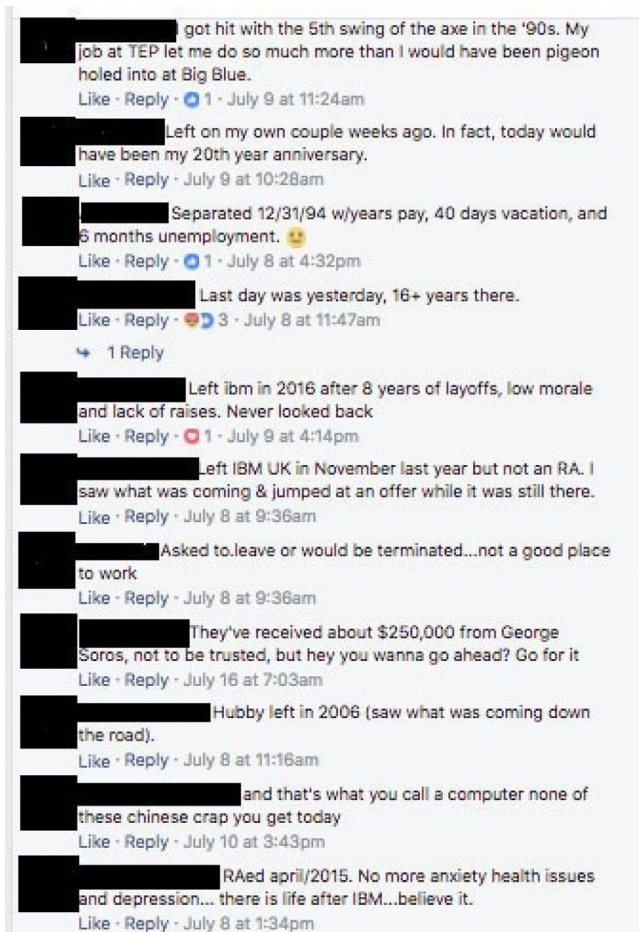
Another wrote: "Part of the separation agreement was that I not seek collective action against IBM for age discrimination. I was not going to sign as a law firm was planning to file a grievance. However they needed 10 people to agree and they could not get the numbers."

... and then they connected us with more IBMers

We started making some calls. One of the first people we talked to was Brian Paulson, a 57-year-old senior manager with 18 years at IBM, who was fired for "performance reasons" that the company refused to explain. He was still job-hunting two years later.

LABELS 	
 Banking/finance	2
 Bridge, gig, temp job	72
 Buyout bust	13
 Can't find a job	110
 Capstone to crisis	62
 Claims discrimination	139
 Degrees/+qualification	42
 health insurance	41
 IBM	12
 Intersectional (race, gender, ethnicity...)	33
 Medicine	16
 Mentions legal action	17
 Needs follow up	39
 newsletter export	342
 Positive experience	17
 Retraining	29
 Self-employed	25
 Uber driver	1
 Works in higher ed	24
 Works in media	24
 Works in tech/IT	27

A screenshot of the labels on our original age discrimination questionnaire, where we track themes and try to pull out patterns.



Former IBM workers were already comparing notes on Facebook, Reddit, LinkedIn and elsewhere.

Another ex-IBM employee told us that she had seen examples of older workers laid off from many parts of the company on a public Facebook page called WatchingIBM. Ariana spent a day looking through the posts, which were, as promised, crawling with stories, questions, and calls for support from workers of all kinds, as shown in the accompanying screenshot.

We decided to reach out to the page's administrator, who was a longtime IBM workplace activist, Lee Conrad. He shared our age discrimination questionnaire in the group and more responses poured in.

With dozens of interviews already on the books, we decided to launch a second, more specific questionnaire — this time about IBM

We realized that we had been pointed toward an angry, sad and motivated group. The older ex-IBM workers we called were trying to figure out whether their own layoffs were unique or part of a larger trend. And if they were part of a larger trend ... how many people were affected?

A major frustration we saw in comment after comment: These workers couldn't get information on how many others had been forced out with them.

This was an information gap that immediately struck Peter, because that information is exactly what the law requires employers to disclose at the time of a layoff.

On top of that, many of these sources mentioned having been forced to sign agreements that kept them from going to court or even talking about what had happened to them. They were scared to do anything in violation of those agreements, a fear that kept them from finding out the answers to some big open questions: Why would IBM have stopped releasing the ages and positions of those let go, as they had done before 2014 to comply with federal law? How many workers out there believed they had been "retired" against their will? What did managers really tell their subordinates when the time came to let them go? Who was left to do all of their work?

So we wrote up another questionnaire asking those specific questions.

We learned from the responses, and also the response rate

We contacted people on listservs, found them on open petitions, joined closed LinkedIn networks, and followed each posting on ex-IBM groups. We tweeted the questionnaire out on days that IBM reported its earnings, including the company's ticker symbol. We talked to trade magazines and IBM historians and organizers who still work at IBM. We bought ads on Facebook and aimed them toward cities and towns where we knew IBM had been cutting its workforce.

As the responses came in, we tried to figure out where most of them were coming from. To identify any meaningful trends, we needed to know who was answering, what was working, and why. We also realized that we needed to introduce ourselves in order to persuade anyone it was worth participating.

Watching IBM
July 10 · 🌐

For those that want to see what an older resource action package with age/title information looks like go here: <https://watchingibm.com/ibm-documents/>

The OWBPA (age info) is at the end of the doc.



IBM documents
 Work in progress.

 WATCHINGIBM.COM

Like · Comment · Share · </> Embed

15

Write a comment...

ProPublica is interested in hearing from IBMers who have left in the last few years. Here's a link to the article: <https://www.propublica.org/.../left-ibm-layoffs...>



Have You Left IBM in the Past Few Years? We Want to Hear From You

ProPublica is an independent, non-profit newsroom that produces investigative journalism in the public interest.

PROPUBICA.ORG

Like · Reply · 2 · July 10 at 7:11pm

Is this a reliable request? What is their intent?

Like · Reply · July 10 at 9:32pm

ProPublica does investigative journalism, and has won several Pulitzer prizes.

Like · Reply · 2 · July 10 at 9:38pm

Ariana Tobin Always happy to talk more about ProPublica and what we do here.
<https://www.propublica.org/about/impact/>



Impact - About Us - ProPublica

ProPublica is an independent, non-profit newsroom that produces investigative...

PROPUBICA.ORG

Like · Reply · Remove Preview · 1 · July 18 at 3:11pm

Write a reply...

The biggest spikes in response came when community members shared the questionnaire themselves.

Please fill out the form - will be interesting to see the results of this as most believe that older employees were targeted. This will analyze if this is true.

Like · Reply · 6 · July 8 at 12:37pm

Just validate that perhaps we were right


Nothing more.

Like · Reply · July 8 at 3:20pm

Submitted.. Thank you. All the best with the investigation.

Like · Reply · 1 · July 8 at 5:13pm

Ariana Tobin Hi, I'm a journalist at ProPublica (the ones behind this survey). We don't know what this reporting will accomplish, if anything. It all depends what we find, what we can prove, and how it is received by influencers. But unlike most outlets, our primary metric is impact. If you're curious, here's how our president/founder describes it: <https://www.propublica.org/about/impact/>



Impact - About Us - ProPublica

ProPublica is an independent, non-profit newsroom that produces investigative...

PROPUBICA.ORG

Like · Reply · Remove Preview · July 8 at 7:48pm

Write a reply...

RAed 5/31/2016 (so on the first wave of the crappy severance package), informed I was on the list between my meetings with the client VPs while on a international assignment, 31+ years (so was able to retire from IBM at least), but was only 54 (so missed getting the Future Health Account by 10 months). Definitely not the way I planned my IBM retirement, but what can you do, except move on.

Like · Reply · 1 · July 8 at 9:29pm

1 Reply

First layoffs 1993. Got a job in support on Wall Street within a couple of months. Never hesitated to make a career move if needed/wanted, and I've made far more money , put my kids through college , saved for retirement etc. Never would have been able to do that if I had stayed "blue".

Plenty of people were skeptical of us. We tried to be responsive.

When something worked, we'd double down:

Page	Source	Pageviews	Unique Pageviews	Avg. Time on Page	Entrances	Bounce Rate	% Exit	Page Value
		15,970 % of Total: 0.42% (3,786,118)	15,124 % of Total: 0.46% (3,313,027)	00:05:14 Avg for View: 00:04:20 (21.11%)	12,178 % of Total: 0.43% (2,821,817)	90.93% Avg for View: 83.36% (9.09%)	80.01% Avg for View: 74.53% (7.35%)	\$0.00 % of Total: 0.00% (\$0.00)
1. /www.propublica.org/getinvolved/item/left-ibm-layoffs-retirements	facebook	3,116 (19.51%)	2,994 (19.80%)	00:22:28	2,962 (24.32%)	94.34%	93.58%	\$0.00 (0.00%)
2. /www.propublica.org/getinvolved/item/left-ibm-layoffs-retirements	(direct)	2,794 (17.50%)	2,723 (18.00%)	00:05:21	1,697 (13.93%)	87.14%	72.30%	\$0.00 (0.00%)
3. /www.propublica.org/getinvolved/item/left-ibm-layoffs-retirements	m.facebook.com	2,484 (15.55%)	2,361 (15.61%)	00:02:45	2,342 (19.23%)	94.49%	94.28%	\$0.00 (0.00%)
4. /www.propublica.org/getinvolved/item/left-ibm-layoffs-retirements	google	2,355 (14.75%)	2,207 (14.59%)	00:02:25	1,265 (10.39%)	88.71%	61.66%	\$0.00 (0.00%)
5. /www.propublica.org/getinvolved/item/left-ibm-layoffs-retirements	facebook.com	1,019 (6.38%)	981 (6.49%)	00:28:51	936 (7.69%)	90.28%	89.30%	\$0.00 (0.00%)
6. /www.propublica.org/getinvolved/item/left-ibm-layoffs-retirements	t.co	768 (4.81%)	697 (4.61%)	00:01:06	613 (5.03%)	88.45%	80.60%	\$0.00 (0.00%)
7. /www.propublica.org/getinvolved/item/left-ibm-layoffs-retirements	pardot	716 (4.48%)	632 (4.18%)	00:03:50	587 (4.82%)	81.26%	78.35%	\$0.00 (0.00%)
8. /www.propublica.org/getinvolved/item/left-ibm-layoffs-retirements	linkedin.com	523 (3.27%)	497 (3.29%)	00:09:46	497 (4.08%)	92.15%	92.54%	\$0.00 (0.00%)
9. /www.propublica.org/getinvolved/item/left-ibm-layoffs-retirements	twitter	439 (2.75%)	387 (2.56%)	00:01:00	297 (2.44%)	91.25%	70.62%	\$0.00 (0.00%)
10. /www.propublica.org/getinvolved/item/left-ibm-layoffs-retirements	news.google.com	271 (1.70%)	271 (1.79%)	00:00:34	271 (2.23%)	95.20%	95.20%	\$0.00 (0.00%)

Show rows: 10 Go to: 1 1 - 10 of 78

A snapshot of pageviews on our questionnaire in August. It suggests that most came from Facebook, and the next most came from direct shares, such as email or chat.

We know what worked the best: When people filled out the questionnaire they'd also share their contact information with us. So we asked them to forward the questionnaire around within their own networks:

Your former IBM coworkers

From: ProPublica <noreply@dobt.co>
Reply to: ariana.tobin@propublica.org
To: [REDACTED]

Hi,

I'm Ariana, a reporter at ProPublica.

First of all: I want to say thank you. Reporter Peter Gosselin and I are reading through all of your responses to our IBM departures survey, and we will be following up with many of you in the coming days.

We've gotten a fantastic response – more than 500 in a single week. That said, our goal is ambitious: we are attempting to reconstruct the numbers of layoffs and other kinds of departures since 2014, when the company stopped disclosing figures even to those it was asking to leave. To get anywhere close, we've got to keep momentum going. **We're trying to at least double our reach in the next week.**

We'll do our part chasing down information. But we know our best bet is the huge repository of knowledge and expertise you represent.

We could really use your help. Can you please forward along our survey to any former coworkers or IBMers you know, even if it seems like a longshot? We promise to keep all responses secure: <https://www.propublica.org/getinvolved/item/left-ibm-layoffs-retirements>

We'll keep you posted as you requested on your initial survey as our reporting bears fruit. In the meantime, I'm very happy to answer any questions you might have about our work and our goals. And we'd certainly welcome advice on where else to look and who else to ask.

All the very best,

Ariana

--

Ariana Tobin

Engagement reporter, ProPublica

Signal: 314-920-5990

Twitter: @Ariana_Tobin

Facebook: Ariana.Tobin

What's an [engagement reporter](#)?

We explicitly asked people who participated in our questionnaire to recruit their former coworkers.

And we got more leads

We read through all of the responses and identified themes: 183 respondents said the company recorded them as having retired by choice even though they had no desire to retire or flat-out objected to the idea. Forty-five people were told they'd have to uproot their lives and move sometimes thousands of miles from the communities where they had worked for years, or else resign. Fifty-three said their jobs had been moved overseas. Some were happy they'd left. Some were company luminaries, given top ratings throughout their career. Some were still fighting over benefits and health care. Some were worried about finding work ever again.

Inevitably, this categorization process led to us to identify new patterns as we went along, and as new responses accumulated. For each new pattern, we would go back and see how many people fit.

One of the first and most interesting such categories were the people who had received emails congratulating them on their retirement at the same time as they were informed of their layoff. We realized there would be power in numbers there, so we set up a SecureDrop for people who were willing to send us their paperwork.

Eventually, we also created a category called “legal action.” We’d stumbled upon support groups of ex-IBM employees who had filed formal complaints with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Some sent us the company’s responses to their individual complaints, giving us insight into the way the company responded to allegations of discrimination. These seemed, of course, very useful.

In other words: we sent some rather complicated mass emails and were surprised over and over again by the specificity of the responses:

Some follow up questions to our IBM survey

From: Ariana at ProPublica <noreply@dobt.co>

Reply to: ariana.tobin@propublica.org

To: [REDACTED]

Hi,

For those of you I haven’t spoken with yet, I’m Ariana, a journalist at ProPublica reading through all of your responses to our IBM survey.

Over the past few weeks, reporter Peter Gosselin and I have been reaching out to many of you to learn more about what’s happened at the company, and to you and your families as a result. Based on what we’ve heard so far, I’ve got a few important follow-up questions:

1. This one is especially for the long-term IBMers out there: We’ve heard quite a few stories from people who started at IBM decades ago with promises of “lifetime careers” and benefits. Did any of you save your early paperwork – official hiring papers, casual brochures, event invitations, pictures from a previous era of retirement parties, or the like? We’d like to see some of this “old IBM” language to get a sense of the context.
2. We’ve talked with a few people who say they have filed formal complaints with the EEOC, the National Labor Relations Board, or other state or federal regulatory bodies. We need to get a sense of how many complaints have been filed, especially since 2013. If you’ve filed a complaint, would you let me know? I’m happy to give you more details if that would make you feel more comfortable about sharing paperwork. As with our survey, **we promise to keep your information confidential unless you give us permission to use it publicly.** You can always email me, or if you’d prefer, here’s our advice on [contacting ProPublica securely](#) (and my Signal number is below).

3. That said, to tell the story of IBMers and ex-IBMer in a way that will withstand challenge and bring meaningful public attention to what's going on, we need to find people willing to put their names to their own experiences. We know many of you are concerned about speaking publicly, and we really do understand why. If there is a possibility that you or someone you know would consider going on the record with us, both Peter and I would be happy to talk in confidence at first while you make decisions.

Even if none of the above apply to you: Thank you for trusting us with your responses. They are proving incredibly helpful in guiding our search for answers.

All the very best,

Ariana

Engagement reporter, ProPublica

IBM undoubtedly has information that would shed light on the documents, its layoff practices or the overall extent and nature of its job cuts. The company chose not to respond to our questions about those issues.

So we tried to answer ex-IBMer's questions ourselves, including one of the most basic: How many employees ages 40 and over were let go or left in recent years?

IBM won't say. In fact, over the years, the company has stopped releasing almost all information about its U.S. workforce. In 2009, it stopped publishing its American employment total. In 2014, it stopped disclosing the numbers and ages of older employees it was laying off, a requirement of the nation's basic anti-age bias law, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA).

So we've sought to estimate the number, relying on one of the few remaining bits of company-provided information — a technique developed by a veteran financial analyst who follows IBM for investors — as well as patterns we spotted in internal company documents.

We began with a line in the company's quarterly and annual filings with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission for "workforce rebalancing," a company term for layoffs, firings and other non-retirement departures. It's a gauge of what IBM spends to let people go. In the past five years, workforce rebalancing charges have totaled \$4.3 billion.

The technique was used by veteran IBM analyst Toni Sacconaghi of Bernstein Research. Sacconaghi is a respected Wall Street analyst who has been named to Institutional Investor's All-America Research Team every year since 2001. His technique and layoff estimates have been widely cited by news organizations including The Wall Street Journal and Fortune.

Some years ago, Sacconaghi estimated that IBM's average per-employee cost for laying off a worker was \$70,000.

Dividing \$4.3 billion by \$70,000 suggests that during the past five years IBM’s worldwide job cuts totaled about 62,000. If anything, that number is low, given IBM executives’ comments at a recent investor conference. Internal company documents we reviewed suggest that 50 to 60 percent of cuts were made in the U.S., with older workers representing roughly 60 percent of those. That translates to about 20,000 older American workers let go.

Our analysis suggests the total of U.S. layoffs is almost certainly higher.

First, as Sacconaghi said in a recent interview, IBM’s per-employee rebalancing costs are likely much lower now because, starting in 2016, the company reduced severance payments to departing employees from six months to just 30 days. That means IBM can lay off or fire more people for the same or lower overall costs.

Second, because, as those ex-IBMers told us, the company often converts their layoffs into retirements, the workplace rebalancing numbers don’t tell the whole story.

Right below the line for “workforce rebalancing” in its SEC filings, IBM adds another line for “retirement-related costs,” which reflects how much the company spends each year retiring people out. Some — perhaps a substantial amount of that — went to retirements that were less than fully voluntary. This could add up to thousands more people.

By coming up with answers and investigating in the open, we’ve gotten more sources

Many of the conversations we’ve had during our reporting didn’t make it into the final story. People allowed us to review internal company documents. They let us see long email exchanges with their managers. They dug back through closets and garages to find memos they had saved out of frustration or fatigue or just plain anger.

We can’t go into detail about all of the ways the community helped us report out this story, because we also promised many of our sources that we would protect their confidentiality. The beauty is that they talked to us anyway. They knew where to find us, because our contact information had been spread far and wide.

So for any more ex-IBMers out there? We’d still love to hear from you. Please be in touch.

Ryann Grochowski-Jones, Mike Tigas, Derek Kravitz and Jeremy Merrill contributed reporting. Special thanks also to independent technology reporter Ethan Chiel and analyst Michael Ferrer.

LABELS		
2014 or after	784	
401k	10	
Age discrimination	152	
Applied for internal	42	
Ariana has contacted	34	
Before 2014	284	
brain drain	39	
Clumsy	71	
Colocation example	45	
Contractors	25	
Found out secondhand	1	
George J interested	1	
H1-B	53	
High up in the compan	35	

The ever-changing list of labels on our IBM questionnaire.

Video: How IBM Is Quietly Pushing Out Aging Workers

Our latest in the Vox-ProPublica collaboration explores how IBM sidestepped age discrimination laws.

by Ranjani Chakraborty and Ariana Tobin, ProPublica
April 20, 2018, 11 a.m. EDT



Last month, we reported that over the past five years, IBM has targeted its older U.S. employees for layoffs. The numbers are staggering: Since 2013, we estimated IBM eliminated more than 20,000 American employees ages 40 and over. We've collected the stories of over 1,400 former IBM employees and learned about their experiences during these job cuts. So exactly how does one of the country's largest tech giants quietly push out this many older workers? Don't we have laws to protect people at the end of their careers?

Watch the video above to find out about how IBM — a longtime leader in employment practices — went from dream employer in the 1980s to what it has become in recent years.

In response to these claims, IBM spokesman Ed Barbini said: "We are proud of our company and our employees' ability to reinvent themselves era after era, while always complying with the law. Our ability to do this is why we are the only tech company that has not only survived but thrived for more than 100 years."

We haven't received further explanation or response from the company in the weeks since we published. We know these layoffs haven't ended. Watching IBM Facebook group members have reported that IBM sent a wave of layoff notices in just the past few weeks. How IBM chooses to face this changing landscape matters; the way it treats its workers will be a model for generations to come.

If you know more — particularly about anything happening internally at the company, reach out. This story makes up the seventh installment in Vox's collaboration with ProPublica. You can find this video and all of Vox's videos on YouTube. Subscribe and stay tuned for more from our partnership.

TRANSCRIPT: How IBM quietly pushed out 20,000 older workers

April 20, 2018

Ariana: Imagine it's 1980. Mulletts are cool; "The Empire Strikes Back" is playing in theaters; and International Business Machines, or IBM, is the world's dominant technology firm. It embodies the American dream, with a progressive agenda of equal opportunity, and prides itself on a stable workforce.

Tape: It's so thrilling to see the new IBM Personal System/2 in the hands of an old master.

Ariana: According to this handbook, in over 40 years, full-time employees haven't been touched by layoffs. People are a treasured resource and are treated like one.

Fast forward to the present: ProPublica estimates IBM has eliminated 20,000 American employees, age 40 and over, in just the past five years. That's about 60 percent of its estimated U.S. job cuts during that time.

How did IBM go from valuing its older workforce to systematically getting rid of them?

Tape, Unidentified Male 1: I worked for IBM for, uh, 15 years and I'm 42 years old.

Tape, Unidentified Male 2: I worked at IBM for 18 years.

Tape, Unidentified Male 3: I spent approximately 38 years there.

Tape, Unidentified Female 1: I was expecting a high rating.

Tape, Unidentified Female 2: The culture there is now that everybody has a target on their back.

Tape, Unidentified Male 4: Because what they said they were doing was a lie.

Ariana: Through the '80s, technology started shifting rapidly. Among other things, Apple introduced the first Macintosh — and took a direct shot at IBM.

Tape: It appears IBM wants it all.

Ariana: By the early 2000s, IBM fell further as new rivals, like Google, Facebook, and Amazon took the lead.

Tape: In our world, the speed and tempo of modern living are increasing at an ever-accelerating rate.

Ariana: And as it slipped, IBM had to deal with something most of these competitors didn't have: a large number of experienced, and aging, employees. They reacted to new set-backs with layoffs. And many of them were older workers.

ProPublica heard from over 1,400 former IBM employees.

Tape (overlapping): My name is Brian Miller; my name is Gina Donaldson; my name is Joe Pennell; Ramon Negron; David Harlan. It really ruined my career. I'm never going to probably get up to speed again. I was unable to move across the country. When I read through those papers, I did not think I was giving my entire rights away. It feels like a termination without cause.

This process felt like a betrayal.

Ariana: Here's what we know. In making staff cuts, IBM has side-stepped U.S. laws and regulations intended to protect workers from age discrimination.

In the past, they would get two lists from IBM: One that had ages of people staying, and another with ages of those being let go.

In 2014, IBM stopped giving that information. On top of that, the company required people to sign away their rights to sue for age discrimination in court in exchange for their severance packages. By signing the documents, laid off employees waived the right to go to court. They could only pursue their age cases through confidential arbitration.

They'd also have to do it solo. So they couldn't combine forces with other workers who may be claiming similar age discrimination.

Studies show arbitration overwhelmingly favors employers. Workers win only 19 percent of the time when their cases are arbitrated, versus 36 percent of the time when they go to federal court, and 57 percent in state courts.

IBM has also laid off and fired some older workers with review techniques that effectively made their age a disadvantage. Take the case of one business unit that was using a point system to evaluate workers. The more points a person got, the more protected they were from negative changes to employment. But the system itself appeared biased. Employees were given points for being relatively new at a job level. So those who worked there fewer years earned more points than longtime IBM-ers. The bias against older workers is evident when you compare the number of points to years of service. Those with no points worked there an average of more than 30 years. Those with higher points averaged 15 years.

But the numbers don't reflect workers' skills. Eighty percent of older, more long-term employees — the ones with lower points — were rated by the company itself as "good enough

to stay at current job levels or be promoted.” While only a small percentage of younger employees, with high numbers, had similar ratings.

They’ve also converted many layoffs into retirements, forcing ex-employees to accept a retirement package or leave with no benefits. They’ve told remote workers, including older ones who had worked from home for years, to relocate to offices potentially thousands of miles away from their homes. Their options were relocate, or resign.

In response to all these findings, IBM has said: “We are proud of our company and our employees’ ability to reinvent themselves era after era, while always complying with the law.”

The problem is protection for workers under the law is eroding. In the past few decades, rulings in age discrimination cases have said former employees must prove that there were no factors other than age involved in their job changes. But companies like IBM have made it near impossible to prove that.

With nearly 400,000 employees worldwide, IBM is still a tech giant. And how it handles its older workforce could encourage other companies to follow suit. Even though a lot of these companies have a younger workforce now, here’s the thing about aging — it happens to everyone.

Federal Watchdog Launches Investigation of Age Bias at IBM

After a ProPublica story spotlighting IBM's practices in shedding older workers, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission consolidated age discrimination complaints against the company from around the country.

by Peter Gosselin, ProPublica
May 17, 2018, 5 a.m. EDT



The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has launched a nationwide probe of age bias at IBM in the wake of a ProPublica investigation showing the company has flouted or outflanked laws intended to protect older workers from discrimination.

More than five years after IBM stopped providing legally required disclosures to older workers being laid off, the EEOC's New York district office has begun consolidating individuals' complaints from across the country and asking the company to explain practices recounted in the ProPublica story, according to ex-employees who've spoken with investigators and people familiar with the agency's actions.

"Whenever you see the EEOC pulling cases and sending them to investigations, you know they're taking things seriously," said the agency's former general counsel, David Lopez. "I suspect IBM's treatment of its later-career workers and older applicants is going to get a thorough vetting."

EEOC officials refused to comment on the agency's investigation, but a dozen ex-IBM employees from California, Colorado, Texas, New Jersey and elsewhere allowed ProPublica to view the status screens for their cases on the agency's website. The screens show the cases being transferred to EEOC's New York district office shortly after the March 22 publication of ProPublica's original story, and then being shifted to the office's investigations division, in most instances, between April 5 and April 10.

The agency's acting chair, Victoria Lipnic, a Republican, has made age discrimination a priority. The EEOC's New York office won a settlement last year from Kentucky-based national restaurant chain Texas Roadhouse in the largest age-related case as measured by number of workers covered to go to trial in more than three decades.

IBM did not respond to questions about the EEOC investigation. In response to detailed questions for our earlier story, the company issued a brief statement, saying in part, "We are proud of our company and its employees' ability to reinvent themselves era after era while always complying with the law."

Just prior to publication of the story, IBM issued a video recounting its long history of support for equal employment and diversity. In it, CEO Virginia "Ginni" Rometty said, "Every generation of IBMers has asked 'How can we in our own time expand our understanding of inclusion?'"

ProPublica reported in March that the tech giant, which has an annual revenue of about \$80 billion, has ousted an estimated 20,000 U.S. employees ages 40 and over since 2014, about 60 percent of its American job cuts during those years. In some instances, it earmarked money saved by the departures to hire young replacements in order to, in the words of one internal company document, "correct seniority mix."

ProPublica reported that IBM regularly denied older workers information the law says they're entitled to in order to decide whether they've been victims of age bias, and used point systems and other methods to pick older workers for removal, even when the company rated them high performers.

In some cases, IBM treated job cuts as voluntary retirements, even over employees' objections. This reduced the number of departures counted as layoffs, which can trigger public reporting requirements in high enough numbers, and prevented employees from seeking jobless benefits for which voluntary retirees can't file.

In addition to the complaints covered in the EEOC probe, a number of current and former employees say they have recently filed new complaints with the agency about age bias and are contemplating legal action against the company.

Edvin Ruis of Laguna Niguel, a suburb south of Los Angeles, said IBM has told him he'll be laid off June 27 from his job of 15 years as a technical specialist. Ruis refused to sign a severance agreement and hired a class-action lawyer. They have filed an EEOC complaint claiming Ruis was one of "thousands" discriminated against by IBM.

If the agency issues a right-to-sue letter indicating Ruis has exhausted administrative remedies for his claim, they can take IBM to court.

"I don't see a clear reason for why they're laying me off," the 59-year-old Ruis said in an interview. "I can only assume it's age, and I don't want to go silently."

Coretta Roddey of suburban Atlanta, 49, an African-American Army veteran and former IBM employee, said she's applied more than 50 times to return to the company, but has been turned down or received no response. She's hired a lawyer and filed an age discrimination complaint with EEOC.

"It's frustrating," she said of the multiple rejections. "It makes you feel you don't have the qualifications (for the job) when you really do."

Correction, May 17, 2018: This article originally misspelled Coretta Roddey's name.

If You're Over 50, Chances Are the Decision to Leave a Job Won't be Yours

A new data analysis by ProPublica and the Urban Institute shows more than half of older U.S. workers are pushed out of longtime jobs before they choose to retire, suffering financial damage that is often irreversible.

by Peter Gosselin, ProPublica
Dec. 28, 2018, 5 a.m. EST



Update, Jan. 4, 2019: This story has been updated to reflect a statement from Maersk.

Tom Steckel hunched over a laptop in the overheated basement of the state Capitol building in Pierre, South Dakota, early last week, trying to figure out how a newly awarded benefit claims contract will make it easier for him do his job.

Steckel is South Dakota's director of employee benefits. His department administers programs that help the state's 13,500 public employees pay for health care and prepare for retirement.

It's steady work and, for that, Steckel, 62, is grateful. After turning 50, he was laid off three times before landing his current position in 2014, weathering unemployment stints of up to eight months.

When he started, his \$90,000-a-year salary was only 60 percent of what he made at his highest-paying job. Even with a

subsequent raise, he's nowhere close to matching his peak earnings.

Money is hardly the only trade-off Steckel has made to hang onto the South Dakota post.

He spends three weeks of every four away from his wife, Mary, and the couple's three children, who live 700 miles away in Plymouth, Wisconsin, in a house the family was unable to sell for most of the last decade.

With Christmas approaching, he set off late on Dec. 18 for the 11-hour drive home. When the holiday is over, he'll drive back to Pierre.

"I'm glad to be employed," he said, "but this isn't what I would have planned for this point in my life."

Many Americans assume that by the time they reach their 50s they'll have steady work, time to save and the right to make their own decisions about when to retire.

But as Steckel's situation suggests, that's no longer the reality for many — indeed, most — people.

ProPublica and the Urban Institute, a Washington think tank, analyzed data from the Health and Retirement Study, or HRS, the premier source of quantitative information about aging in America. Since 1992, the study has followed a nationally representative sample of about 20,000 people from the time they turn 50 through the rest of their lives.



Steckel keeps photos of his wife, Mary, and their three children on the mantel at his rented place in Pierre. (Ackerman + Gruber, special to ProPublica)

Through 2016, our analysis found that between the time older workers enter the study and when they leave paid employment, 56 percent are laid off at least once or leave jobs under such financially damaging circumstances that it's likely they were pushed out rather than choosing to go voluntarily.

Only one in 10 of these workers ever again earns as much as they did before their employment setbacks, our analysis showed. Even years afterward, the household incomes of over half of those who experience such work disruptions remain substantially below those of workers who don't.

"This isn't how most people think they're going to finish out their work lives," said Richard Johnson, an Urban Institute economist and veteran scholar of the older labor force who worked on the analysis. "For the majority of older Americans, working after 50 is considerably riskier and more turbulent than we previously thought."

The HRS is based on employee surveys, not employer records, so it can't definitively identify what's behind every setback, but it includes detailed information about the circumstances under which workers leave jobs and the consequences of these departures.

We focused on workers who enter their 50s with stable, full-time jobs and who've been with the same employer for at least five years — those who HRS data and other economic studies show are least likely to encounter employment problems. We considered only separations that result in at least six months of unemployment or at least a 50 percent drop in earnings from pre-separation levels.

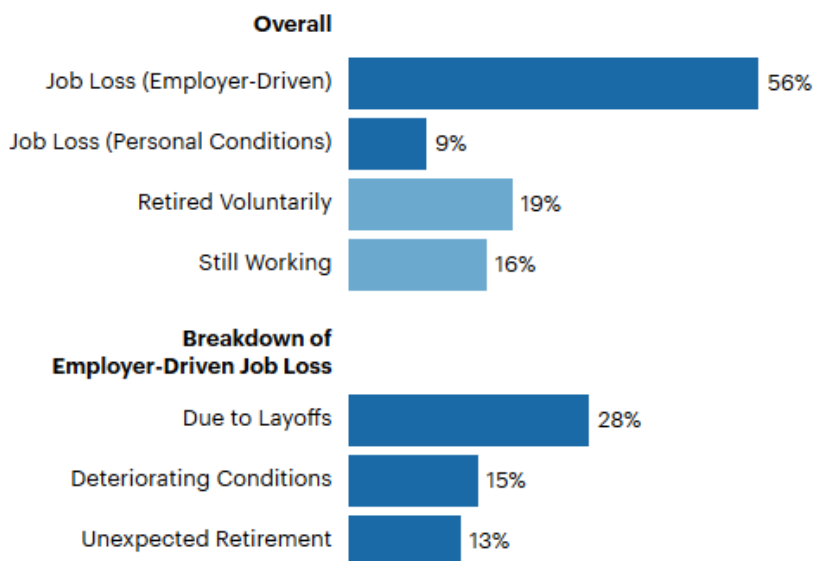
Then, we sorted job departures into voluntary and involuntary and, among involuntary departures, distinguished between those likely driven by employers and those resulting from personal issues, such as poor health or family problems. (See the full analysis [here](#).)

We found that 28 percent of stable, longtime employees sustain at least one damaging layoff by their employers between turning 50 and leaving work for retirement.

“We’ve known that some workers get a nudge from their employers to exit the work force and some get a great big kick,” said Gary Burtless, a prominent labor economist with the Brookings Institution in Washington. “What these results suggest is that a whole lot more are getting the great big kick.”

A Majority of Older Americans With Stable Jobs Are Pushed Out of Work

Americans who enter their 50s working full-time, long-held positions — the steadiest type of work — report being pushed out of their jobs by their employers.



Note: Estimates are based on a sample of 2,086 respondents employed full time, full year at ages 51 to 54 and who have been with the same employer for at least five years and who are observed at least until age 65. The analysis considers only job departures that were followed by at least six consecutive months of nonemployment or that resulted in at least a 50 percent decline in weekly earnings for at least two years. Some respondents experienced more than one type of involuntary job departure after age 50, but the departure categories are arranged hierarchically so that no more than one type of separation is counted for any worker.

Source: Data analysis by ProPublica and the Urban Institute, based on the Health and Retirement Study survey by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research.

An additional 13 percent of workers who start their 50s in long-held positions unexpectedly retire under conditions that suggest they were forced out. They begin by telling survey takers they plan to keep working for many years, but, within a couple of years, they suddenly announce they’ve retired, amid a substantial drop in earnings and income.

Jeffrey Wenger, a senior labor economist with the RAND Corp., said some of these people likely were laid off, but they cover it up by saying they retired. “There’s so much social stigma around being separated from work,” he said, “even people who are fired or let go will say they retired to save face.”

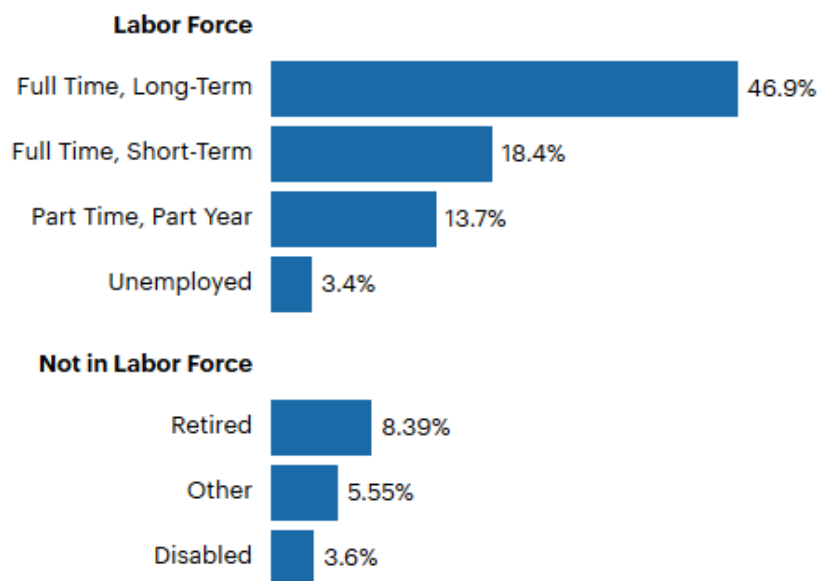
Finally, a further 15 percent of over-50 workers who begin with stable jobs quit or leave them after reporting that their pay, hours, work locations or treatment by supervisors have deteriorated. These, too, indicate departures that may well not be freely chosen.

Taken together, the scale of damage sustained by older workers is substantial. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are currently 40 million Americans age 50 and older who are working. Our analysis of the HRS data suggests that as many as 22 million of these people have or will suffer a layoff, forced retirement or other involuntary job separation. Of these, only a little over 2 million have recovered or will.

“These findings tell us that a sizable percentage, possibly a majority, of workers who hold career jobs in their 50s will get pushed out of those jobs on their way to retirement,” Burtless said. “Yes, workers can find jobs after a career job comes to an early, unexpected end. But way too often, the replacement job is a whole lot worse than the career job. This leaves little room for the worker to rebuild.”

When you add in those forced to leave their jobs for personal reasons such as poor health or family trouble, the share of Americans pushed out of regular work late in their careers rises to almost two-thirds. That’s a far cry from the voluntary glide path to retirement that most economists assume, and many Americans expect.

What Americans Do for Work as They Enter Their 50s



Note: Estimates are based on 13,879 observations between 1992 and 2016. Long-term employment is defined as at least five years with the same employer.

Source: Data analysis by ProPublica and the Urban Institute, based on the Health and Retirement Study survey by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research.

Steckel knows a lot about how tough the labor market can be for older workers, and not just because of his own job losses. He's spent much of his career in human resources, often helping employers show workers — including many, like him, over 50 — the door.

In most instances, he said he's understood the business rationale for the cuts. Employers need to reduce costs, boost profits and beat the competition. But he also understands the frustration and loss of control older workers feel at having their experience work against them and their expectations come undone.

"Nobody plans to lose their job. If there's work to do and you're doing it, you figure you'll get to keep doing it," he said recently. But once employers start pushing people out, no amount of hard work will save you, he added, and "nothing you do at your job really prepares you for being out" of work.

For 50 years, it has been illegal under the federal Age Discrimination in Employment Act, or ADEA, for employers to treat older workers differently than younger ones with only a few exceptions, such as when a job requires great stamina or quick reflexes.

For decades, judges and policymakers treated the age law's provisions as part and parcel of the nation's fundamental civil rights guarantee against discrimination on the basis of race, sex, ethnic origin and other categories.

But in recent years, employers' pleas for greater freedom to remake their workforces to meet global competition have won an increasingly sympathetic hearing. Federal appeals courts and the U.S. Supreme Court have reacted by widening the reach of the ADEA's exceptions and restricting the law's protections.

Meanwhile, most employers have stopped offering traditional pensions, which once delivered a double-barreled incentive for older workers to retire voluntarily: maximum payouts for date-certain departures and the assurance that benefits would last as long as the people receiving them. That's left workers largely responsible for financing their own retirements and many in need of continued work.

"There's no safe haven in today's labor market," said Carl Van Horn, a public policy professor and director of the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University in New Jersey. "Even older workers who have held jobs with the same employer for decades may be laid off without warning" or otherwise cut.

In a story this year, ProPublica described how IBM has forced out more than 20,000 U.S. workers aged 40 and over in just the past five years in order to, in the words of one internal company planning document, "correct seniority mix." To accomplish this, the company used a combination of layoffs and forced retirements, as well as tactics such as mandatory relocations seemingly designed to push longtime workers to quit.

In response, IBM issued a statement that said, in part, "We are proud of our company and our employees' ability to reinvent themselves era after era, while always complying with the law."

As an older tech firm trying to keep up in what's seen as a young industry, IBM might seem unique, but our analysis of the HRS data suggests the company is no outlier in how it approaches shaping its workforce.

The share of U.S. workers who've suffered financially damaging, employer-driven job separations after age 50 has risen steadily from just over 10 percent in 1998 to almost 30 percent in 2016, the analysis shows.

The turbulence experienced by older workers is about the same regardless of their income, education, geography or industry.

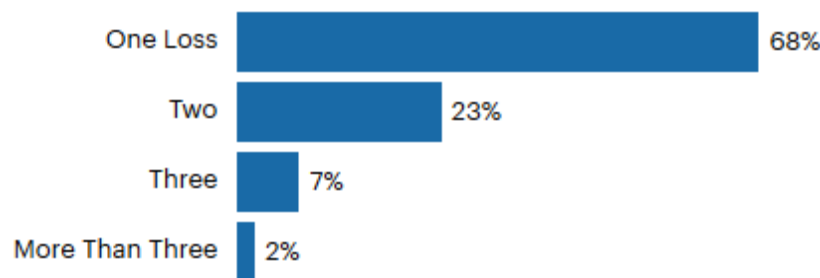
Some 58 percent of those with high school educations who reach their 50s working steadily in long-term jobs subsequently face a damaging layoff or other involuntarily separation. Yet more education provides little additional protection; 55 percent of those with college or graduate degrees experience similar job losses.

Across major industrial sectors and regions of the country, more than half of older workers experience involuntarily separations. The same is true across sexes, races and ethnicities, although a larger share of older African-American and Hispanic workers than whites are forced out of work by poor health and family crises, the data shows. This could indicate that minority workers are more likely to have jobs that take a bigger toll on health.

Once out, older workers only rarely regain the income and stability they once enjoyed.

Many Older Americans Are Pushed Out Multiple Times

Among workers over 50 who have lost one job, a third go on to lose two or more jobs.



Note: Estimates are based on a sample of 1,189 respondents employed full time, full year at ages 51 to 54 who are observed at least until age 65 and who experienced an employer-related involuntary job departure. The analysis considers only job departures that were followed by at least six consecutive months of nonemployment or that resulted in at least a 50 percent decline in weekly earnings for at least two years.

Source: Data analysis by ProPublica and the Urban Institute, based on the Health and Retirement Study survey by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research.

Jaye Crist, 58, of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, was a mid-level executive with printing giant RR Donnelley until his May 2016 layoff. Today, he supports his family on less than half his previous \$100,000-a-year salary, working 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at a local print shop, 7 p.m. to 2 a.m. at the front desk of a Planet Fitness gym and bartending on Sundays.

Linda Norris, 62, of Nashua, New Hampshire, earned a similar amount doing engineering work for defense contractors before being laid off in late 2015. She spent much of 2016 campaigning for then-candidate Donald Trump and is convinced her fortunes will change now that he's president. In the meantime, she hasn't been able to find a permanent full-time job and said she has \$25 to her name.

The HRS is widely considered the gold standard for information about the economic lives and health of older Americans. It's funded by the National Institutes of Health and the Social Security Administration and is administered by the University of Michigan. It has been cited in thousands of academic papers and has served as the basis for a generation of business and government policymaking.

Our analysis suggests that some of those policies, as well as a good deal of what analysts and advocates focus on when it comes to aging, don't grapple with the key challenges faced by working Americans during the last third or so of their lives.

Much public discussion of aging focuses on Social Security, Medicare and how to boost private retirement savings. But our analysis shows that many, perhaps most, older workers encounter trouble well before they're eligible for these benefits and that their biggest economic challenge may be hanging onto a job that allows for any kind of savings at all.

"We're talking about the wrong issues," said Anne Colamosca, an economic commentator who co-authored one of the earliest critiques of tax-advantaged savings plans, "The Great 401(k) Hoax." "Having a stable job with good wages is more important to most people than what's in their 401(k). Getting to the point where you can collect Social Security and Medicare can be every bit as hard as trying to live on the benefits once you start getting them."

Layoffs are the most common way workers over 50 get pushed out of their jobs, and more than a third of those who sustain one major involuntary departure go on to experience additional ones, as the last decade of Steckel's work life illustrates.

Steckel spent 27 years with the U.S. affiliate of Maersk, the world's largest container cargo company, working at several of its operations across the country. It was while managing a trucking terminal in Chicago that he met his wife, an MBA student who went on to become the marketing director at Thorek Memorial Hospital on the city's North Side.

In the late 1990s, Steckel was promoted to a human resources position. It required the family to relocate to the company's headquarters in northern New Jersey, but the salary — which, with bonuses, would eventually reach about \$130,000 — allowed Mary to be a stay-at-home mom.

Steckel saw himself continuing to climb the company's ranks, but as shipping technology changed and business slumped in the middle of the last decade, Maersk started consolidating operations and laying people off. Steckel flew around the country to notify employees, including some he knew personally.

"It was pretty hard not to notice that many — not all, but many — were over 50," he said.

A Maersk spokesman confirmed Steckel worked for the company and responded to questions with this statement: "As an equal opportunity employer, Maersk is committed to maintaining a work environment free of any form of discrimination or harassment against employees on the basis of age, race, religion, gender, national origin, physical and mental disability, or any other basis protected by law."

In early 2007, Steckel, then 51, was laid off.

He and Mary moved back to the Midwest, where the cost of living was lower and they had relatives.

Layoffs are common in the U.S. economy; there were 20.7 million of them last year alone, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In most instances, those who lose their jobs find new ones quickly. Steckel certainly assumed he would.

But laid-off workers in their 50s and beyond are more apt than those in their 30s or 40s to be unemployed for long periods and land poorer subsequent jobs, the HRS data shows. "Older workers don't lose their jobs any more frequently than younger ones," said Princeton labor economist Henry Farber, "but when they do, they're substantially less likely to be re-employed."

Steckel was out of work for eight months. The family made do, buoyed by generous severance pay and a short consulting contract. They did without dinners out, vacations or big purchases, but were basically okay.

Steckel was hired again in January 2008, this time as a benefits manager for Kohler, a manufacturer of bathroom fixtures. At about \$90,000, his salary was 30 percent lower than what he'd made at Maersk, but Wisconsin was so affordable that the family was able to buy the house and five acres in Plymouth.

Kohler seemed like a safe bet. Many of its employees had never worked anywhere else, following their parents and

grandparents into lifetime jobs with the company. But as Steckel started in his new position, the U.S. financial crisis cratered real estate and home construction and, with them, Kohler's business.

This time, Steckel's role in executing layoffs was explaining severance packages to the company's shellshocked factory workers.

"Most of these people were in their late 40s and 50s and there was nothing out there for them," he said. "They'd come in with their wives and some of them would break down and cry."



Steckel works on his computer in his furnished place in Pierre. (Ackerman + Gruber, special to ProPublica)

After three years, Kohler's problems leapt from the factory to the front office. Steckel, by then 54, was laid off again in April 2010. A Kohler spokeswoman did not reply to phone calls and emails.

Still the family's sole breadwinner, with kids in fourth, eighth and ninth grades, he scrambled for new work and, after a string of interviews, landed a job just four months later as the manager of retirement plans at Alpha Natural Resources.

Alpha, in the coal mining business, was riding a double wave of demand from China and U.S. steel producers, snapping up smaller companies on its way to becoming an industry behemoth.

Steckel's job was a big one, overseeing complicated, union-negotiated pensions and savings arrangements. At \$145,000, the salary represented a substantial raise from what he'd been making at Kohler and was even more than he'd earned at Maersk. The Steckels relocated again, this time to the tiny southwest Virginia town of Abingdon.

"We started thinking: 'This may be it. This is where we'll stay,'" Mary Steckel said. "Then, all that changed."

In January 2011, Alpha bought Massey Energy for \$8.5 billion and with it the responsibility for reaching financial settlements with the families of 29 miners killed the previous year in an explosion at Massey's Upper Big Branch mine in West Virginia. The combination of the settlement costs and a sustained fall in coal prices forced layoffs at Alpha and eventually led to the company's bankruptcy.

Steckel struggled to collect decades of paper records on wages and years of service in order to calculate pension

payments for laid-off miners, virtually all in their 50s and 60s. “There were no jobs for them, but they were owed [pension benefits] and they wanted their money yesterday,” he said. A spokesman for the successor company to Alpha, Contura Energy, did not return phone calls or emails.

Once again, he processed other employees’ layoffs right up until his own, in March 2013. He was 56. The Steckels packed the kids and the family’s belongings into their Mercury Sable station wagon and went back to Wisconsin.

There, Mary took a job at Oshkosh Defense, which builds Humvees and other equipment for the military. Tom was out of work almost six months before landing a consulting contract to work in Milwaukee with Harley-Davidson, the motorcycle maker.

If it had lasted, the position would have paid about \$90,000, or about what he’d made at Kohler, and, for a time, it seemed possible that it might turn into a regular job. But it didn’t, and he was out again that December.

Unlike Steckel, Jean Potter of Dallas, Georgia, seemed to leave her longtime job at BellSouth by her own choice, taking early retirement in 2009, when she was 55.

But that wasn’t the full story, she said. Potter, who’d had a 27-year career with the telephone company, rising from operator services to pole-climbing line work to technical troubleshooting, said she only retired after hearing she was going to lose her \$54,000-a-year job along with thousands of other employees being laid off as part of the company’s acquisition by AT&T.

Under the law, retirements are supposed to be voluntary decisions made by employees. The 1967 ADEA barred companies from setting a mandatory retirement age lower than 65. Congress raised that to 70 and then, in 1986, largely prohibited mandatory retirement at any age. Outraged by companies’ giving employees the unpalatable choice of retiring or getting laid off, lawmakers subsequently added a requirement that people’s retirement decisions must be “knowing and voluntary.”

Yet for almost two decades now, when HRS respondents who’ve recently retired have been asked whether their retirements were “something you wanted to do or something you felt forced into,” those who’ve answered they were forced or partially forced has risen steadily. The number of respondents saying this has grown from 33 percent in 1998 to 55 percent in 2014, the last year for which comparable figures are available.

“The expectation that American workers decide when they want to retire is no longer realistic for a significant number of older workers who are pushed out before they are ready to retire,” said Rutgers’ Van Horn.

Potter was convinced she’d secured money and benefits by leaving as a retiree that she would not otherwise have received. She felt better for making the decision herself and figured she’d go back to school, get a college degree and find a better job.

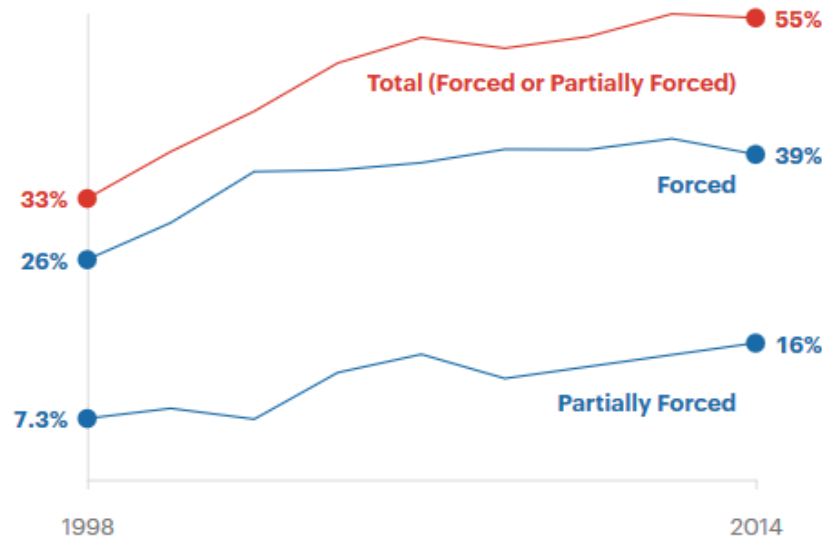
“I thought I’d gotten the drop on them by retiring,” she said.



Jean Potter, 65, spent 27 years with BellSouth, taking early retirement at 55 only because she received a layoff notice. Now, she lives on Social Security and a graduate student stipend as she finishes her master’s degree at Kennesaw State University in Georgia. (Audra Melton for ProPublica)

A Majority of New Retirees in 2014 Said They Were Forced to Retire

The percentage of recent retirees who said their retirement was forced or partially forced has risen steadily over two decades and reached 55 percent in 2014, the last year for which comparable figures are available.



Note: Estimates are based on a sample 13,988 respondents who reported being newly retired. Respondents are categorized by the year in which they first reported being retired. Results are only through 2014 because information needed to make 2016 numbers comparable is not yet available.

Source: Data analysis by ProPublica and the Urban Institute, based on the Health and Retirement Study survey by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research.

But looking back, Potter acknowledges, her decision to retire was hardly freely chosen.

“If I had to do it over, I’d take early retirement again, but you can’t very well call it voluntary,” she said recently. “All the old people were toast. They were going to get laid off, me included.”

Jim Kimberly, a spokesman for AT&T, said the company could not confirm Potter’s employment at BellSouth because of privacy concerns. Speaking more generally, Kimberly said “We’re recognized for our longstanding commitment to diversity. We don’t tolerate discrimination based on an employee’s age.”

There was a time when older workers thought they could use early retirements as a stepping stone, locking in years of payments for leaving and then adding income from new jobs on top of that.

But many have discovered they can’t land comparable new jobs, or, in many cases, any jobs at all. In the decade since she left Bell South, Potter, now 65, has yet to find stable, long-term work.



Potter talks with Tauseef Khan, 24, at the multicultural student affairs office at Kennesaw State University, where she works to supplement her Social Security benefits while finishing her degree. (Audra Melton for ProPublica)



Potter leaves the student center at Kennesaw State University. (Audra Melton for ProPublica)

After getting her bachelor's degree in Spanish in 2014, Potter applied to teach in the Cobb County, Georgia, public schools but could only get substitute work. She got certified to teach English as a second language but said she was told she'd need a master's degree to land anything beyond temporary jobs.

She's scheduled to receive her master's degree next June. In the meantime, she tutors grade-school students in math, English and Spanish and works as a graduate assistant in the office of multicultural student affairs at Kennesaw State University. She makes do on \$1,129 a month from Social Security and a graduate-student stipend of \$634, while applying, so far unsuccessfully, for other work.

She's applied for jobs selling cellphones in a mall, providing call-center customer service and even being a waitress at a Waffle House. For the Waffle House job, she said she was told she wouldn't be hired because she'd just leave when she got a better offer.

"Isn't that what every waitress does?" she recalled replying. "Why hire them and not me?"

As with retirements, our analysis of the HRS data shows that, among older workers, quitting a job isn't always the voluntary act most people, including economists, assume it to be.

The survey asks why people leave their jobs, including when they quit. It includes questions about whether their supervisors encouraged the departure, whether their wages or hours were reduced prior to their exit and whether they thought they "would have been laid off" if they didn't leave.

We found that even when we excluded all but the most consequential cases — those in which workers

subsequently experienced at least six months of unemployment or a 50 percent wage decline — 15 percent of workers over 50 who'd had long-term, stable jobs quit or left their positions after their working conditions deteriorated or they felt pressured to do so.

Quitting a job carries far greater risk for older workers than for younger ones, both because it's harder to get rehired and because there's less time to make up for what's lost in being out of work.

After a simmering disagreement with a supervisor, David Burns, 50, of Roswell, Georgia, quit his \$90,000-a-year logistics job with a major shipping company last February. He figured that the combination of his education and experience and the fact that unemployment nationally is at a 20-year low assured that he'd easily land a new position. But 10 months on, he says he's yet to receive a single offer of comparable work. To help bring in some money, he's doing woodworking for \$20 an hour.

Burns has an MBA from Georgia State University and two decades in shipping logistics. A quick scan of online job ads turns up dozens for logistics management positions like the one he had in the area where he lives.

When he'd last lost a job at the age of 35, he said it took him only a couple of months and four applications to get three offers and a new spot. But in the years since, he said, he seems to have crossed a line that he wasn't aware existed, eliminating his appeal to employers.

He keeps a spreadsheet of his current efforts to find new work. Through November, it shows he filed 160 online job applications and landed 14 phone interviews, nine face-to-face meetings and zero offers.

"My skills are in high demand," he said. "But what's not in high demand is me, a 50-year-old dude!"

"People can quibble about exactly why this kind of thing is going on or what to do about it, but it's going on."

Meg Bourbonniere had a similar experience just as she seemingly had reached the pinnacle of a successful career.

Two weeks after being appointed to a \$200,000-a-year directorship managing a group of researchers at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston in March 2015, Bourbonniere, then 59, said her supervisor called with an odd question: When did she think she'd be retiring?

"I kept asking myself, 'Why would that be important today?'" she recalled. "The only thing I could come up with was they think I'm too old for the job."

After she answered, "I'll be here as long as you are," she said she ran into an array of problems on the job: her decisions were countermanded, she was given what she saw as an unfairly negative job review and she was put on a "personal improvement plan" that required her to step up her performance or risk dismissal. Finally, a year after being hired, she was demoted from director to nurse scientist, the title held by those she'd managed.

Michael Morrison, a spokesman for Mass General's parent organization, Partners HealthCare, confirmed the dates of Bourbonniere's employment but said there was nothing further he could share as the company doesn't comment on individual employees.

Bourbonniere said she accepted the demotion because her husband was unemployed at the time. "I couldn't not work," she said. "I was the chief wage earner."

Through a friend, she found out about an opening for an assistant professor of nursing at the University of Rhode Island that, at about \$75,000, paid only a third as much as the Mass General job. She told the friend she'd apply on one condition. "I said she had to tell the dean how old I was so I wouldn't go through the same experience all over again."

On paper, Bourbonniere quit Mass General of her own accord to take the position at URI. But, in her eyes, there was nothing voluntary about the move. "I had to go find another job," she said. "They demoted me; I couldn't stay."

Soon after Steckel's consulting contract ended in late 2013, he got what he saw as a sharp reminder of the role age was playing in his efforts to get and keep a job.

While searching job sites on his computer, Steckel stumbled across what seemed like his dream job on LinkedIn. Business insurer CNA Financial was looking for an assistant vice president to head its employee benefits operation. Best yet, the position was at CNA's Chicago headquarters, a mere 145 miles from Plymouth. He immediately applied.

The application asked for the year he'd graduated from college.

Older job seekers are almost universally counseled not to answer questions like this. The ADEA bars employers from putting age requirements in help-wanted ads, but as job searches have moved online, companies have found other ways to target or exclude applicants by age. Last year, ProPublica and The New York Times reported that employers were using platforms like Facebook to micro-target jobs ads to younger users. Companies also digitally scour resumes for age

indicators, including graduation dates.

Steckel left the field in the CNA application blank, but when he pushed “submit,” the system kicked it back, saying it was incomplete. He reluctantly filled in 1978. This time, the system accepted the application and sent back an automated response that he was in the top 10 percent of applicants based on his LinkedIn resume.

Hours later, however, he received a second automated response saying CNA had decided to “move forward with other candidates.” The rejection rankled Steckel enough that he tracked down the email address of the CNA recruiter responsible for filling the slot.

“Apparently, CNA believes a college application date is so important that it is a mandatory element in your job application process,” his email to the recruiter said. “Please cite a credible, peer-reviewed study that affirms the value of the year and date of one’s college graduation as a valid and reliable predictor of job success.”

He never got an answer.

Contacted by ProPublica, CNA spokesman Brandon Davis did not respond to questions but issued a statement. “CNA adheres to all applicable federal, state and local employment laws, and our policy prohibits any form of discrimination,” it said.

Steckel landed his current job with the state of South Dakota in March 2014.

Going back and forth between Pierre and Plymouth since then, he’s driven the equivalent of once around the world. If, as he hopes, he can hang onto the position until he retires, he figures he’ll make it around a second time.



Steckel has driven the equivalent of once around the world, commuting between his job in South Dakota and his home and family in eastern Wisconsin. If he holds onto the post, he expects to go around again. (Ackerman + Gruber, special to ProPublica)

During his off hours in the spring, when he’s not with his family, he fishes in the Black Hills. In the fall, he goes out with his Mossberg 12-gauge shotgun and hunts duck. The loneliest months are January and February. That’s when the Legislature is in session, so he can’t go home, and it’s usually too cold to do much outside. He spends a lot of time at the Y.

A half-century ago, in a report that led to enactment of the ADEA, then-U.S. Labor Secretary W. Willard Wirtz said that half of all private-sector job ads at the time explicitly barred anyone over the age of 55 from applying and a quarter barred anyone over 45.

Wirtz lambasted the practice in terms that, although backward in their depiction of work as solely a male concern, still ring true for older workers like Steckel and their families.

“There is no harsher verdict in most men’s lives than someone else’s judgment that they are no longer worth their keep,” he wrote. “It is then, when the answer at the hiring gate is ‘You’re too old,’ that a man turns away ... finding nothing to look backwards to with pride [or] forward to with hope.”

Asked how the years of job turmoil and now separation have affected her family, Mary Steckel resists anger or bitterness.

“The children know they are loved by two parents, even if Tom is not always here,” she said. She doesn’t dwell on the current arrangement. “I just deal with it.”

As for Tom?

“He hasn’t admitted defeat,” Mary said, although something has changed. “He’s not hopeful anymore.”



Workers over 50 who get pushed out of longtime jobs crisscross the American landscape looking for livelihoods to carry them through to retirement. (Ackerman + Gruber, special to ProPublica)

Ariana Tobin contributed to this report.