



Career climbers share Conan O'Brien's pain

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NEW YORK (Reuters Life!) - Late-night television host Conan O'Brien was not alone when his career aspirations were crushed earlier this year by an older colleague who refused to retire, experts say.

After just seven months O'Brien, 47, was forced out as host of NBC's long-running "The Tonight Show" in January when he refused to move his show to a later time and accommodate Jay Leno, 60, in a reshuffle of the network's late night line-up. Leno was later reinstated as host of "The Tonight Show."

The move sparked outrage among O'Brien's peers and young fans because, some experts say, his on-the-job experience was shared in workplaces around the United States by people who felt their careers were being stifled by an older generation.

"What was largely taking place was this huge amount of anger and animosity toward Leno for blocking the way of the next generation," said gerontologist Ken Dychtwald. "That's happening not only on NBC but in every work site in America."

"Every single workforce is going through the same drama, the Leno/Conan dynamic," he said.

O'Brien walked away from the NBC TV network with a \$45 million severance deal. He returned to TV this week with a new late night show, "Conan," on cable channel TBS, but his wounds are still raw.

"People ask me why I named the show 'Conan.' I did it so I'd be harder to replace," he told the audience on Monday night's premiere telecast.

For more than 15 years, O'Brien hosted NBC's "Late Night" talk show, which was broadcast after "The Tonight Show," and he was anointed several years ago by NBC to succeed Leno in 2009.

Like many an office worker, he effectively was promoted to the top spot on NBC's late-night roster, but when NBC's plans didn't work out as expected, the old boss Leno was returned to his job and the younger, career-climber O'Brien saw his ambitions crushed.

Richard Johnson, director of The Urban Institute's program on retirement policy, said O'Brien's experience was shared by many Americans, mostly at top management levels. Mid-level manager jobs, by contrast, generally are more available.

"If the person who holds the top job stays on and delays retirement, it's certainly going to limit opportunities for the people who are aiming for that position," Johnson said.

Moreover, while the United States struggles to recover from its worst recession in decades and unemployment hovers near 10 percent, more people are hanging on to the jobs they have.

Marcie Pitt-Catsouphe, director of The Sloan Center on Aging and Work at Boston College, said that because of the economic downturn workers of all ages are taking less risks to ensure they retain their positions, rather than progress.

"When people become uncertain about the predictability of future employment, for all of us, for young people as well as for older workers, an understandable strategy is to hang on to what you have," Pitt-Catsouphe said.

"It's not always quite so simple that, if an older person leaves, it opens up a job for a younger person," she said.