

Ageism In The Workplace: Is It A Bigger Problem Than You Think?

By David Rice

QUICK SUMMARY

Ageism isn't just common, it's often accepted to the detriment of workplace culture and employee wellbeing. Learn how ageism might be impacting your people.

Amidst all the talk about diversity and inclusion, ageism in the workplace is sometimes overlooked. There's a reason for that.

Just in the last year, the American Psychological Association dubbed ageism "the last socially acceptable prejudice." They define ageism as "discrimination against older people because of negative and inaccurate stereotypes."

As we take a look at ageism as a dimension of diversity, I think it's necessary to tweak that definition a bit.

What Is Ageism?

For the purposes of this article, we'll go with the World Health Organization's definition of "the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) towards others or oneself based on age."

The reason we choose this definition is because there are plenty of instances of older generations exhibiting these behaviors against younger people.

It may be something as light as a "you'll understand when you get older" comment, or as egregious as the Millennial and Gen Z bashing you find in mainstream media and the rhetoric of older generations.

Ageism Against Older Workers

Stereotypes and biases toward older workers don't just impact the quality of that worker's experience, it can also have a negative effect on overall health.

Ageism experienced in the workplace can perpetuate self directed ageism that many people struggle with as they get older. Studies show that older adults who engage in self-directed ageism are likely to experience feelings of uselessness and have shorter lifespans.

Traditionally, ageist views towards older workers stems from the perception that they can't keep up with technological advancements that drive workplace innovation and trends. This stereotype proves to be incorrect with increasing regularity.

"Ageism is a curious case of discrimination because every year age matters less and less," says Margaret J King, Director of The Center for Cultural Studies & Analysis. "What the prejudice relies on is a belief that older workers have less to offer because they have set ways of thinking and are harder to train. This idea is mitigated by the great number of people who are computer-literate at older and older ages, and working remotely is assisting that trend."

The number of workers who remember a time before the internet, nevermind computers and the variety of software solutions that they provide, is dwindling fast.

In a world where the retirement age is likely going to continue increasing in the coming years, it's imperative that workplace leaders not only dispel any notions that older workers can't keep up, but cultivate a work environment where they feel safe to make mistakes and learn the same as they did in their youth.

"People can learn anything with the right motivation and at any life stage," King said. "Medicine and good health habits are extending the lifespan. There is no retirement requirement in this country, so motivated seniors need not even retire-and many now can't afford that luxury anyhow. What we value is really vitality, ability to learn, and sociability, and those are attainable at all ages."

But even if the person is willing to learn, there are still ageist obstacles in place.

64-year old Debra Sengson was an HR practitioner for more than 25 years. After being laid off from her job as the Head of HR for a local plumbing company in her hometown of Naples, Florida, she went back on the job hunt.

Her resume needed extensive updating having been in her last position for nearly 12 years and she would finally have to join LinkedIn, something she wasn't all that interested in as someone who doesn't use social media at all.

But adopt it she did, and as she began applying for jobs, the common response from potential employers didn't make much sense to her.

"They would say things like 'you're too experienced'," Sengson said. "Others would say they could never afford me. I even said I was willing to take a pay cut. With others, I said I'd take a lesser role or even work part time. But they weren't interested and would just say it's not a good fit. In one instance, the recruiter contacted me with so much enthusiasm, but when they saw me, the enthusiasm was gone. She didn't think I was going to be in my 60s. I know this because they said they went with a candidate they believed would be in it for the long haul."

Exhausted from her experience as a job seeker, Sengson opted for early retirement. Her experience is not uncommon. The reasons for bias against older workers vary, but are often down to preconceptions about retirement, health or vitality.

Ageism Against Younger Workers

Ageism against younger workers isn't necessarily recognized as often as the opposite, but it is a consistent issue if we apply our definition of ageism to behaviors commonly exhibited toward younger workers.

For many years, narratives around paying dues and the wisdom that comes with age have led to younger workers' ideas being dismissed or, in some cases, being flat out taken.

In some settings, their optimism is labeled as naivete and their credentials or experiences are minimized.

Haley DeLeon is all too familiar with what's being described here. In her career as a digital marketer, she's worn a variety of hats over the years spanning strategy, content creation and management and people management.

Her ascent into those roles was swift at a previous company where she was promoted to the role of a content marketing editor in her mid 20s. But rather than being seen as a "high potential" or top performer, many of her colleagues only saw her age.

"I was put in the position of being an editor for writers that were significantly older than me and the resentment was obvious," she said. "I was in my mid-20s, they were mostly in their early to mid-40s. I had several writers that I was providing regular feedback to, and none of them were implementing it."

Despite being more experienced in content marketing than many of her peers who had transitioned into the discipline from careers in journalism or education, DeLeon's feedback, guidance and offers to help train them were mostly ignored.

On several instances, if they didn't like the feedback she provided, they would go above her to her superiors at the time and complain.

"One writer specifically mentioned that he was personally insulted by the situation," she said.

Soon after that, DeLeon was promoted to being a people manager in addition to being an editor. Rather than earning her the respect of her peers, this only heightened the tension.

"I remember a time when our team was instructed to create a board using craft supplies that was supposed to display our goals," she said. "Everyone assumed that I would do all of the work because at that time, I was not only the youngest person on the team, but also the only woman. Double whammy. This wasn't implied—it was said aloud by the older male team members."

Years later, DeLeon says she can sympathize that it would be tough to report to someone 20 years your junior, but notes that it was difficult not to be taken seriously based mostly on her age.

"I was earnestly trying to help them transition from their journalism careers into having more of a content marketing focus," she said. "I even hosted training workshops and brought doughnuts. Looking back on it, I was probably annoyingly over-eager to them, but I thought I was helping."

Even that sentiment, however, brings to life how ageist views can change the context of how a person is perceived. DeLeon's ambition and sincerity being translated to over eagerness would be unlikely to occur if she were in her 40s at the time.

The Legal Questions Of Ageism

Ageism, like any other form of workplace discrimination can have significant consequences.

I don't just mean the obvious cases, such as the recent cases against Elon Musk's X for laying off workers older than 50 at a disproportionate rate or the Meathead Movers case being brought by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in which candidates over 50 were automatically rejected, even for desk jobs.

Employers should watch these and other cases in the future closely. At a time when the U.S. House of Representatives has proposed a bill to make it easier to sue for age discrimination, the implications of legal recourse for age-based discrimination is intensifying.

“Age Discrimination is more than someone explicitly saying they’re not going to hire you because of your age,” Robert Bird, Professor of Business Law at the University of Connecticut said. “Companies need to be aware of the environments that can create age discrimination or the casual remarks that can trigger age discrimination.”

An example Bird provides involves a supervisor assuming that an older employee does not need training on the latest operating system or technology, because they’re only going to be at work a few more years.

Other examples include idle remarks that are the building blocks of illegal activity. When those remarks are made, and not responded to, it creates an environment where age discrimination is acceptable.

To prevent this, Bird recommends prioritizing two actions.

“One is to ensure that kind of talk or assumptions do not become part of the organization. That can be done either through training or education or on the spot responses to these issues,” he said. “Don’t let a casual remark like that slide, because it’s the poisonous soil from which age discrimination can sprout.

“The other is a focus on the language of company culture. What language is acceptable needs to be explicitly defined. Words such as a ‘vigorous’ culture, or the more blatant, a ‘youthful’ culture, those can be codewords for age discrimination. So it’s okay to have a vigorous, engaging or a dynamic culture, but you have to be explicit in making it clear that what that means is that dynamism and that vitality your culture is built on is available to everyone and age isn’t a factor.”

Bird also suggests being explicit when it comes to the criteria used during layoffs. Typically, companies lay off the most expensive people on their payrolls. But the most expensive people tend to be their older workers.

“If they’re making a decision to fire individuals based on salary, firms have to make sure that is the explicit criteria, that they look at firing someone because their costs are too expensive,” Bird said. “That’s perfectly legal under American law, but firing someone because they’re 65 is not. When salaries and age tend to match closely together, it can be tough to avoid the appearance of discrimination.”

In efforts to combat ageism, Bird recommends highlighting the value of every employee.

“Emphasize the positive qualities of older workers, which is that older workers have more experience, they have a wisdom that younger counterparts might not have,” he said. “They have the benefit of more past knowledge that can help them predict how things might go. They’ve seen crises happen before and they’ve dealt with periods of instability, and are able to address the questions that arise out of those crises more effectively than younger workers.”

Impact On Culture And People

Age is an important dimension of workforce diversity. When we talk about diversity and its impact on organizational culture, ageism can have as detrimental of an effect as any other form of discrimination and is as important to innovation and relating to customers.

According to Ash Beckham, an inclusive workplace and leadership expert and author of "Step Up: How to Live with Courage and Become an Everyday Leader," the likelihood of ageism being present within the organization depends on the prevailing culture of the industry it belongs to.

"I think it depends on the foundational culture of the organization," Beckham said. "Is it a tech organization fixated on being the first with the latest and greatest that quickly moves on to the next thing? That company has a greater tendency to marginalize older workers - if they employ them in the first place.

"Organizations in industries where tradition is more highly valued, finance for example, may hold 'experienced' employees in a higher regard. But as work shifts in every aspect, from where to when to how it happens, older employees can have a harder time transitioning to this new normal. That is happening across industries."

For organizations looking to tackle ageism within their industries and institutional cultures, training and setting a tone around age diversity needs to start early in the employee experience.

"Age needs to be included as a marginalized group in onboarding training and in how you view professional development," Beckham said. "Ageism affects both our youngest and oldest employees."

As a first step, Beckham recommends reciprocal mentoring as a way highlight and value input from both sides.

"Both the vast knowledge that comes from seasoned employees as well as the fresh viewpoint of younger employees are necessary for the organization to thrive," Beckham said. "These mutually beneficial relationships help bridge the gap between generational differences and expand our empathy for those not like us."

Intersectionality

While aging is a universal experience for all of us, we do not all age the same or have the same experience within society. How ageism intersects with those aspects of identity, such as race or ethnicity, that shape our overall experience in society and the workplace is important to consider across age groups.

While we can all relate on the complexities of aging and how it makes us feel, it's important that we recognize these intersections when training hiring managers and thinking about employee experience.

"Just as all BIPOC or LGBTQ individuals are not a monolith, neither are older individuals," Beckham said. "The complexities of our overlapping identities, rather than our association with a single marginalized group, dictate our unique challenges with bias in the workplace. The intersection of age and gender is particularly pronounced in the workplace as the perception that women lose value as they age can limit career advancement or result in unequal pay."

Media Narrative Or Reality?

Ageist rhetoric is commonplace in the media. Not long ago, the common complaint my generation faced (Millennials) was that we live at home and waste our money on meaningless things like retro video game consoles and avocado toast.

We were ruining the workplace with our entitlement and desire for work to be something other than an awful experience that we wanted to end each week.

Then, Gen Z became the target of media narratives that say they've taken cancel culture to extremes and that they want "lazy jobs" filled with instant gratification and plenty of down time to feed their screen addictions.

In response, the 'OK Boomer' refrain made the rounds on social platforms and caught the attention of mainstream pundits, turning ageist "banter" into straight up fighting words.

"I think this falls in the trap of so much current age bias," says Beckham. "It is rooted in the fact that the media we consume is targeted to draw lines of us and them, ingroups and outgroups. We are not externally motivated to cross those lines."

The Power of Illusory Truth

Media narratives can transform into perceived reality simply by being repeated enough.

This is what is known as illusory truth, the idea that people will believe something to be true after being exposed to it a number of times. The more it gets repeated, the truer it seems until finally, we end up believing something we knew was false in the first place.

Fake news relies on illusory truth for its very existence. Take any conspiracy theory, regardless of where it comes from, and you will see this.

It may start from a social media account, but as it picks up steam and gets reshared by a public trained to seek likes and reshares of their own, the idea spreads.

Before you know it, pundits on popular media platforms or even mainstream media begin to recognize it and debate it. Your cousin at the family reunion recycles rhetoric they've heard and your old friend from high school is now putting "the facts" on their Facebook. Your colleagues are talking about it in the breakroom at work and before long, you're questioning your own interpretation of reality.

In the case of ageism, it's not hard to see this come to life. An older adult listening to rhetoric about younger people can become convinced that they are all entitled and lazy and do not hold traditional values.

But take an objective look at the barista in your local Starbucks and what you'll often find is a college student working the night shift to pay extortionate rents and who does indeed hope to one day have a career, a house and a family.

For a Millennial listening to their father in law spouting polarizing political rhetoric, you can become convinced that ageist rhetoric on social media may have a point, that he is among those responsible for the financial inequality and climate crisis that impacts our current day. That the voting decisions he made and the lifestyle he led 30 years ago is what has shaped the current obstacles that our generation now faces.

But in fact, upon further examination, what you see is an individual who did the best with the information and resources they had at the time. That they, like everyone else, is a product of the environment in which they exist and are just as susceptible as anyone else to the illusory truths of their day.

So why do we hold ageist stereotypes to be so true when anything more than a cursory glance at most individuals will show us something else?

“What it really comes down to is an unwillingness to try to empathize with people who are not like us,” Beckham said. “We are offended when our generation is stereotyped and our response is to do the exact same thing to another generation, but we miss the irony of what we are doing. We refuse to even be open to the value of those not like us based on some outlandish calculation that if we do so, we devalue ourselves.”

Ageism In The Workplace

Ageism is a very real issue. As we think about how to combat the damage it does to our workplaces, we also have to consider how we educate our people around it as a dimension of diversity. Part of that is helping people understand how ageism can affect anyone.

“We view professional trajectory as up and to the right,” Beckham says. “The story goes - the older we get the more accomplished we are, the more success and responsibility and therefore power we have and so how can that person possibly be discriminated against? But our perception of the world and the reality of it rarely match up.”

One thing is for certain, ageism is embedded into a societal culture that is more geared toward youth and always looking for the next big thing. Getting ageism out of organizational culture, therefore, is complex and will take time. But according to Bird, it can be done.

“You can’t have a meeting and tell everyone that culture has changed, and then the culture has changed,” he says. “It has to come in the tone from the top, it must come from senior executives and other leaders who are going to say, this is a value that we have. And this is behavior we're not going to tolerate.”

There is another risk in that executives tend to be older, so saying this may be seen as self serving. Bird advises that this message should come from individuals of a variety of ages saying "we do not treat anyone differently just because of their age, we look at the content of their character and the quality of their work.”

Once leaders have embraced this and discussed the idea publicly, it should be a part of relevant documents for hiring practices, firing, promotion, and as part of the terms or conditions of employment. Then, it can be operationalized.

“It has to be lived in meetings and when questions of age come up, there must be people there to quickly respond to say, this is not how we do things, or to reward and encourage doing the right things,” Bird said. “Employees can be skeptical of mission statements, they can be skeptical of proposed culture changes. Companies that are committed to this cannot simply drop their commitment to eradicate ageism because the economy gets weaker, the competitive environment gets harder, the company starts losing money. A company that drops its values whenever the road gets rough is a company that never had those values in the first place.”

Ensuring age diversity in your talent pipeline is just as important as race, gender or any other dimension of diversity.

Your hiring processes will benefit from the use of diversity recruiting tools and a top down message that is instilled in your organizational culture and comes through in your job descriptions.

If you want to learn more about DEI, workplace culture and how to create an environment where all employees can thrive, subscribe to the People Managing People newsletter. You'll get all the latest insights, tips and expert advice to help you improve your people practices.

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