

Ageism in the workplace and what you need to know

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What is Ageism?

Ageism is a type of discrimination that involves prejudice against people based on their age. Similar to racism and sexism, *ageism* involves holding negative stereotypes about people of different ages.

The term *ageism* was first used by gerontologist Robert N. Butler to describe the discrimination of older adults. (Butler; 2011) Today, the term is often applied to any type of age-based discrimination, whether it involves prejudice against children, teenagers, adults, or senior citizens.

Younger adults may have difficulty finding jobs and receive lower pay due to their perceived lack of experience, while older adults may have problems achieving promotions, finding new work, and changing careers. (Duncan et al; 2000)

With a worldwide ageing population and increasingly youth-centred societies around the world, there are mounting concerns about how perceptions of age and ageing may influence the work environment including job satisfaction, commitment, and engagement (Bal & Kooji, 2011). Researchers are increasingly considering the role that psychosocial factors play on job longevity.

One psychosocial factor is perceived age discrimination in the workplace including discriminatory practices based on age, such as firing and lack of hiring, as well as perceived lack of support of supervisors of employees of a certain age (North & Fiske, 20121).

What does Ageism in the Workplace look like?

In any facet of life, but at the workplace particularly, ageism exists because of prejudices and uninformed opinions that are formed based on very superficial information.

Some of the most common stereotypes related to people over the age of 50 at the workplace are that they are difficult to manage, resistant to change, technophobic, and less innovative.

This is why, during the hiring process, management tends to give not-so-subtle hints that they are looking for “energetic,” “fresh,” “agile” people, to discourage older workers from applying. Not meeting these meaningless criteria is a common reason why ageing workers fail to secure a job that they might have been an excellent fit for otherwise.

In reality, ageing workers’ perceived unwillingness to learn new skills and resistance to change reflects the employer’s reluctance to provide proper training for employees that are over the age of 50.

Common Signs of Ageism in the Workplace:

- Learning opportunities are automatically offered to younger employees — not older ones.
- Being overlooked or passed over for challenging assignments.
- Being left out of client meetings or company activities.
- A spoken or unspoken assumption that you are not entitled to take time off for family commitments because you don't have young kids at home.
- Disparaging comments and remarks about age.
- Being passed over for raises and promotions. As in our example above, this one can get tricky. Different raises and promotion decisions may indicate age-based discrimination, or they might be a reflection of individual performance.

How managers can deal with Ageism in the Workplace

Treat employees of varying ages similarly: This may sound trite or trivial, but it's the first step against discrimination. If you keep this in mind, then it will positively affect the relationship between you and all of your employees.

Provide further training and professional opportunities for all your employees, irrespective of age, provide equal opportunities. Do you believe it is not worth much to invest in an older employee? Think again. Build on their years of experience.

Provide performance-related and age-independent feedback. No matter how old we are, everyone makes mistakes and everyone has a right to learn from his or her mistakes.

Distribute tasks according to the ability of your employees not according to their age. Do you believe a younger employee is more powerful? Maybe an older employee has far more experience or agility to offer.

Refrain from prejudices and stereotypes immediately from the top. If certain prejudices have crept into the company culture, it becomes more difficult to control discrimination. So pay attention to your corporate culture.

Practice active age diversity management – Inform your employees about the implications of ageism and age discrimination and encourage them to fight it.

Train young people not to be discriminatory – Focus on the strengths and key skills of your employees, not the irrelevant sides that only point to discrimination. Do not trust young people to automatically know, train.

How can employee deal with ageism in the workplace

Invest in your continued growth and development. Read, stay up to date on trends and best practices, and push yourself to do better every year. Get a mentor, whether within your current company or

outside, who is dedicated to supporting your success.

Commit to fighting the stereotype of an ageing professional who is uncomfortable with change and technology, low on energy, and coasting without ambition. Today's older workforce is a wealth of industry and institutional knowledge.

Project the same level of polish and professionalism as your younger colleagues. Perhaps you are feeling secure in your position as an established contributor, but that's no reason to falter in doing your best to represent your company.

Position yourself to succeed. If you are job hunting, research companies that are known for their anti-ageism views. We should all be active in fighting against this discrimination but change comes very slowly. Working where the older employee is valued is much easier.

Take age out of the equation. If you find it a struggle to work under someone younger and with less experience, figure out a strategy. Consider taking on more of a supportive position where you can help identify problems and guide toward solutions.

If you are being discriminated against, speak openly and honestly with the appropriate person at your company. If things do not change, be prepared to deal with the issue in the way that works best for you and your circumstance. You have every right to take legal action but know that ageism is a hard claim to prove.

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