

Ageism in the workplace – the privilege of being the ‘right age’

*In a world of ageing populations, extending working lives is widely viewed as an economic necessity. With up to four generations working alongside each other, organisations must ensure that their workplaces are inclusive, avoiding individual, interpersonal, and organisational harm. **Sharon Raj** writes that age discrimination can lead to the formation of workplace ingroups and outgroups, which reduces information sharing and collaboration. She discusses ways to address ageism in the workplace.*

Privilege in the Workplace series - [The Inclusion Initiative](#) - #TIThursday

Biased beliefs or assumptions held by others mean that our physical characteristics, for example gender, appearance, or ethnicity, have the potential to be a huge advantage or disadvantage in the workplace. One such characteristic with the potential to affect virtually all employees during their working lives is age. Ageism has been defined as “stereotypes, prejudice, or discrimination against (but also in favour of) people because of their chronological age” ([Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2017, p.1](#)). While ageism can be positive or negative for an individual, ageism generally has negative connotations. The typical experience of ageism is U-shaped across the lifetime, with both the youngest and oldest workers more likely to suffer from age-based discrimination ([Duncan & Loretto, 2004](#); [Marchiondo et al., 2015](#)). That said, how harmful it is to be outside the optimal ‘middle age’, will vary by role, industry, and the economic environment at the time.

It is often not just one’s age that matters. Intersectionality with gender, race or other characteristics can also play a key role. Research covering nine European countries found that access to training opportunities was affected by the interaction of both age and gender, with older female workers the most disadvantaged ([Lossbroek & Radl, 2019](#)). A separate study found rates of downward mobility from managerial and professional jobs were higher among older workers who were African-American relative to their white counterparts ([Wilson & Roscigno, 2018](#)).

What drives ageism and how harmful is it?

Multiple studies have linked age-based discrimination to negative beliefs and assumptions. Younger employees can be perceived as lazy, less reliable, less conscientious, less organised, selfish and poorly motivated simply because of their age ([Finkelstein et al., 2013](#); [Bertolino et al., 2012](#)). As a result, they can be overlooked for training opportunities, greater responsibilities, and promotions. Younger workers also tend to receive lower pay and benefits relative to similarly experienced older workers ([Duncan & Loretto, 2004](#)), and to be more at risk of layoff during a downturn ([Verick, 2009](#)).

Turning to older workers, which is where the bulk of the research on ageism has focused to date, a review by Harris et al. ([2016](#)), which aggregated findings from 43 separate research papers, demonstrated that it is common for older workers to face stereotyping in the workplace. The review noted that the assumptions made about older workers can be favourable. They can be seen as more reliable, more loyal, and as having a stronger work ethic. However, Harris et al. found that it was far more common for older workers to face negative stereotypes; including perceptions that they are less adaptable, lack physical capabilities, have limited technological competence, are less trainable and are resistant to change. These negative stereotypes, although they are largely unfounded, persist and result in significant discrimination. Older workers are less likely to be shortlisted for interviews, hired, offered training opportunities, or promoted ([Posthuma & Campion, 2009](#)). Older workers who lose their jobs tend to be unemployed for longer, and may end up taking lower skilled, lower paid jobs as a result ([Harris et al., 2016](#)). They are also more likely to end up in less secure roles, such as contract or entrepreneurial work ([Expert Panel on Older Workers, 2008](#)).

The presence of negative age-related stereotypes does not only result in direct discrimination. It can also result in worker underperformance, even for employees who have previously performed strongly. This can occur through two routes – one external and one internal ([Weber et al., 2019](#)). The external route occurs when an older worker becomes so worried about confirming a negative age-based stereotype that it impedes their ability to focus, causing their performance to suffer. Thus, a vicious spiral is created, and the stereotype becomes self-fulfilling. The internal route occurs when the worker internalises a stereotype via repeated exposure to it. If you grow up continuously hearing that older people are less competent, when you become older, you might believe that you are now less competent. Such internalised stereotypes create self-imposed constraints. The impact of such age-related stereotypes, whichever route they stem from, is not trivial. They have been shown to cause damaging psychological and physiological changes, ranging from a deterioration in memory and weaker cognitive performance to poorer cardiovascular stress responses ([Dionigi, 2015](#)).

Even if an older worker’s actual performance is not directly affected by negative age-based stereotypes, the prevalence of such beliefs among their co-workers can still result in worse outcomes for the organisation via the formation of workplace ingroups ([Kunze et al., 2011](#)). Humans have a natural tendency to form groups with people that they perceive to be like them, and this tendency is exacerbated in highly competitive situations or when people feel threatened. If older workers are expected to be weaker performers, less flexible or different in some other way, they are more likely to be excluded from the ingroup. This formation of ingroups and outgroups reduces information sharing and collaboration. It causes insufficient attention to be paid to opinions voiced by older co-workers despite their extensive experience and potentially different perspectives. With fewer voices at the table, the organisation is likely to experience poorer decision-making and lower levels of productivity, creativity, and innovation.

Older workers facing a lack of inclusion in the workplace have adopted a wide range of strategies in response. Some explicitly challenge age discrimination when they experience it, resulting in workplace conflict, disruption, legal action, and expensive discrimination claims. Some redefine themselves in a way that supports a continued positive self-image, for example by describing themselves as ‘semi-retired’ ([Berger, 2006](#)) or by taking on volunteering roles. Unfortunately, others resign themselves to believing that their best career days are now in the past ([Grima, 2011](#)). This can result in negative outcomes ranging from lower engagement by these workers ([James et al., 2013](#)), to higher turnover and earlier retirement intentions ([Von Hippel et al., 2013](#)).

How can ageism be addressed?

Among countries with ageing populations, raising retirement ages, and extending working lives is widely viewed as an economic necessity. Age diversity in workplaces is higher than ever, with up to four generations working alongside each other ([King & Bryant, 2016](#)). Against this backdrop, it is critical that organisations consider how to ensure that their workplace is inclusive for all age groups and that the individual, interpersonal and organisational harms that can otherwise occur are avoided. Given the complexity of this issue, the most successful initiatives will probably be those that take a systematic and wide-ranging approach.

One interesting framework suggested by Cortijo et al., ([2019](#)) is the Acknowledge-Grow-Embrace (AGE) model. This approach, which has its roots in self-determination theory, aims to move a workplace’s age-related practices away from being extrinsically motivated (something organisations feel they have to do) to being intrinsically motivated (something they want to do). The first stage – Acknowledge – requires an organisation to accept that ageism may be occurring. This may be necessary even where anti-discrimination policies are in place if, for example, adoption of such policies was motivated solely by regulatory requirements.

To understand its starting position, the authors recommend that the organisation conducts an audit to look at the age profile of employees, how workers of different ages are treated (e.g., in appraisals, in instances of poor performance, when stretch assignments are allocated, and when new training is available) as well as the firm’s hiring practices. After forming an accurate picture of current behaviours, the organisation can move to the Grow stage. At this point, it puts systems in place to address any age-biases identified. This might include regular reporting and monitoring of areas of concern; adjustments to hiring practices to ensure that the best candidates are recruited; ensuring training is provided to staff of all ages; initiatives to challenge stereotyping; and steps to attract and maintain older talent such as flexible or part time job options and retirement planning support. Finally, in the Embrace stage, employees of all ages are valued for their skills and experience and encouraged and empowered to reach their full potential.

While the AGE model provides an overarching framework, it can incorporate a variety of individual interventions that have been shown to be successful in addressing elements of ageism. For example, providing reminders that age bias has been found to occur when CVs are being reviewed, and that applicants should be judged purely on their relevant skills and experience at the point in the hiring process where CVs are actually being reviewed, can help to reduce the risk of age discrimination occurring ([Kleissner & Jahn, 2020](#)).

Another strategy, which can be employed on a stand-alone basis or incorporated within the AGE model, is an attempt to change the narrative. Although it is possible that some co-workers and managers might assume that older colleagues are less competent or less productive, this is often a false belief. In physically demanding roles, ergonomic adjustments and technological solutions can maintain the productivity of older employees ([Raposo & Carstensen, 2015](#)), while performance in knowledge-based roles often benefits from greater experience ([Avolio et al., 1990](#)). Indeed, when it comes to creating new companies, people over the age of 40 are three times more likely than younger entrepreneurs to create successful ones ([Bersin & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2019](#)). Given this, mixed-age mentoring initiatives may prove effective in demonstrating older workers’ abilities, challenging negative perceptions and reducing the risk of ‘them and us’ mentalities emerging ([King & Bryant, 2015](#)).

A further intervention that could help to break down erroneous negative beliefs is related to the mindset theory of Carol Dweck. According to Dweck, mindsets can be defined as being on a continuum from fixed to growth ([2006](#)). Individuals at the fixed end believe that personal attributes are impervious to efforts to change them; whereas those at the growth end believe that a person’s attributes can be changed over time. People with fixed mindsets have been found to be more likely to endorse stereotypes ([Levy et al., 1998](#)) and to be prejudiced towards outgroups ([Hong et al., 2004](#)).

Research by Hui & Rabinovich ([2020](#)) found that younger workers with growth-oriented mindsets displayed more positive attitudes towards their older colleagues. While this work is still in the early stages, it suggests that interventions that support the development of growth mindsets, such as training, inter-departmental collaboration, and rewarding employees for gaining new, relevant knowledge; might reduce ageist beliefs and improve cross-age respect and collaboration.

Even without the existence of erroneous age-based beliefs, teams that are age-diverse can still exhibit lower levels of bonding. In a 2021 study, [Kunze et al.](#) noted that subjective age diversity (how old you feel) may matter more in this regard than chronological age. Where chronological or subjective age-diverse colleagues are struggling to bond, team building initiatives that focus on improving communication, collaboration and leadership may help. These kinds of initiatives typically need to be repeated regularly, rather than arranged as one-off events, to be successful. Since negative emotions and workplace stress tend to boost subjective age perceptions, health and stress management initiatives may also support age-related cohesion.

When considering such initiatives, organisations must recognise that employees of various ages might be experiencing age-based discrimination. Indeed, as discussed already, age-discrimination commonly affects both young and old workers, and intersectionality will also likely be playing a role. Any steps to level the playing field should be based on age-related audit findings and consider the needs of all affected workers. Once the organisation has a clear picture of its starting position, it can consider which interventions may be most relevant and effective. Each organisation will have different needs: there will not be a one-size-fits-all solution. Whatever approach is taken, it will be important to measure its effectiveness over time and not just assume that introducing one or more changes means that the issue has been resolved. Moreover, as with all steps to support previously disadvantaged groups, any initiatives adopted will need to be carefully communicated as a win-win opportunity to avoid resentment from current age-privileged groups, who may otherwise feel threatened and react in a hostile manner.



Notes:

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