

## Issue #76: This Old Thing: Spotlight on Workplace Ageism

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Population aging trends predicted decades ago have become a reality we will live with throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including at work. The workforce is becoming older, on average, and more age diverse, which can create challenges for leaders and workers alike, particularly in terms of workplace ageism (Truxillo et al., 2018). The [World Health Organization](#) defines ageism as “the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel), and discrimination (how we act) towards others or oneself based on age.” Ageism is both pervasive and socially accepted (Levy, 2022).

Unfortunately, workplace ageism is also common. A [recent 2020 AARP survey](#) of over 1,900 U. S. workers aged 40 to 65 years old found 78% reported either personally experiencing or witnessing ageism in their workplace. Although federal legal protection provided by the [Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967](#) begins at age 40, perceptions of age discrimination can occur at any age and are widespread among younger workers too. For instance, a [2019 Society for Human Resource Management survey](#) of over 2,500 U. S. workers, managers, and executives revealed that nearly two times as many younger workers (<30 years old) reported experiencing ageism at work compared with workers who were older.

Age-related stereotypes are a driving force of ageism. People easily recognize the most prevalent age-related stereotypes of older or younger workers (Petery et al., 2020). Although age stereotypes exist for younger and middle-aged workers, research for these age groups is less common. Negative older worker stereotypes (e.g., being resistant to change) have endured for decades despite a lack of evidence for them (Posthuma & Campion, 2009).

Perhaps the most common source of ageism stems from beliefs about generational differences. Generational differences are the combined effects of age differences, period (representing events and social and cultural norms associated with a moment or period of time), and cohort (based on group characteristics and experiences). However, analyses of generational differences rarely, if ever, isolate the effects of each component. In most cases, data capture a single timepoint, making it impossible to detect period effects, and age is typically used to categorize people into generational cohorts. Therefore, differences attributed to generation/cohort effects are more likely due to differences of age. In fact, after a thorough review of theoretical and empirical evidence, the [National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine](#) published a consensus report stating:

“Many of the research finding that have been attributed to generational differences may actually reflect shifting characteristics of work more generally or variations among people as they age and gain experience” (p. 5); and

“...categorizing a group of workers by observable attributes can lead to overgeneralization and improper assumptions about those workers, perhaps even discrimination” (p. 11).

Nevertheless, many people identify themselves by the generation they belong to and characterize themselves and others by the stereotyped traits associated with that generation. This “social categorization” can produce an “us vs. them” mentality, where people view their own generation favorably and other generations negatively. These generational stereotypes can be so pervasive

that simply saying a generation's name can trigger stereotypes associated with that generation. This can lead to discriminatory behaviors toward that group.

Individuals (including workers) are often aware of the biases towards their age and generation, which can have adverse consequences. For instance, those who think they may be judged by the stereotypes associated with their age group may feel threatened they'll be stereotyped or may even self-stereotype. This can result in them acting in a way that supports the biased beliefs. Furthermore, individuals can be negatively affected by their own beliefs about aging. An accumulation of research suggests that having a negative attitude about aging and older adults is associated with poorer physical and functional health as one ages, and a shorter lifespan, compared with those who have a positive outlook on aging (Levy, 2022).

According to experts (Boehm, Schroder, and Bal 2021) a better management approach to workforce aging and age diversity uses a lifespan perspective that recognizes workers' wants, needs, and motives change as they go through different career stages and individual circumstances. Instead of using terminology that could evoke ageist beliefs (e.g., using generation labels), think in terms of career stages, which may have a stronger relationship with work performance behaviors and attitudes. Focus on fostering an inclusive workplace where workers of all ages are given opportunities to contribute and encouragement to develop knowledge, skills, and abilities. Create opportunities for workers to communicate and collaborate with people of different ages, as this helps to refute age stereotyped beliefs. Finally, implement mentorship and reverse mentorship programs to promote knowledge sharing between early career and more tenured workers. Together, these strategies may help counter biased beliefs and promote a welcoming, age-inclusive work culture.

## References

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