



## Age stereotypes and ageism at the workplace - #ageisjustanumber

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### **Abstract**

*Because the world population is growing old, as the birth rate has diminished over the past 20-30 years, organizations have to cope with problems associated with inclusive policies that facilitate the integration of people not only of different ethnicity, race or gender, but also of old age. The older applicants for a job as well as the older employees are perceived in various ways because of their age, and their assessment is negatively influenced by age-based stereotypes. Commonly encountered stereotypes related to older workers portray them as having lower performances, showing resistance to organizational changes, not being able to learn new skills and doing poorly at the training programs, having low motivation, being easily distracted by health or family issues etc. These perceptions determine different types of discriminatory behaviors and decisions related to older generations like: reducing the opportunities for getting an interview for a job, for getting a promotion, for being sent to a training program, being forced to resign. This sort of stereotypes and ageist behavior, which are part of a type of discrimination called ageism, generate frustration, low self-esteem and affect the activity of old employees at the workplace. Old employees are not the singular target of stereotypes and discrimination - young people hired in an organization are also the victim of ageism. However, the research on the topic as well as the literature on ageism clearly reveal the fact that the frequency older people are subject to ageism is greater than that of young employees. Despite the fact that the term of ageism dates back some decades ago, most of the researches agree upon the fact that this phenomenon, unlike racism or sexism, is not thoroughly investigated. Although suggestions regarding the policies that should be*

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*implemented to reduce this phenomenon have been formulated, the level of age-based discrimination at the working place is still at alarming rates in many developed countries.*

**Keywords**

Aging population, age-based stereotypes, ageism at the workplace, old employees

Globally speaking, the work force, especially from the developed and industrial countries, is going through an ageing process, given the fact that over the last two or three decades, the birth rate has severely diminished, thus reducing the flow of young employees coming into the labour market. Consequently, governments have increased the retirement age, thus forcing people over 50 to continue working until the age of 60-65. Taking this into account, organizations and the HR departments are now starting to face a disproportion between employees of different generations, which makes the study of the relationships between the younger generations vs. older generations as well as older generations vs. managers, of paramount importance.

The concept of ageism was introduced by Robert Butler, one of the leading researchers in the field, who defined it as “*the systematic stereotyping and discrimination against older people because they are old*” (Butler, 1989: p.139). As opposed to recent research which place young employees as potential victims of ageist behaviour, the early writings of Butler considered that ageism mainly affected older employees.

When it comes to the many facets of discrimination, the concept of ageism holds one of the most disputed and notorious places in the field. Greenberg et al. (2002: p.27) define ageism as “*negative attitudes and behaviours toward an individual solely based on that person’s age*”.

Blauth et al. (2011: p. 6) presented a more dramatic definition of ageism, insisting on the negative effects inflicted by the process; thus, according to the authors:

“ageism is a system of stereotypes, policies, norms and behaviors, that discriminate against, restrict and dehumanize people because of their age”.

This perspective is supported by Esposito (1987 cited by Greenberg et al. 2002: p.37) who claims that discrimination based on age is a clear result of ageism, which has been proved in multiple situations to have devastating effects of economic and social nature.

Although the definition presented by the authors refers to discrimination based simply on age, thus implying that all categories of age can be a target of discriminatory attitudes and behaviours, the vast literature on this topic focuses mainly on discrimination against elderly.

However, authors like Blauth et al. (2011: pp.6-7) who have been previously quoted, criticize the idea that only older people are the target of age-based discrimination and state that people of all ages are labelled with various stereotypes in equal proportions. For example, Macdonald and Levy (2016: p.173) draw attention upon the many types of stereotypes that junior employees confront with, such as lacking

experience, being too young and too impatient, which lead to discriminatory policies like giving fewer opportunities for promotion.

Authors addressing the issue of ageism consider that the reason why there are heated debates around this concept is that, unlike discrimination based on gender or religious affiliation, where a certain individual belonging to a group confronts with such attitudes and reactions from others, without being able to change the respective group, age based discrimination or ageism is a phenomenon that almost all of us are going to face with in the future, as the time goes by (Duncan, 2001: pp.25-46). In other words, the phenomenon of ageism, especially at the work place, should be carefully studied in order to identify proper policies that can enable the mitigation of its consequences that almost each and every one of us might confront with in the future.

Analysing the research on stereotypes conducted by Cuddy and Fiske (2002: p. 3-4) we can infer that age stereotypes, which stand at the root of ageism, are the result of a complex process in which individuals fall into different categories based on our beliefs, thoughts and expectations, and where the social indicator influencing these labelling tendencies is the age of that specific person. Continuing the work of Butler, the study of Rupp et al. (2005: p.352) concludes on the fact that the construct of ageism includes an affective as well as a cognitive dimension.

The following sections will address the stereotypes that employers and employees of young or different age have against the older colleagues (that is the way elderly workers are perceived by the groups of people mentioned) as well as the types of discriminatory decisions or behaviours (cases of ageism) that occur as a result of possessing such stereotypes.

### **Age-based stereotypes related to old employees**

According to Braithwaite (1986 cited by Greenberg et al. 2002: p.166) the general stereotypes that younger generations have against the elderly people imply attributing negative behavioural and attitudinal traits such as “nagging, irritable, decrepit, cranky, weak, feeble-minded, cognitively deficient”. Byrne (1971 cited by Dipboye and Erebaum, 2005: p.205), in his attempt to understand why younger generations constructed these stereotypes, resorted to the “similarity – attraction” theory, arguing that people who are similar (in this case of similar age) will tend to like one another while people who are different (i.e. of different age), will share some sort of dislike. Byrne’s point of view is thus useful when trying to explain why young people, and old people at the same time, tend to prefer working, talking, spending their working time with persons of similar age and feel uncomfortable doing these with persons of different age.

Of course, these are stereotypes that older people face with in ordinary situations. The stereotypes that they meet up against at the workplace/organizations are more specific as they are connected to the various aspects of the working activity.

Macdonald and Levy (2016: p.173) and Nelson (2016: p.195) explained why younger employees have stereotypes and discriminate against old employees and one of the reasons that the authors discovered is that young people tend to consider that they are

deprived of financial rewards and other types of rewards which are granted to those who have had a longer career in the organization. Furthermore, according to the authors, the younger employees exhibit a negative attitude towards their fellow senior colleagues because they believe that the older persons refuse to accept their age identity and refuse to act accordingly. In other words, whenever an old employee exhibits a type of behaviour deemed by a young employee to be incompatible to its age identity, the result is that the old person will be avoided in the future and marginalized by the work group.

Greenberg et al. (2002: p.37) also try to explain the roots of the age-based stereotypes against older fellow colleagues at work and simply suggest that the younger generations exhibit these attitudes, share these beliefs and reject the elderly because they do not want to be surrounded by people who constantly remind them of their own fate.

After studying multiple researches on this topic, Rupp et al. (2005: p.338) conclude on the fact that young individuals who work in an organization generally have and show more negative attitude towards their elderly colleagues than their counterparts.

Posthuma and Campion (2009) as well as Nelson (2016) conducted a very thorough research regarding the most commonly encountered age stereotypes related to older people in organizations, their strenuous investigations leading to the following ideas:

The stereotype concerning the weaker work performances of the elderly – according to the two researchers, people in organizations tend to perceive older workers as being driven by a lower level of motivation, as having lower skills and abilities than younger people, and last but not least, as being less productive.

Ng. and Feldman (2012: p.392), Craft et al (1979) and Prendha and Stahl (2001: p.214) believe that the reason why older employees are perceived to be less motivated and less productive is because they can be easily distracted by family issues and because they are less healthy or having less physical strength (health conditions thus having a negative impact on their engagement in activity and results).

The stereotype concerning the older people's resistance and reluctance to adapt to the organizational changes – the main idea behind this stereotype is that older workers are less flexible when it comes to adjusting their daily activity in order to better meet the organizational objectives, harder to train because they need more time to develop the required new skills.

In explaining the resistance to organizational changes coming from the older employees, Johns (1973: p.53) reminds us that as we grow old, our anxieties and fear about the unexpected future start to increase considerably. However, the author underlines that these psychological transformations do not necessarily have a great impact on the older employees' capacity to change or to adjust to the new waves of changes in organizations; in fact, it is the small incidents at work, in which older people come across as being a bit clumsy, that fuel the stereotype.

The same author further adds that along the years, a range of organizational changes, mainly technological, posed some problems to the older workers as they implied a gradual replacement of manual work (or activities that required hand and eyes

coordination) with automatic, machine made activities, which, in turn, demanded an increased attention and supervision of data inputs, and a more quick-acting pace of work.

The stereotype concerning their less developed ability to learn – this stereotype underlines the fact that older people do not have the same potential for development and self-improvement like the younger employees in the organization or do not have the same motivation and willingness to learn new skills.

According to Nelson (2016: p.196), old employees are not so dedicated to acquiring new knowledge and new skills because of the fact that they believe their remaining time in the organization is limited, therefore they have lower goals and consider their effort to learn is not worthwhile.

Johns (1973: p.53) explains that a reason why older employees are not easy to convince to learn new skills or do not perform in this task is that they are afraid of the final outcome, they are not convinced that they will be able to take in the new information, and that they experience some sort of tediousness when trying to learn.

The findings of Hayward et al. (1997 cited by Blauth et al. 2011: p.9) support the second and the third stereotype, his research highlighting that almost a third of the hiring managers that he interviewed (30%) considered older workers as more difficult to train, while a bigger percentage (34%) perceived them as incapable of learning and adapting to technological changes. Hayward identifies another stereotype, additional to the previous two (2 and 3), saying that older workers tend to have a more cautious attitude, thus not being able to run risks or to apply a more daring strategy to work, remaining faithful to a more conservative and traditional approach to task/problem solving.

Other authors like Dipboye and Erebaum (2005: p.214) claim that older people face with various declines in their cognitive abilities like data processing, attentions skills or short-term memory that practically diminish their effectiveness.

The stereotype that if an old worker will be recruited he/she will have a short term staying in the organization and therefore the employer will not have sufficient time to exploit the fruit of the employees' training investment because he will have left the job by the time he got efficient and effective and of course productive. This seems to be a stereotype shared among employers who are more focused on pay-offs and profits.

The stereotype according to which older employees are a more financially costly burden to the organization given the fact that they have bigger salaries that the company must support, by comparison to the younger workers.

When talking about the differences between old female and male employees, Nelson (2016: p.194) draws our attention upon the fact that older women are more exposed to ageism and confront with accumulated discrimination (sexism and ageism), in other words all of the above mentioned age stereotypes are added to the sex stereotypes, the sum of which severely affect the self-image of an old female worker, as well as her satisfaction and commitment to the job.

### **Positive age-based stereotypes**

The findings of Posthuma and Campion (2009: p.163) suggest that the vast literature on age-based stereotypes, although focusing more on the bad perceptions, also promotes good stereotypes regarding the older workers. Thus, the positive aspects revealed by the two authors suggest that older workers are more stable and predictable, more dependable and loyal to the organization than the younger employees who can switch jobs easily, more trustworthy and with a good job ethics. In addition to these positive stereotypes regarding older workers, Blauth et al. (2011: p.5) state the fact that there are proven differences among generations and that for older employees, by comparison to younger work force, work occupies a more central and valued place in their lives, while leisure time is valued less, which means that they will be more committed to their jobs. Arches (1991: p.85) discusses about the stability of values and expectations regarding the job that characterizes older people as opposed to younger employees who are very shifty and very difficult to satisfy; the author thus concludes that, older employees know what they want from their workplace, as opposed to young employees who, depending on different circumstances, might expect in one day financial rewards and then the next day intrinsic rewards from their workplace. In this particular and perhaps singular case, age turns into a clear indicator that can enable the assessment of one's commitment and attachment to the organization as well as satisfaction (Sabal and Lemire, 2015: p.2).

Another aspect which is worth mentioning, is that older workers, according to Levy et al. (2002: pp.261-265), are prone to self-fulfilling prophecies which means that once they know that people perceive them as being unable to learn new tricks or as less productive, older employees will involuntarily end up behaving in the exact way they are expected to. Looked at it from a different angle, it seems that if older employees are expected to do well at their work place, they would be able to deliver and be successful at their workplace.

### **Rejecting the age-based stereotypes in organizations**

Although many field studies suggest that the performance of the employees declines as people get older, Dipboye et al. (2005: p.212) disagree with these results and argue that there are no psychologically proven evidence to support the idea that the older workers confront with a considerable reduction in their necessary abilities to meet the objectives of the organizations, in fact the IQ tests that they had to pass proved the opposite. These results seem to be only natural given the fact that an employee can reach performances not over night, but during longer periods of times, which means that older workers are the depositors of knowledge and skills.

The authors point out that older people not necessarily have weaker results because their cognitive abilities declines – it is just that they need other types of trainings and learning programs, customized according to their needs, in order to maintain the level of productivity.

With respect to the capacity to use and to adjust to the new technology, Conrad et al. (2008: p.17) suggests that older employees can learn how to use new gear or new equipment just as well as the youngsters.

Last but not least, the stereotype concerning the short tenure of the job by the older employees seems to be confronted by other theories identified in the literature review carried out by Posthuma and Campion (2009: p.162) which mention that older workers will not quit their jobs so easily as the younger people do so there will be plenty of the time for the organization to recover the investments spent on training.

### **Ageism at the workplace**

The perceptions that managers and co-workers have related to older employees in organizations translate into various types of behaviors and decisions that negatively and destructively influence the activity of the labeled group.

Blauth et al. (2011: p.12) identifies a set of behaviors that can be grouped in the phenomenon of ageism in organizations and organizational factors that may favor the appearance of ageism, as following:

1. The group of workers tends to exhibit signs of ageism if the members judge one another based only on the criterion of age;
2. Ageism increases as the younger generation and the old generation of workers are in a constant fight for resources and recognition;
3. Employees constantly complain and criticize representatives from other generations that they work with;
4. Employees generally rule out ideas and suggestions put forward by colleagues of different generation;
5. Managers consider that certain task or types of problems can be solved only by a person belonging only to certain group of age;
6. Representatives of a certain generation are constantly denied the opportunities of promotion.

Added to this, Powell (2010: p.656) included other forms of more brutal behaviors related to ageism like verbal abuse, humiliation, emotional abuse, harassment which can severely affect the motivation and the productivity of an older employee.

The factors that were previously mentioned, tackled the concept of ageism in general, that both the younger generation and the old generation might confront with at the work place.

When it comes to ageism against the older employees, the most common situations that a person of 45-50 years might put up with, has to do with: hiring opportunities, promotion opportunities, training opportunities, assessment of performances, retiring conditions.

A study conducted by Drydakis et al. (2017: pp.4-8), as a part of Labor Market Discrimination Study in the United Kingdom, was aimed at establishing the level of age-based discrimination against the older people when it comes to hiring opportunities. The study was conducted in the period between 2013-2015 and it focused on a number of 1836

vacant job positions and on the characteristics of the job applicants. The youngest person to apply for one of the jobs was 28 years old (having almost 9 years of experience in the respective field of work), while the oldest applicant was 50 years old (with almost 28 years of experience in the field).

The research revealed the following cases of discrimination against the applicants, based on their age (ageism):

- the chances for the older applicant to be accepted for a job interview was more than three times less likely than the younger applicant (3.6 times);
- the most severe discrimination was related to older people's access to blue-collar type of jobs (factory jobs), the younger generations being almost 6 times more likely to be accepted to a job interview;
- when it comes to opportunities to access white-collar types of jobs, the discrimination against old people is also at a very high level: older applicants are almost 42.7% less likely to be accepted for an interview;
- the older female applicants, by comparison to the older male applicants received a higher level of discrimination in all of the above-mentioned situations;

The figures that resulted in the research are worrisome given the fact that older applicants, despite having greater experience in the field, were assessed as not compatible with the job profile. In this case, a possible explanation might have to do with the stereotype that older people have a short job tenure and will not have sufficient time, as opposed to younger generation, to take in new information.

Based on the existing age-based stereotypes against older employees, Dipboye, (2005: p.205) identified other situations of discrimination related to older employees, already working in organizations:

- since older employees are perceived to be unable or reluctant to adjust to the new organizational changes, managers usually grant fewer opportunities to training programs meant to improve their performances, and also provide less feedback to their activity carried out in organizations;
- managers tend not to support or to accept requests, coming from older employees, which imply allotting financial resources to training programs, given the fact that they believe that the older people will not do well in the learning process or there will be no substantial improvement in their activity;

The evidence gathered by various researchers clearly reveals that older employees receive fewer opportunities for training and skill-developing programs. This means that, although older employees may have a lower motivation to improve (an aspect which is still not scientifically proven) and may be slow when learning how to adapt to new changes, they are not even granted a chance to improve or to prove otherwise. What is even more important, is that managers who are biased with respect to the older generation tend to put the blame on them for the poor results more seldom, than they do on the younger generation (Blauth et al., 2011: p.9).

Conrad et al. (2008, pp.6-7) bring our attention to another discriminatory behavior with respect to old generations; they explain that the practice of mandatory retirement



or early retirement, imposed by organizations in order to control and reduce the costs associated with senior wages, is a form of ageism as it forces the older workers to leave a job despite the fact that some of them would not have liked to be sacked, and reduces the level of motivation for elderly to continue to identify other vacant job opportunities.

Nelson (202: p.166) adds other, more “mild forms” of discrimination at the work place: ageist messages conveyed within the work group (jokes and so-called funny remarks targeting older colleagues), overt ageist attitude and behaviour (not hesitating to say in public that people should retire at a certain age etc.).

### **HR policies to reduce ageism in organizations**

Authors that were cited in this paper, that have attempted to analyze age-based discrimination at work, proposed a list of organizational policies aimed at maintaining the older employees at the workplace, increasing their performances and exploiting their vast experience. Such examples include:

- defining inclusive promotion policies so that the elderly people can get a chance to be promoted, thus increasing their motivation;
- adjusting the working schedule in accordance with the needs of the older people so that they will not feel they have to sacrifice families for the sake of the organization;
- firms should implement written commitment regarding an equal treatment of both the old and the young employees;
- encouraging social support among co-workers and in the supervisor/manager-employee relationship;
- offering financial stimulation for older employees when they reach certain stages in their career so that they maintain a high level of commitment and engagement at the workplace;
- promote an organizational culture that respects the experience and expertise of the older employees.

### **Conclusion**

Older employees in organizations as well as the older applicants for a vacant job seem to put in a greater effort in order for their experience and expertise to be acknowledged by managers and colleagues, since they confront with so many stereotypes regarding their effectiveness, efficiency and skills.

The studies conducted in various European countries as well as in the USA clearly indicate a high level of discrimination against older generation, starting from the recruitment process to practical and daily tasks carried out at the workplace.

This type of discriminatory behavior is counterproductive as it generates negative feelings such as frustration and demotivation among senior workers, as well as low commitment and engagement.

Since the entire world is confronting the risk of an aging work force, it is high time that organizations implemented more inclusive policies and adapt their programs in order to increase and improve the performance of the older employees.

One of the most important direction for future research on this topic should focus on the identification of the best practices that should be implemented in any type of organization, in order to ensure the full integration of the senior/old employees.

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