



The Damaging Effects of Age Discrimination in the Workplace

Written by [Linda Bell](#)

As a recruiter, Lynn learned how to read people well. (Her name has been changed to protect her identity.) Ten years ago, she applied for a marketing position at a senior living facility. After the two-and-a-half-hour drive for her fifth interview with the company, Lynn immediately knew that something was off with the hiring manager.

“The look in her eye was utter disgust,” she says. “In other words, I was not the person she was looking for. I had a feeling it was due to age and I don’t look that old. I’ve been told before you don’t look your age.”

Lynn has over 20 years of experience in the recruiting industry. During the interview, which only lasted only 5 minutes, she was asked about her energy level. At the time, Lynn was 53 years old.

“They’re passing over good, strong candidates with experience for those who are younger,” she says. “I don’t know if that’s because they can pay them less. Or they just feel they (younger workers) will be there longer or they don’t want to deal with the baby boomer generation.”

Lynn’s thoughts are not off the mark.

Age Discrimination in Employment

Workplace age discrimination has been on the rise during the pandemic.

[Seventy-eight percent of older workers](#) reported having experienced or seen age discrimination in the workplace in 2020, up from 61% in 2018. The bias is connected to [stereotypes about older workers](#) including that they will only accept higher salaries, are reluctant to report to younger managers, don’t have any technical skills or are counting the days to retirement.

“There are several different reasons why boomers are not ready to retire,” says Lynn. “Many of them just love to work. They want to work, they want to be productive.”

Age discrimination can rear its ugly head in every stage of employment – like not being hired because of one’s age, getting turned down for a promotion or being forced to retire. The bias can also manifest itself as harassment, which can be overt or subtle.

Lynn recalls the manager that wrote her up for events that didn’t take place and talked over her during meetings. Then there was the employer who put her on a corrective action plan for a mistake that was not her fault. After the action plan was over, Lynn was stripped of her recruiting capabilities and blocked from transferring to one of the company’s subsidiaries.

“It started becoming very clear to me this is an ageism thing,” she says. “They were uncomfortable with my knowledge. They were uncomfortable with the way I did things. They just were uncomfortable with me.”

Fast forward to the present day and Lynn has found herself unemployed again. For weeks, the 63-year-old applied for numerous jobs but wasn’t getting any interviews. Once she shaved years off of her experience and tweaked her LinkedIn profile, everything changed. The interview requests came pouring in and Lynn is weighing several job offers.

“I find it very sad that we have to dumb ourselves down to get a position,” she says.

Negative Health Outcomes

Women age 50 and older who regularly face discrimination say it's taking a toll on their mental health, [according to an AARP study](#). The bias has been linked to various health problems like high blood pressure, anxiety, substance abuse and obesity. The health conditions are taking a toll on older people, leading to a [lower life expectancy](#).

"So many people get stuck in that mindset – I'm never going to find a job," Lynn says. "It's very depressing."

Add to that the prevalence of ageism on social media networking sites like Facebook. Diane Stegmeier says the discrimination has made a bad situation even worse.

"Older generations are told to stay home and die because they're worthless," says the founder of [Project WHEN](#), a nonprofit organization focused on research and solutions to workplace harassment. "Can you imagine reading something like that? That floors me that someone would read that and not be impacted with their health and feel depressed and hopeless."

Stegmeier says some older workers are even afraid to take much-needed sick days for fear of how they will be perceived.

"Because it would reinforce that they don't have what it takes to be successful in the company, that they're not as healthy and virile as the younger workers," she says. "We all have stress in the workplace, but it's a much deeper stress that people take to heart."

The group most at risk for health issues tied to age discrimination are women of color. African American females regularly experience the most age discrimination, followed by Latinas and Asian American/Pacific Islanders.

"When you think about intersectionality, people of color experience so many more challenges in the workplace. If you're an older Black woman, that's going to add to it even more," says Dr. Simone Phipps, Professor of Management at Middle Georgia State University, Research Fellow at the University of Cambridge Judge Business School's Centre for Social Innovation and member of the [PhD Project](#).

Legal Liability

The Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 (ADEA) protects people 40 years and older in every stage of the employment process like hiring, firing, promotions and raises. Age discrimination cases are not only costly, but they are damaging to a company's reputation.

"Even if it was legal, it's just unethical," says Phipps. "You hear a lot of companies talk about business ethics and in school, we teach business ethics. One aspect of being

ethical in an organization is not discriminating against people based on what they bring to the table.”

Age discrimination isn't just a reality for older workers. The ADEA does not protect workers under the age of 40, but some states like New York, Florida and New Jersey have laws that shield younger workers from age discrimination.

“It's so easy to hear the word ageism and think of the older workforce, but it hits both ends of the age spectrum,” Stegmeier says. “Younger workers often feel that they're much more likely to be discriminated against than older workers.”

Reverse age discrimination has also taken a toll on the [mental health and wellbeing](#) of younger workers. The discrimination they experience includes not being hired because of their age, being talked down to at work or being passed over for a promotion. The bias often stems from preconceived notions about younger people.

“The big one is entitlement,” Phipps says. “They're not going to want to work to earn all the things, all the perks that they want – they just feel entitled to all these great rewards just for existing.”

Loss of Experience and Innovation

As the saying goes, with age comes experience. Lynn says older workers simply want to be acknowledged for their value in the workplace.

“What I'm looking for is the respect that I have the knowledge and experience,” she says. “Pay is nice, of course, to be paid what you're worth. But the main thing is that I'm happy and I'm being productive.”

Phipps says companies that discriminate against older workers are missing out on their creativity and innovation.

“There is a difference between creativity and innovation,” she says. “Creativity is more about the thinking process – thinking new things and coming up with new ideas, etc. Innovation is putting that creativity into practice by doing new things. If you have experience, you can help on both of those fronts.”

Reverse age discrimination can also play a role in stifling innovation and creativity. Stegmeier says a diverse mix of workers of all ages is critical to success of a business. Not only does a multigenerational workforce give companies a competitive advantage, but it also boosts productivity and helps generate a stronger pipeline of talent.

“Companies who hire like minds and like ages tend to fall behind on innovative outputs as compared with their more diverse competitors,” says Stegmeier. “A respect for the older generation and the younger generation is needed to bring in fresh ideas to work.”

Negative Work Environment

Phipps says age discrimination puts a company’s business climate and culture at risk. A negative business climate can result in lost worker productivity, increased turnover and absenteeism.

“If the shared perception is that all people are not welcome, then there can be some hostility and tension among colleagues, the older and younger ones,” she says. “The older ones will feel like they’re not included. Job satisfaction can start to decrease. With that job satisfaction decreasing, there’s that lack of motivation.”

If age discrimination becomes an accepted policy, a company’s culture is also in jeopardy.

“If that becomes ingrained in the culture where it’s okay to discriminate against older people, then that can be problematic too as that spreads,” says Phipps. “Teamwork is going to suffer if it’s part of the culture you exclude.”

[Gallup](#) reports that simply the perception of discrimination can increase employee disengagement.

“It’s only when you can bring your true self to work that you can do your best,” says Stegmeier. “How can you do your best if you feel like you’re being harassed? Or you feel like you’re not getting the opportunities that you should be entitled to?”

Ineffective DEI Initiatives

While many companies acknowledge the business case for diversity, more than half of employers said they do not include age in their diversity and inclusion policies, according to a [2020 AARP study](#). Phipps says there’s a lot of work to be done.

“It starts with HR having a strict policy that age discrimination is not allowed, that it’s seen as unethical and it’s not going to be condoned at the organization,” she says.

Phipps says companies’ age discrimination initiatives shouldn’t stop at policies.

“Sometimes people don’t even know policies exist,” she says. “You need to make sure that you educate the employees about the policy, about what age discrimination is, why it is a problem and why you don’t want to have it at your organization. There also needs

to be a way for people who feel they experienced age discrimination to be able to report it and not feel like it's going to fall on deaf ears.”

Phipps adds that nurturing a culture that embraces diversity, equity and inclusion is also essential. But initiating change on the corporate level may be easier said than done.

Lynn recently came across a Facebook group where human resources professionals were discussing which generation was the easiest to work with. The post was full of negative comments about older workers like “boomers are PR nightmares and liabilities,” “stuck in the dinosaur age” and “highly resistant to change.”

She is working with an attorney and a group of people she met on LinkedIn to have ageism included in DEI and training for hiring managers. Lynn is bracing herself for a long fight.

“This is not an overnight endeavor,” she says. “It will take a great deal of time and effort. It’s going to take more people getting involved.”