

# Age: At Issue in the American Workplace

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People who experience age discrimination in the workplace are generally older workers. As improvements in health care and fitness continue to extend our lifespan, men and women are choosing to stay in the workforce beyond the standard retirement age. For younger workers, discrimination shows up more often as a reluctance to take young people seriously or in their assignment to work projects with low organizational and/or career impact. This practice reduces their mobility and ability to advance in their careers. Although younger workers do face discrimination, litigation against companies for discriminatory practices is more common with older workers. While only about 20% of all complaints filed with the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) are for age discrimination, settlements and jury awards are substantially higher in such cases than in those of race, sex, or disability discrimination.

Working from assumptions and stereotypes about a group of people is one of the root causes for discrimination and bias. In the case of age bias, the tendency is to make assumptions about others based on the people in our own lives in that particular age bracket. Assumptions about young people are often based on the experiences of our children or children we know who are the same age as those in our workplace. When regarding older people, we draw on what we know and experience of our own parents. While there may be many similarities or shared experiences, the potentially negative impact comes from making assumptions and acting on stereotypes.

Each generation views the world from a unique perspective. Being 20 in the year 2003 is a very different experience from being 50 in that same year. By the same token, being 20 in the year 2003 is very different from being 20 in the year 1973. While this is a simple and obvious concept, part of our difficulty in relating to one another across generations is that we do not keep this unique worldview in mind. We have a tendency to view the world through our lenses without regard to the changes and challenges facing each one of us. By valuing each other's different experiences, we can develop a basis for dialogue and learning.

The cost of age discrimination in the workplace goes beyond legal awards. When older workers are not permitted to stay in the workforce, a company can lose valuable experience and know-how. The cost of training new workers, rather than maintaining experienced workers, can be significant. Current findings indicate that age is not a determinant of the capacity to do well in a job. The assumption that many corporations make that older workers are eager to leave the work environment is frequently an erroneous one; older workers can be assets, not liabilities to their employers. Older persons retain their mental faculties, can learn new skills, and are not necessarily more rigid. Healthy older workers do not cost more in medical benefits than younger employees with children at home.

Interestingly, this is a subordinated group we will all belong to at some point in our lives, since everyone ages. The pain of discrimination cuts across every line and no one is safe from becoming a victim of this form of oppression. If we are in our 30's and 40's, the landscape of American companies is likely to change significantly by the time we are 65. This very vocal subordinated group is demanding positive changes in the workplace as we approach the former retirement age.

For those of us who are in our 50's and 60's, we are staying in our jobs in record numbers. Most people continue to work part-time even after retiring. The number of people between 50 and 65 will increase at more than twice the rate of the overall population. Companies will become increasingly dependent on the quality, skill, and work ethic of older employees. Some corporate leaders are already realizing they can act to reduce or eliminate age discrimination and the more subtle forms of bias through effective management. Although few if any companies are offering major ongoing educational programs designed to prevent age discrimination or deal with intergenerational issues in the workplace, several national corporations have added these subjects to their diversity statements.

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Age discrimination takes several forms. Older workers not encouraged to pursue job-related education, training, and promotional opportunities, create an environment in which older workers may see themselves ignored, and excluded. With their responsibilities reduced, they ultimately feel pressured to leave the workplace. "Jokes" about age, talk of "rejuvenation," sidetracking of resumes of those over 45, and downgrading of performance abound. Perceptions about image, adaptability, attitude, health, and productivity may indirectly contribute to that negative environment. As with other forms of discrimination, a negative, exclusive environment is not a place where men and women deliver their best work. When attempting to create an inclusive environment, all workers should be seen as valuable and contributing based on their merit and regardless of differences.

Young adults are not immune from the pressures of age discrimination. While their youthfulness is prized and coveted, very often their contributions to the workplace are muted by stereotypes of immaturity and inexperience. It is not uncommon for young adults to experience being restricted to jobs with low levels of responsibility, often on a trial basis, in order to prove themselves to older workers and supervisors. Very often, these same young people arrive to the workplace with superior education as compared to older colleagues. They also bring with them enriched life and workplace experiences and yet are discounted in this way. What is needed is real progress against age discrimination at both ends of the age continuum.

### ***What Dominant Group Members Can Do***

Our positive future on this issue resides in the proposition that middle-age workers (the dominant group in age oppression) can extend their power, privilege, and influence by:

- Seeking the full participation of younger and older workers based on the merits of their performance, preparation, and overall engagement of their chosen work
- Speaking up when the value of younger and/or older workers are being undermined or under utilized
- Paying attention of the group patterns of middle-age workers as it relates to the treatment of younger and older workers
- Working to change organizational and societal rules that impede the performance and contribution of younger and older workers
- Being an ally to younger and older workers and support their commitment to a full contribution of their talent and ability to organizational objectives

**Purposefully engage younger and older workers as allies to their commitment to a full contribution of the talent and ability to organizational objectives.**

### **What Subordinated Group Members Can Do**

- Continue to develop and contribute your best work towards the achievement of organizational objectives.
- Seek out developmental assignments and opportunities to develop your signature strengths and create value in the organization.
- Purposely engage middle-age workers to fully contribute your added value to organizational objectives

Since age bias can be very subtle and all workers are at risk for being discriminated against at some time in their lives, this issue needs to be consciously included when talking about creating an inclusive workplace. Dialogue and cultural audits are important ways of revealing age bias in the work environment, followed by education and policy reform.

### **Suggested Reading and Resources**

#### **AARP - American Association of Retired Persons**

601 E. Street NW,  
Washington, DC 20049.  
[www.AARP.org](http://www.AARP.org)

#### **Administration on Aging**

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
330 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20201  
(202) 619-0724  
[www.aoa.gov](http://www.aoa.gov)

**Gregory, Raymond F.** (2001). *Age Discrimination in the American Workplace: Old at a Young Age*, Rutgers University Press.