Part 1. Ageism in the Workplace – Our Eventual Reality!
Is Ageism a Stereotype Against Our Feared Future Self?
(Nelson, 2006)

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The first two newsletters of 2018 from Sample & Associates address one of the most perplexing problems for employers and employees – beliefs and effects of ageism in the workplace. Part 1 in the January 2018 newsletter briefly explores the broader impact of ageism in our contemporary society and in the workplace. In Part 2, the February newsletter focuses on the impact of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) as a necessary, but insufficient remedy to this important organizational issue.

Older adults in developed countries like the United States and Europe are living not only longer but also healthier lives. Many seek to remain productive in their communities and the workplace, through paid and volunteer work. Despite these developments, negative images of aging continue to be perpetuated that describe older adults as burdens to others, draining society of valuable resources, and incapable of keeping up with the demands of the contemporary workplace. As a result, many workplace environments remain hostile to older employees, placing them at risk of discrimination and mistreatment in the workplace (Newsom and Vogt, 2016).

The following definitions are offered as a means to begin the discussion of ageism and its impact in society and the workplace (Cadiz, et al., 2017):

Ageism – The broadest of the terms that includes bias, stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination against people based on a person’s age.

Age bias – Evaluative judgments and attitudes made based on a person’s age.

Age stereotype – Generalizations made about a person or people based on age-group membership, such as believing that older workers in general are less flexible or are more dependable.

Age prejudice – Preconceived attribution of a person as good or bad based on their age, such as not liking older workers.

Age discrimination - Treating someone differently due to their age, such as in the hiring process.
Ageism can be viewed as a systematic stereotyping form of social discrimination against people because “they are old, just a racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender . . . [ageism is manifested] in a wide range of phenomena, on both individual and institutional levels – stereotypes and myths, outright disdain and dislike, simple subtle avoidance of contact, and discriminatory practices in housing, employment, and services of all kinds” (Butler, 1989).

Ageism is a widely adopted and prejudicial stereotype that stems from the assumption that neglect and abuse of older persons is an acceptable social norm. Ageism exists in some form in most societies, and finds expression in individuals’ attitudes, institutional and governmental policy and business practices. The international media representation of aging and elderly populations devalues and exclude older persons. This form of social and prejudicial discrimination shapes how older persons are treated and perceived by their societies, including in all levels of education, health care, and workplaces, creating environments that limit older persons’ potential and impact their health and well-being. The failure to tackle ageism across regional and international borders undermines older persons’ rights and hinders their contributions to social, economic, cultural and political life (Nelson, 2006).

**Ageism in the Workplace**

Older employees make important contributions to the workplace, its productivity outcomes, and its culture. Work remains important for older adults for financial security, to give meaning to later life, to maintain social networks, and promote lifelong learning. However, ageist beliefs about the capability of older employees to remain productive and contributing to the mission of their employer can create barriers for these employees.

Employers may exhibit stereotypical beliefs and employment practices that older employees are senile, slow, unproductive, frail and sickly, and unable to acquire new skills and abilities, resistant to change, less flexible and adaptable compared to younger employees (Blackstone, 2013; McCann and Giles, 2002). Note that some of these descriptors may violate an employee’s civil rights under the Americans With Disability Act. Simply saying an employee is “a bit long in the tooth” or is “too old to cut the mustard” or she “should retire and make room for a younger, more energetic employee” is sufficient to cross the line into a complaint of prohibited age discrimination. A recent study of older employees and harassment concluded that these employees identified having their work contributions ignored, being left out of decision making that affects one’s work, and being talked down by co-workers, supervisors and managers. Other research found evidence of covert hostility, verbal hostility, manipulation and physical hostility, mobbing and bullying (Blackstone, 2013).

Resume studies in recruitment and selection comparing responses to two equally qualified resumes (one identified as 57 years old and the other as 32 years old) determined that older workers received less favorable feedback 27% of the time. Research that compared identical applicants for vacant positions found that older applicants received less favorable responses via phone, letters, and interviews 41% of the time. Other research that analyzed age ranges for women from 35 to 62 in terms responding to job advertisements determined that younger women needed to respond to 19 ads while older applicants needed to respond to 27 ads, before being granted an interview (cited in Rothenberg and Gardner, 2011).
Implicit Stereotypes and Ageism

Prohibited employment practices are typically based on employee behaviors that violate an employer’s personnel policies, state or federal law. These types of behaviors are assumed to be conscious behavior, meaning that the employee consciously endorses his or her behavior. In this context, an explicit bias reflects the prejudices, stereotypes or beliefs that an employee endorses consciously. For example, an employee may explicitly believe that older employees should not be promoted or people of color are not good risks for a mortgage loan, yet not act on such an explicit bias because of the employer’s personnel rules, state and federal laws.

But what if an employee is not consciously aware of his or her attitudes, prejudices, and stereotypes? For example, imagine a manager who explicitly believes that older employees are equally suited for careers in the professions. Despite this egalitarian belief, this manager might nevertheless unconsciously associate older employees with prejudicial attitudes and stereotypes. This implicit stereotype might lead him or her to behave in any number of biased ways, from not trusting feedback from older experienced co-workers to hiring younger applicants instead of equally qualified older employees. The science of implicit cognition suggests that we do not always have conscious, intentional control over our social perceptions, processes for forming impressions, and decision-making judgements that motivate our behaviors (Sample, 2017). The lack of research attention accorded to age is yet another indicator of the ease with which this form of discrimination appears to be acceptable compared with others (Levy and Banaji, 2002).

An Intervention Strategy for Reducing Ageism

The traditional approach for reducing any form of discrimination has been to design and implement a “training program” that focuses on insulating employers from liability. While this short-term approach has merit, it is typically not designed to change an organizations culture which is the source of most discrimination in the workplace, including ageism. Kroon (2015) describes a strategy that is more likely to influence those who may be viewed as exemplars by others – the organizations managers. Managers who are positive role models have the potential to affect “perceived age discrimination climates” (p. 180).

The strategy consists of four phases that are summarized in table 1 (see below).

1. The diagnostic phase (or needs assessment) identifies critical beliefs about older employees by the organizations managers. Because of the subtle and potentially systemic nature of ageism, by sensitive to over relying on self-reports, especially from managers. Recall that implicit ageism bias is not a conscious cognitive process, so self-reports and surveys are suspect. In the alternative, Kroon (2015) recommends calculating the actual number of younger and older employees who receive promotions or who are provided advancement opportunities (training, mentoring, etc.). Ask managers to conduct resume studies under the supervision of the HR department. Generating their own data will help with accepting the results. Finally, offer
managers the opportunity to complete the online version of the Implicit Association Test (Levy and Banaji, 2002; Harvard University Project Implicit).

2. Based upon the results of the diagnostic phase, develop process and outcome objectives and measures that target specific areas of ageism in the HR cycle, such as recruitment and selection, promotion, benefits, performance appraisal, HR policies, etc. Generate best practices available from management theory and evidence based exemplars. Kroon (2015) suggests three possible strategies for development: awareness and concerns, motivation to avoid ageism, and practical recommendations. Developing a strategy that focuses on each of these has the potential to change managerial behavior and the organization's culture.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>1. Diagnosis</th>
<th>2 Development</th>
<th>3. Implementation</th>
<th>4. Evaluation</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Conduct a needs assessment to identify critical AS among managers in target organization</td>
<td>Formulate outcome measures based on phase 1.</td>
<td>Collaborate with target group.</td>
<td>Measure effectiveness.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Use observational data and a combination of explicit and implicit measures</td>
<td>Collaborate with target group. Use theory and evidence based strategies to design the AS reduction intervention: * Awareness and concerns * Motivation to avoid AS * Practical recommendations</td>
<td>Encourage and plan program maintenance.</td>
<td>Track possible side effects.</td>
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3. The development of a practical implementation strategy in phase three requires that program designers actively engage and collaborate with managers and employees at key decision points in the human resource management cycle. Each of the three strategies listed above in the second phase will require attention to implementation and maintenance over time. Involving managers in the design and implementation of each strategy will improve the likelihood of long-term success in reducing ageism. Include benchmark measures that provide systematic feedback as the strategy is maintained.

4. In the fourth phase, determine the effectiveness of the intervention that targets each of the three strategies. Benchmark and outcome measures created in the development stage are used to track effectiveness. It is important to Kroon (2015) that unanticipated and negative side effects be included in the evaluation phase.

Conclusion

It can be anticipated that the number of employees at risk of ageism discrimination will increase as the general population ages. Employers can reduce these effects by becoming more age friendly through enabling workplace programs, supportive management, and forward thinking human resource managers.
References


Harvard University Project Implicit. [https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/](https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/)


