

Introduction to Ageism: Older People

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This track will cover:

- Definitions of ageism
- Some experiences of older people in the workplace, and
- Ways to alter an ageist culture and develop a more inclusive workplace for older people

Let's take a look at what ageism means. A 2021 United Nations [report](#) on ageism found, "Every second person in the world is believed to hold ageist attitudes – leading to poorer physical and mental health and reduced quality of life for older persons, costing societies billions of dollars each year."

The report unveiled just how widespread ageist attitudes are. [HBR](#) highlights that "almost 65% of workers say they have experienced age-based discrimination" and "[studies show](#) older people struggle to get promotions, find new work, and change careers; this is particularly true for [women and minority racial groups in the U.S.](#)"

Ageism has far-reaching implications, such as physical isolation, loneliness, financial insecurity, and premature death. The U.N. noted 6.3 million cases of depression globally could be linked to ageism. A [Forbes](#) definition of ageism is clear and concise: "Although older workers typically face the most egregious age bias and discrimination, whenever age is used to diminish the competency and capability of another, ageism is in action." Regarding legal frameworks, [The Equality Act 2010](#) protects employees from age discrimination in the UK.

Undoubtedly, ageism impacts younger people in various ways. For example, their voices are sometimes dismissed, and access to resources is sometimes denied based on age. This track will, however, focus specifically on ageism directed towards older people.

Fundamentally, ageism in the workplace means talent is missed, and valuable experience is overlooked. Plus, it impacts individuals on an emotional and practical level too. Older people might not feel like valued employees, might feel uneasy at work, and their general well-being is likely to be affected. Being discriminated against and combating prejudice daily is demotivating, exhausting, and understandably detrimental to levels of job satisfaction. Nicole Smith, for [HBR](#), examines how "[ageism can be insidious and pervasive](#)" and can have a negative influence across groups. It can dissolve solidarity, limit the contributions of younger and older employees alike, and [lead to people being devalued and excluded](#)".

Ageism can manifest in the form of both language and behaviours. Unconscious bias may mean hiring managers dismiss older candidates. In this instance, they could be making assumptions based on stereotypes and prejudicial views. Age indicates nothing about a person's talent or suitability for the role, but how many recruiters hold harmful and discriminatory views about older people's capabilities? As Liz Kislik [writes](#), "Age is not inherently a barrier to change or learning", but familiar ageist narratives would indicate that it is. Some recruiters may try to determine a candidate's age in order to make assumptions about whether they are appropriate for the role. A manager would be subscribing to an ageist stereotype if they didn't give an employee access to new software because they believed older people struggle with adapting to updated technology. Nicole Smith, for [HBR](#), found "Younger employees often disparaged older colleagues' technical skills and willingness to learn". Perhaps you hear younger colleagues joke about older team members being reluctant to change or remaining "behind the times". You may assume what someone wants, needs, or thinks depending on how old they are. Potentially you've heard, or you even subscribe to, the harmful myth that older people are inherently [rude or demanding](#) or more [rigid in their beliefs](#). Another example of ageism is if somebody misses out on promotion only because their manager deems them "too old".

It's also possible that people [internalise ageism and direct it towards themselves](#). A colleague might have decided their age restricts them from using new software or enrolling on a training course. They may feel unwelcome in specific spaces or be hesitant about intergenerational meetings. They might feel they have less to offer because of their age than they actually do.

There's also the [myth of conflict between generations](#) in the workplace. In reality, contributions from people of all ages are valuable, and diversity of experience and perspective is essential. Of course, individuals may approach teamwork differently, but effective collaboration is not related to age. Make the most of varied experiences and ensure all voices are heard. It can be incredibly productive to have a range of ideas, even if they appear to be contrasting at first. Dr Levy, author of *Breaking the Age Code: How Your Beliefs About Aging Determine How Long & Well You Live*, speaks about intergenerational communication being valuable for productivity and innovation.

Sheila Callaham [covers](#) the use of potentially ageist language, especially in terms of generational labels. Categories such as Boomer or Millennial can feel loaded and often have distinct stereotypes attached. Similarly, using the category of 40+ to refer to all older colleagues is arbitrary and doesn't acknowledge variation and individuality. It implies 40 is an endpoint of sorts, that everybody over that age is somehow an afterthought, and it doesn't recognise the many working years that follow 40. If needed, refer to more specific age ranges or 10-year age brackets instead.

Often what's not said or done can indicate how an organisation feels about a certain group. As [Forbes](#) examines, "Media habitually assigns individual attributes to specific groups of a certain age. In the workplace, it's evident by the absence of age in implicit bias training—or anywhere in the DEI strategy—as well as the lack of older candidates recruited." Being aware of bias allows us to develop our understanding and implement the relevant and necessary changes. Dr Becca Levy [found](#) "roughly 90 per cent of DEI programs in place do not include older adults as a group that deserves protection from discrimination". Again, this absence speaks volumes about how seriously organisations really take ageism.

It's important to analyse exactly what you already know about ageism and how your workplace might perpetuate harmful ideas about ageing. Sheila Callaham, for [Forbes](#), says, "Helping employees recognize their own unconscious bias is part of any diversity, equity and inclusion initiative—recognizing how age bias manifests in the workplace and effectively challenging it is a critical first step". Taking time to figure out where discrimination might already exist and how often ageism is actually challenged is a valuable exercise. [Data collection](#) might sound like a cold process, but one-on-one conversations can help you discover so much more about daily office life and the experiences of older people. Qualitative information can give a richness that statistics might lack.

Relatedly, an important piece of advice is to communicate. As Callaham [highlights](#), "Culture change requires awareness building. Create a safe space to talk about these beliefs, question their validity and create opportunities to disrupt the bias through mutual mentoring and intergenerational teamwork". Perhaps an Employee Resource Group would be a great place to start for the constructive sharing of information, experiences, and guidance. Make sure to assess your own beliefs and preconceptions, too.

There may be certain stereotypes and myths that are ingrained in your workplace and as part of daily practices, and it's important to be able to spot them. A formal audit may indicate gaps in intention, policy and procedure. Callaham advocates conducting "anonymous employee surveys to measure employee beliefs about age and ageing in your workplace." Are you adhering to equalities policies? Are you making a real effort to erase ageist practices? Would your colleagues recognise ageist statements and behaviours? Do you employ people from a diverse range of age groups? Make a concerted effort to proactively acknowledge your biases and commit to change.

If you're a manager, as with any move to make the workplace more inclusive, speak to older employees about their experiences and what they need to thrive. Allyship is crucial, alongside creating a culture more generally that rewards speaking up and making suggestions on how to improve. Be prepared for criticism of your company's own practices, and make sure to be endlessly curious. If you're in HR or manage a team, but find that no one is coming to you about ageism, don't assume that's because it doesn't exist in your workplace. If you have direct reports, check in with all employees about what they need to succeed at work before individuals have to initiate difficult or awkward conversations. Ask open-ended questions and make sure you're not imposing your own assumptions.

That's all we have time for today. Why not use this week to assess where ageism might exist in your workplace? Take time to list some of your own unconscious assumptions about ageing as a first step to tackling discriminatory practices.