

Ageism and the Contemporary Workplace

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ABSTRACT

Ageism is a real issue in the workplace today with the increase in life expectancy. There is a tendency for discrimination against the older adults in the workplace by the more youthful workforce. The tendency is to think that the older persons should be home rather than in the workspace. This discrimination can have great effects on the older persons in the workforce who need to survive with various financial demands. This paper therefore reviews the situation of ageism and proposes various recommendations to be adopted in order to manage the problem of ageism within the workspace.

KEYWORDS: *ageism, workplace, Human Capital, task specific Human Capital, life expectancy, contemporary society, discrimination.*

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INTRODUCTION

There is a global increase in life expectancy. A glaring example is that of the United States of America. According to Medina, Sabo, and Vespa (2020), between 1960 and 2015, life expectancy for the total population in the United States increased by almost 10 years from 69.7 years in 1960 to 79.4 years in 2015. Looking ahead, gains to total life expectancy are projected to increase by 6.1 years from 2016 to 2060 (cf. Figure 1, Appendix). By 2060, total life expectancy in the United States is projected to reach an all-time high of 85.6 years. This increase is attributable to increase in vaccinations, continued decreases in infectious diseases and cardiovascular mortality, and the effectiveness of prevention programs related to smoking, alcohol consumption, and promotion of physical activity (Hinman et al., 2011; Klenk et al., 2016).

In contemporary society, there is an increase in life expectancy which invariably calls for an adjustment of the retirement age of workers by policy makers. In some areas, the demography, health, nature of a particular profession and the availability of the labour force determines the age at which individuals may retire. In some situations, the conditions of life and the ever increasing cost of living forces some persons

to persist in the job market in order to meet up with their financial demands. In the province of politics, some of the elderly persons want to continue leading and taking decisions for a younger generation that resists and feels the impact of a rather old fashioned style of management and leadership. Ageism therefore is becoming an issue in the society today. Ageism expresses itself in the form of negative stereotypes of aging that lead to discrimination and unfair treatment of older adults in the workplace especially. All of these notwithstanding, the management of human capital in the workspace is critical. Dealing with recruitment, training and development, retention of employees, it must ensure that the right capital is available. According to Caves (2004) in the 1990s, the concept of human capital was extended to include natural abilities, physical fitness and healthiness, which are crucial for an individual's success in acquiring knowledge and skills. These are areas therefore that must be taken into consideration when retaining the elderly in the workplace.

In spite of the increasing number of the aged in the workspace, discrimination against them is also noticeable. According to Butler (1975), America learned that prejudice against women (sexism) and

against race (racism) was costly to society. On account of these two vices, productivity suffered and Cultural sensibility was offended. Likewise, the impact of ageism is considerable, for older people can and do play a major role in social and economic development. The paradox is that in spite of the lessons of history, there is a failure to maximize the potential of older persons on either a paid or voluntary basis. There is also the tendency to deny them the opportunity to play a significant role in cultural life.

Ageism is becoming an issue in modern society. Declining mortality and fertility rates together with the increased life expectancy are reversing most European countries' age pyramids leading to a greater relative weight of older people (Boehm, Kunze, & Bruch, 2014). By extension, the older workers' representation in organizations has been growing (Kulik, 2014). In many organizations, on account of the disparity in age among members, the older generation is considered by the younger as old fashioned, technologically illiterate and unfit for the modern workspace. These elderly workers think they should belong and be accepted by the younger generation of workers. This tension needs a regulation without which the older generation in the workspace can feel ostracized and unwanted by the younger generation, especially in situations where the older persons are in positions of responsibility.

Understanding Ageism

As first introduced by Butler (1969), ageism is defined as a syndrome of negative thoughts, feelings, and actions with regard to older persons. It comprises evaluative judgments towards persons based simply on their advanced age, reflecting prejudice (negative evaluations), stereotyping (belief associations), and discrimination (practices such as exclusion and placing people in disadvantageous social positions solely because of their age) against older adults (Butler 1969). As compared to younger people, older persons are generally seen as ill, slow, forgetful, lonely, and inflexible (Nussbaum, J., Pitts, M., Huber, F., Krieger, J., & Ohs, J., 2005). Schaie (1993) describes ageism as "a form of culturally based age bias that involves a cultural belief that age was/ is a significant dimension and that it defines a person's social position and test psychological chromosomal characteristics."

According to the WHO (2016) "Ageism is stereotyping and discrimination on the basis of a person's age. Ageism is widespread and an insidious practice which has harmful effects on the health of older adults. This year, we challenge everyone to identify and question these internalized ageist

attitudes, and to understand the serious impact that these attitudes have." In addition, it is recognized that "For older people, ageism is an everyday challenge. Overlooked for employment, restricted from social services and stereotyped in the media, ageism marginalizes and excludes older people in their communities" (WHO, 2016). Ageism is therefore a serious issue to be dealt with. The bias against the older adults can be very damaging to the individuals who experience it. It affects how the elderly are perceived by others, how they are spoken about and definitely how they are treated.

Age discrimination comprises practices and behaviors towards older people that prevent them from participating in social activities (exclusion, rejection). It may also consist in rules, regulations, and structural conditions that hinder older adults from gaining access to these activities. According to Rothermund, Teige-Mocigemba, Gast, & Wentura (2009), diagnosing a certain treatment as a case of age discrimination requires that there (a) is a disadvantage that is (b) due to the age of the person (or group of persons) who suffers this disadvantage, and (c) that people can claim to have access to or be treated in a certain way based on attributes that are independent of their age. This implies that if there is no objective disadvantage, or if this disadvantage is in fact unrelated to a person's age, or if the disadvantage falls into an area where no legitimate claims can be made with regard to a certain treatment (personal sympathy, liking, interpersonal attraction), then we should not classify the outcome as a case of age discrimination. It must be indicated however that the effective management of human capital must take into account the contribution of the aged. As Adam Smith intimated "The improved dexterity of a workman may be considered in the same light as a machine or instrument of trade which facilitates and abridges labor, and which, though it costs a certain expense, repays that expense with a profit." Those advanced in age and specialists in a particular field have knowledge which they can and do contribute for the effective running of any organization. While they may not be able to perform certain functions that require a lot of energy, charisma, and youthfulness, there is a lot they can do.

Task specific human capital makes ageism a real disadvantage to the society. As understood by Gibbons and Waldman (2004; 2006), this is because human capital is accumulated specific to the nature of the task (or, skills required for the task), and the human capital accumulated for the task are valuable to many firms requiring the transferable skills. A competency based strategy for recruiting and

retaining workers will give room for the older adults who are still capable of working to perform in their various jobs. This competence is understood by Mansfield (1999) as ‘an underlying characteristic of a person that results in effective or superior performance’. Equally, Rankin (2002) describes competencies as ‘definitions of skills and behaviours that organizations expect their staff to practice in their work’ and explains that Competencies represent the language of performance. More so, they can articulate both the expected outcomes from an individual’s efforts and the manner in which these activities are carried out. Because everyone in the organization can learn to speak this language, competencies provide a common, universally understood means of describing expected performance in many different contexts. The older adults who are experienced are able to display this competence with its key performance indicators. If this is considered, job assignments, promotions, and wages would be based on the skills, and outcomes not age. Some of the aged workers possess these skills which they have accumulated over the years.

Experience of Ageism in organizations

Like with every other issue, ageism has become a problem both for society and modern scholarship that requires attention. Ageing workforces have become a central issue for scholars of different areas and practitioners alike, chiefly because there is the concern that negative stereotypes about older workers may yield detrimental effects on organizational dynamics (Hippel, Kalokerinos, & Henry, 2013). There are three major issues that are presented from research being a) intergenerational tensions b) older workers live in youth oriented cultures and c) stereotype threats.

Firstly, intergenerational tensions between younger and older workers are likely to escalate because employment is an increasingly scarce resource in those economies hit by the most recent economic crisis. Hence, negative age stereotypes about older workers are likely to spread, and ethnocentric and discriminatory behaviors are expected (Guillaume et al., 2013). Furthermore, intergenerational tensions may be intensified by ageist work settings characterized by negative beliefs about what other age groups think of one’s in-group, a belief best described as negative age-based meta stereotypes (Finkelstein, King, & Voyles, 2015; Finkelstein, Ryan, & King, 2013).

Secondly, despite growing in numbers in most European countries, older workers continue to live in youth-oriented cultures that share the assumption that younger workers are more desirable members of the

workforce than older workers (Stone & Tetrick, 2013).

Thirdly, given that negative stereotypes about older workers performance and competences are diverse and widespread (Fineman, 2011), and that stereotypical beliefs tend to change very slowly (Tajfel, 1959), it is admitted that older workers will experience stereotype threat in the workplace (Kalokerinos et al., 2014). Older workers are likely to wonder whether managers and co-workers endorse those negative stereotypes and for that reason they fear being judged and treated according to them (Kalokerinos et al., 2014). On account of that this feeling has the capacity of triggering experiences of age-based stereotype threat. Which is the concern that others might judge someone on the basis of a negative stereotype about one’s in-group (Steele et al., 2002).

Anchoring ageism within the agency theory

The agency theory in the context of human resources indicates that owners or managers have to develop ways of monitoring and controlling the activities of their agents (staff). The theory suggests that principals may have problems in ensuring that agents do what they are told. In order to avoid such a situation, it is necessary to clear up ambiguities by setting objectives and monitoring performance to ensure that objectives are achieved (Armstrong, 2006). As long as the older adults are able to be monitored by the managers or employers and they deliver the required results or outcomes, they are in alignment with the prescriptions of the agency theory. While the older adults are able to deliver on the key performance indicators, some young adults may not be able to deliver on the key performance indicators. Where due to illness, fatigue or other factors the older adults are unable to deliver on the key performance indicators, the case would be totally different. Their inability to deliver would not be just on account of age, rather, it would be due to other factors.

Managing Ageism in the Workplace

According to Butler (1975), the world is experiencing an unprecedented increase in average life expectancy and population aging, described as a revolution in longevity. In the twentieth century, the industrialized world gained some 30 additional years of life, greater than had been attained during the preceding 5,000 years of human history and transforming what was once the experience of the few to the destiny of many. This means that the aged have become part and parcel of the workplace and have to be included. Resolutions such as those of the American Psychological Association (2020) among which are: “Encourages a more productive public narrative about the heterogeneity of older adults and positive benefits of

longer lifespans that addresses systemic occurrences of ageism across multiple societal settings (e.g., employment and healthcare). Supports appropriate interdisciplinary and inter-organizational collaborations to address entrenched ageism” are very important in the process of managing Ageism.

Given this situation, the following recommendations could help to make the older persons in the workforce to feel accommodated in the workplace:

1. Ensure that cases of discrimination in the workplace are handled effectively and with the right measures.
2. Ensure that workers are educated on issues of discrimination and taught how to be more proactive in inclusive practices.
3. Ensure that laws are enacted to protect the older people in the work place. Countries could emulate the example of America with the 1967 “Age Discrimination in Employment Act.” According to *Sec 621(section 2) a 1 and b* of this act, “in the face of rising productivity and affluence, older workers find themselves disadvantaged in their efforts to retain employment, and especially to regain employment when displaced from jobs.... (b) It is therefore the purpose of this chapter to promote employment of older persons based on their ability rather than age; to prohibit arbitrary age discrimination in employment; to help employers and workers find ways of meeting problems arising from the impact of age on employment.” If regulations are in force that systematically fight against ageism, the aged will

be well integrated into the workforce especially in areas where their abilities permit.

4. Constant education/training on discrimination and its consequences on the organization and on individuals. Training employees to respect inclusion is the best way to ensure that the older people are not abused in the workplace.
5. It would help to implement a performance based award system, not an age based system. A performance based system would help to encourage elderly persons who are in the work place rather than discourage them if awards are age based. The hiring process could also take into consideration diversity especially depending on the nature of the jobs to be done.

In conclusion, ageism brings about a loss to the entire human family. The aged must be allowed to take their rightful place and contribute to the wellbeing of the society in the best way that they can. Their recognized rights to civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, must include the right to work, since such rights are universal and thus belong to all human beings. In any case, the danger of sitting tight and not willing to hand over power to the younger generation could constitute a great problem in the workplace. While the elderly find their space in the workplace, they must recognize the talents, skills and potentials of the younger generation and not neglect or minimize their contributions. If this happens, there is bound to be animosity between the two groups in which case coexistence can be jeopardized.

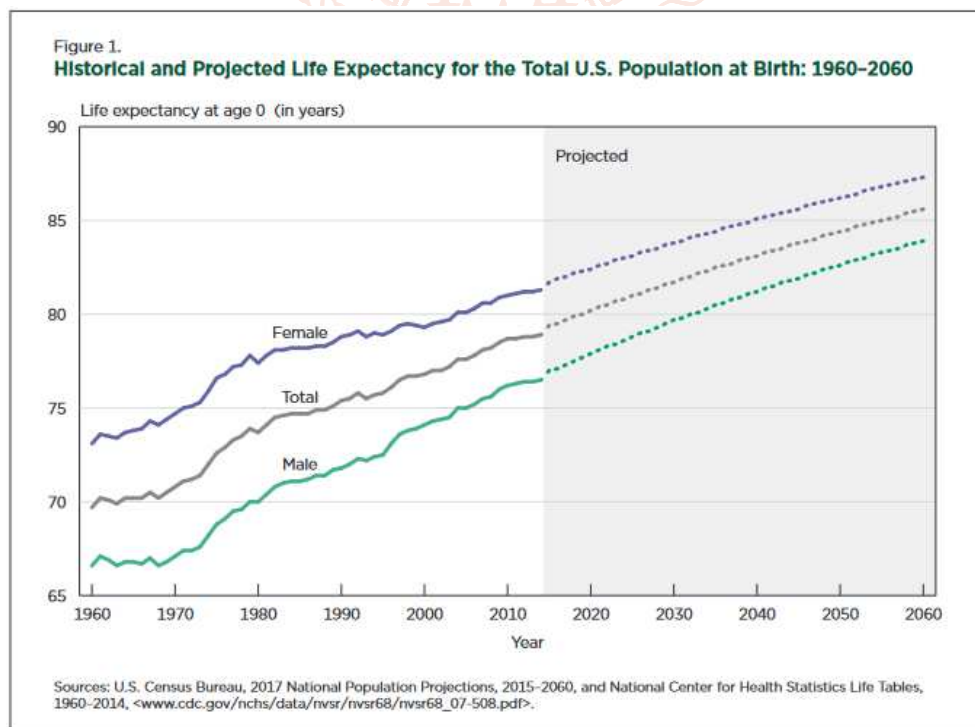


Figure 1: Appendix

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