



Age and Generational  
Issues

# Getting the Best Out of the Five-Generation Workforce

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# Harnessing the Power of Age Diversity

Generational identity should be a source of learning, not division.

by **Megan W. Gerhardt, Josephine Nachemson-Ekwall, and Brandon Fogel**

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Anuj Shrestha

**Conflict between generations is an age-old phenomenon.** But at the end of 2019, when the retort “OK, Boomer” went viral, the vitriol — from both young people who said it and older people who opposed it — was pointed and widespread.

The sarcastic phrase was coined by a younger generation to push back on an older one they saw as dismissive and condescending, and it became popular from Korea to New Zealand even though the

term “Boomer” is barely used outside of the United States. The retort captured the yawning divide between the generations over seemingly every issue: political activism, climate change, social media, technology, privacy, gender identity.

With five generations together in U.S. workplaces for the first time (Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z), and similar dynamics playing out in other parts of the world, tensions are mounting. The anger and lack of trust they can cause hurt team performance by limiting collaboration, sparking emotional conflict, and leading to higher employee turnover and lower team performance. And a lack of awareness and understanding of age issues can drive discrimination in hiring and promotion, leading to lawsuit risks.

But many organizations don’t take steps to address generational issues. While companies have recently renewed their diversity efforts, only 8% of organizations include age as part of their DEI strategy. And of organizations that do address it, the strategy has often been to simply encourage those of different generations to focus on their similarities or to deny the reality of their differences altogether.

This is a missed opportunity. Age-diverse teams are valuable because they bring together people with complementary abilities, skills, information, and networks. If managed effectively, they can offer better decision-making, more-productive collaboration, and improved overall performance — but only if members are willing to share and learn from their differences. Think of a multigenerational team of product developers, merging the seasoned experience and broad client network of its older members with the fresh perspectives and up-to-date supplier network of its younger ones. Such a group can use its age diversity to build something no generation could on its own.

Take the Open Sustainability Technology Lab at Michigan Technological University, a multigenerational team that developed the first low-cost open-source metal 3D printer. Former director Joshua Pearce credits the team's success to members' willingness to learn from those of other generations. To develop their new product, they needed the technical skills of Gen X faculty, the software wizardry of Millennial graduate students, and the experienced resourcefulness of Boomer researchers. For example, once when a younger team member turned to Amazon to order an urgently needed mechanical component, an older colleague intervened and built it from spare parts more quickly than even Amazon could have delivered it. By combining abilities, the team developed the ability to 3D print in aluminum and steel at a much lower cost than had been possible.

That's why papering over generational differences isn't the answer. Through our work with age-diverse groups in finance, health care, sports, agriculture, and R&D, we've found that a better approach is to help people acknowledge, appreciate, and make use of their differences — just as organizations do with other kinds of diversity. Evidence shows that when time-tested DEI tools are used to bridge age divides, they can reduce conflict and generational stereotypes and improve organizational commitment, job satisfaction, employee turnover, and organizational performance.

In our book, *Gentelligence*, we lay out our framework for moving colleagues away from generational conflict and toward a productive embrace of one another's differences. There are four practices involved. The first two, *identify your assumptions* and *adjust your lens*, help overcome false stereotypes. The next two, *take advantage of differences* and *embrace mutual learning*, guide people to share knowledge and expertise so that they can grow together. Each practice also includes an activity to apply its ideas. Teams experiencing generational conflict

should start with the first two; the latter two will help groups move beyond simply getting along and leverage the learning and innovation that intergenerational teams can offer.

To introduce the framework, let's look at what makes a generation — and what makes generations different from each other.

## Generations Today

A generation is an age cohort whose members are born during the same period in history and who thus experience significant events and phenomena at similar life stages. These collective experiences — say, high unemployment, a population boom, or political change — can shape the group's values and norms in a unique way. Because these formative experiences vary from culture to culture, the specifics of generational makeup vary around the world.

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## How Are Generations Defined?

In the U.S. there are currently five generations in the workforce: the Silent Generation (typically considered to have been born 1928–1945), Baby Boomers (1946–1964), Gen X (1965–1980), Millennials (1981–1996), and Gen Z (1997–2012).

Each experienced different world events as members came of age, which shaped their views on jobs and careers — and fueled the stereotypes that people have about them. For example, members of the Silent Generation had more prosperity in their adult years than their parents did; they earned a reputation for doing what was asked of them without complaint and building secure lives for their families. Boomers grew up amid economic growth and possibility, relishing long hours at the office and becoming known as workaholics. Gen Xers enjoyed more independence as children than prior generations, leading them to crave greater autonomy and balance in their careers, which then led to their being seen as slackers by their elders. And Millennials, whose development was actively nurtured by their

parents from an early age, have come to be seen as expecting rapid career advancement.

Other parts of the world don't necessarily label generations this way; instead, specific age cohorts often acquire a name when their births or childhoods coincide with events of particular cultural relevance. Examples include the "little emperors" of China, born during the country's one-child policy; the "born frees" of South Africa, who arrived after apartheid ended; and Kenya's Uhuru ("freedom") Generation, born after the country gained independence. In Sweden cohorts tend to be grouped by decade, but even that can spark tension. Notably, a politician stirred controversy in the early 2000s by coining the name *köttberg*, or "meat mountain," to describe workers born in the 1940s, whom he saw as limiting youth employment.

Around the world, those born recently (such as late Gen Zers and Generation Alpha in the United States) are being shaped by the Covid-19 pandemic. Their early experiences of life, school, and their parents' jobs have mostly been in lockdown and on Zoom. So their ideas and expectations of the workplace will almost surely differ — dramatically — from those of the generations that preceded them.

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But across geographies, the different outlooks, attitudes, and behaviors of cohorts can lead to conflict. For example, in many countries older workers, who have dominated the workplace for decades, are staying in it longer due to better health and longevity. Younger colleagues, anxious for change and upward mobility, are often impatient for them to move on. And when Boomers and digital natives work side by side, tensions can arise about whose contributions are valued more. If the client database that an older employee developed is replaced by automated software suggested by a younger associate, the older employee may feel that their contribution is being minimized.

These generational frustrations have become even more pronounced during the pandemic. As people of all ages have left their jobs in the

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so-called Great Resignation, older and younger workers are competing for similar roles. While older workers have more experience, the 35-and-under age groups, according to a recent survey of hiring managers, are seen as having the most relevant education and skills and the best cultural fit for open positions. Even as people flocked online during the pandemic, different generations tended to spend time on different platforms — older people scrolling Facebook, younger ones TikTok — deepening the digital divide. Gen Z employees, meanwhile, have worked remotely for most if not all of their professional lives, leaving many feeling disconnected from coworkers and undervalued by their older teammates. And older generations have adjusted to working from home better than expected, finding the flexibility energizing after a lifetime of long hours at the office.

Many of these tensions — and the media hype around them — have led to a further decline in trust between the generations. The steps we outline in the four practices and activities below are designed to help bridge that gap and move toward better intergenerational cooperation.

### Identify Your Assumptions

The assumptions we make about generational groups (including our own) can hold us back from understanding teammates' true selves as well as the skills, information, and connections they have to offer. Noticing that we're making these assumptions is the first step to combating them.

Take headlines such as this one from 2019: "Why 'lazy,' 'entitled' millennials can't last 90 days at work." As is often the case, the stereotype on display falls apart on closer inspection. Pew Research Center has found that 70% of Millennials, who are currently aged 26 to 41, stick with their employers for at least 13 months; 69% of Gen Xers stayed that long during the same period of their lives.



**Interactive Available Online**

To view, please visit this article at [HBR.org](#).

*A conversation with Miami University professor Megan Gerhardt on benefiting from generational differences. To listen to or read a full transcript of this IdeaCast, [click here](#).*

Not all biases are blatant enough to make headlines. But even beliefs that we hold at the subconscious level can influence our interactions and our decision-making, often without us realizing it. For example, imagine being asked to nominate a few teammates to lead an Instagram campaign. Who comes to mind? Probably some of your 20-something colleagues. Consciously, you may believe you are choosing those who are the most qualified, most interested, and most able to benefit from the experience. Unconsciously, you may be falling back on deeply embedded assumptions that older people dislike technology or are uninterested in learning anything new.

When it comes to conflict on intergenerational teams, people often rightly suspect there's something age-related going on, but they frequently assume it means something other than what it really does. Let's look at how this played out on one team we studied. At the Fung Fellowship at the University of California, Berkeley, leaders created teams of undergraduates and retirees to collaborate on wellness products for older adults. Initially, these teams ran into several interpersonal challenges. For example, when the retirees didn't respond quickly to texts sent by their younger peers, the students felt that their counterparts weren't taking them or the project seriously. Meanwhile, the retirees resented their teammates' assumptions and seemingly haphazard communication. Work slowed as relations became strained.

Such teams need a tool to recognize the specific age biases they may hold, understand tensions that exist, and head off brewing conflict. We recommend an assumption audit.



**Activity: Assumption Audit.** Challenge employees to spend a week on high alert for age-based assumptions in their daily work. Have them pay attention to their own actions as well as others'. This might mean noticing, for example, that a team leader dismissed a young employee's request for more responsibility as "entitled" behavior or that you left senior employees out of your meeting on innovation.

After the week has passed, schedule time with the group to discuss their experiences, asking each person to bring at least one observation to the table. These conversations can get charged or lead to defensiveness, but clear ground rules can go a long way in preventing those outcomes. Instruct people to speak about what they heard and saw but not to assume intent: "Input from our younger teammates is dismissed quickly" rather than "Senior leaders dismiss our younger teammates' input because they don't think they have anything to offer." Encourage everyone to be open to feedback and to consider how age-based assumptions — whether containing some truth or absolutely false — might be affecting team cohesion, engagement, and performance.

Plan a follow-up meeting for several weeks later to continue the conversation, ensure accountability, and start building awareness into your everyday work.

When the Fung Fellowship program leaders did their own assumption audit to uncover why the undergraduate-retiree teams were struggling, they found that younger team members had assumed that texts sent after hours would be deemed urgent and would get a quick reply. But older peers thought it went without saying that a text could wait until morning. Identifying these assumptions prompted the team to set shared norms around communication.

### Adjust Your Lens

Recognizing assumptions is important, but teams also need to combat them. Stereotypes often cause us to incorrectly attribute differences to age or to assume ill intent where there is none. *Adjusting your lens* means considering whether the assumptions that you've identified align with the reality of the situation at hand, or whether you've been judging someone's actions and attitudes based only on your frame of reference. Try to understand *why* colleagues from different generations might behave differently than you do. To expand your thinking in that way, use the describe-interpret-evaluate exercise.



**Activity: Describe-Interpret-Evaluate Exercise.** Developed in the 1970s to prepare employees to work abroad, this exercise can also help members of age-diverse teams broaden their understanding of one another.

First, have each employee *describe* a frustration they have with someone of a different generation. Next, ask them to think about their initial

*interpretation* of the person's behavior. Finally, challenge them to come up with an alternative *evaluation* of your interpretation; they can also ask for contributions from the group.

For example, recently one of us (Megan) conducted a workshop with a group of health care professionals. A nursing manager who identified herself as a Baby Boomer described being annoyed with young patients who used their mobile phones in the middle of a conversation with a nurse or a doctor. Her interpretation was that the patients were — rudely — not paying attention to their caregiving team. When prompted to think of alternative explanations, she looked confused, unable to come up with anything. But her colleagues — mostly younger doctors and nurses — had plenty of ideas: The young patients might be taking notes on the conversation or looking up the pharmacy's hours to make sure they could get their prescriptions before closing. As her teammates offered these insights, the nursing manager's expression changed. She was able to see the behavior in a different light and better appreciate the patients' perspectives. At the same time, her younger colleagues realized how behavior that felt natural to them — like checking a phone mid-conversation — might offend older peers.

### **Take Advantage of Differences**

Once you've tempered generational tensions by recognizing assumptions and adjusting lenses, you can work on finding productive differences with your colleagues of other generations and ways to benefit from each other's perspectives, knowledge, and networks.

For team members to feel comfortable sharing in this way — bringing up new ideas or conflicting information — they need to feel a certain amount psychological safety, as the research of Harvard Business School's Amy Edmondson shows. But, as we've seen, perceived generational competition in the workplace, exacerbated by clickbait

headlines, has undermined trust. One good way to rebuild it is to hold a roundtable where the team's diverse perspectives can be acknowledged and valued.



**Activity: Intergenerational Roundtable.** Leaders of intergenerational teams should set monthly or quarterly meetings to elicit ideas for how to work together more productively and smoothly. There are two stages to the process:

1. **Find common ground and similarities.** While it may seem counterintuitive to focus on commonalities when the goal is to leverage differences, team members must first see themselves as collaborators on a joint mission, rather than competitors. Furthermore, research shows that having a common purpose and goals are vital to team performance. Intergenerational teams can struggle more than most to find that shared ground. So at your first roundtable, ask teammates to work together to answer questions such as "Why does the team exist?" and "What shared goals do we want to accomplish?" This helps team members begin to see themselves as unified in pursuit of the same interests and builds psychological safety. At future sessions, remind them of these discussions.
2. **Invite unique viewpoints.** Next, have each team member respond to the following questions:

- What are we, as a team, doing well to accomplish these shared goals?
- What are we doing that is keeping us from reaching these goals?
- What opportunities should we take advantage of that we currently aren't?
- If you were in charge, what would you continue, stop, or start doing?

Your aim is not to come to neat conclusions but to surface new ideas that might have been dismissed or unvoiced in the past. Different views will inevitably surface, and some conflict may even erupt — that's all right. Just keep bringing the conversation back to the team's shared goals and emphasize that differences of opinion are valued contributions toward your common success.

Aaron Hornbrook, a customer service manager and vice president at Wells Fargo we've interviewed, holds monthly roundtable meetings with his multigenerational team. At the beginning of each, Hornbrook reminds everyone that their mission is to help customers with their application- and account-related questions and that success will require both trust and willingness to listen to the perspectives of the entire group. His efforts have borne fruit: For example, his Millennial and Gen Z employees feel comfortable voicing their concerns about mental health in the workplace — a subject previously considered taboo by some of their older colleagues. These conversations helped Hornbrook and other senior colleagues understand why paid-time-off requests had spiked recently and prompted them to find ways to reduce employee anxiety, including by requiring supervisors to hold one-on-one meetings with direct reports in conference rooms rather than at their desks. As a result, team members of all generations became more supportive of people taking mental health days.

By creating a space for team members to discuss how the group functions, managers demonstrate that all perspectives are valued.

### **Embrace Mutual Learning**

Finally, to fully reap the benefits of intergenerational teams, members must believe that they have something to learn from colleagues in different age cohorts. The ultimate goal is mutual learning: peers of all ages teaching and learning from one another in an ongoing loop.

One way to encourage this is with formal mentoring initiatives. While traditional mentoring programs (older colleagues teaching younger ones) exist at many organizations, a number of top companies — including GE, Deloitte, PwC, Cisco, and Procter & Gamble — have developed “reverse mentoring” programs, where younger people teach older peers new skills, typically around technology. We suggest that companies and even managers of small teams combine both approaches into two-way “mutual mentoring.” Research shows that such programs support employees’ development of competencies and skills and increase both individual involvement and collective motivation.

Mutual learning can also happen organically when people of different generations have good relationships and are on the lookout for opportunities. BuildWitt Media, a digital storytelling firm we’ve studied, helps its clients in the construction and mining industries attract great talent. Its founder and CEO is 26-year-old Aaron Witt; its president, Dan Briscoe, is 53. While cross-generational learning was never an explicit reason for their partnership, they have come to value how Briscoe’s 30 years of experience in leadership, sales, and marketing complement Witt’s impulsive energy, sense of business trends, and lifelong immersion in mobile media. For example, Briscoe credits Witt with teaching him to look beyond academic degrees and GPA when hiring and to consider leadership potential and alignment with culture

and values in addition to a work portfolio. Witt says Briscoe is good at relating to clients and putting deals together. This partnership, they agree, has led to rapid growth and the opportunity to diversify their services.



**Activity: Mutual Mentoring.** To start building a mentorship culture on your team, create an informal mutual mentoring network. Begin by asking team members of all ages what they want to learn and what they want to teach. Potential teachers can be surprisingly shy when it comes to their expertise; it may help if you make suggestions about what you see as their strengths.

Identify where there are natural connections: employees who are versed in TikTok and those who want to learn to create selfie videos, or employees who have an established roster of clients and those who want to expand their networks. While not all pairings need to be cross-generational, make sure all generations are represented in both the learner and the instructor groups.

Once you have some pairings ready, hold a kickoff meeting with the entire team and ask four to six mentors to present briefly on their area of expertise. Encourage people to reach out to the mentors whose skills they want to learn. Often the energy of the meeting itself will spur connections, but you can also send monthly nudges to remind the team to keep questions flowing.

Even this kind of informal network can help to build a culture of cross-generational learning.

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“OK, Boomer,” “Gen X cynics,” “entitled Millennials,” and “Gen Z snowflakes.” We have become so entrenched in generational name-calling — or, conversely, so focused on downplaying the differences that do exist — that we have forgotten there is strength in age diversity. Especially at a time when we are wrestling with so many changes to the way we work, it’s incumbent on leaders to embrace intergenerational teams as a key piece of the DEI puzzle and to frame them as an opportunity to be seized rather than a threat to be managed.



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# Is That Conflict with Your Colleague Really About Age Difference?

Assuming it is might make it worse. **by Amy Gallo**

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Travis Rathbone/Trunk Archive

**You've noticed a frustrating pattern. During meetings** with an older colleague, they seem to tune out any time you offer an idea. You suspect they're checking email when you're speaking, and they rarely, if ever, acknowledge your suggestions. Given dismissive comments they've made about other employees around your age, you assume they're not taking you seriously because you're younger than they are.

Or perhaps the situation is reversed: You've caught a younger colleague rolling their eyes on group Zoom calls — seemingly whenever you're sharing experience with the topic at hand. The gesture could be aimed at someone else, but you can't help feeling like the colleague sees you as stuck in your ways and is acting disrespectfully on purpose.

But how can you be sure that what's happening between you and your coworker is a generational conflict? And if it is, how should you address it?

With as many as five generations working side by side in organizations, it's easy to get caught up in generational conflicts and stereotypes:

*Boomers are out of touch and arrogant.*

*Gen Xers are cynical and disengaged.*

*Millennials are entitled.*

*Gen Zers are narcissistic and don't want to work hard.*

If these stereotypes were all true, little would get done in most companies. After all, who wants to work with people who have any of these attributes? But stereotypes don't have to be true to create conflicts. Believing these things anyway — assuming that a colleague from a particular generation is a certain way — can cause rifts with our coworkers.

There's another layer that adds to the potential strain. If we assume that our older or younger colleagues believe these things *about us*, we may be setting ourselves up for unpleasant clashes. Researchers call these meta-stereotypes, or "what we think others believe about us based on our age group."

Ultimately, there is little evidence that people of different generations behave markedly differently from each other at work or want markedly different things from their careers. Research has found, for example, that 20-year-olds tend to behave like 20-year-olds, no matter what generation they're in. And while it's common for people to lament how things have changed as they get older and more senior in their careers, the belief that "kids these days" are worse than young people in the past is more of an illusion than a reality.



Travis Rathbone/Trunk Archive

What isn't an illusion is the tension that beliefs about other generations — both yours and your colleagues' — create in your interactions. You feel judged, they feel judged. So what do you do if you're stuck in a conflict that has been created or exacerbated by a colleague's unfair assumptions? There are a few tactics you can use to avoid knee-jerk responses and improve your working relationships.

#### **Be curious about your response — and**

**theirs.** When something goes wrong at work — say, a young colleague misses a deadline, causing an important project to be delayed — we tell ourselves a story about what's occurring, why, and what will happen next. And these stories, laden with emotions and critiques, feel truthful to us even when they may not be, because they're based on our brain's sometimes-flawed sensemaking attempts rather than on facts. In an effort to conserve resources, our brains make snap judgments about what's going on and how we should react. Scientists call it *premature cognitive commitment*.

Maybe you assume that your colleague didn't get their work done on time because they're a 20-something who doesn't take work as seriously as you do. Instead of sticking with that story, take a step back and ask yourself what else might be going on. Here are some questions you can start with:

- Is it possible that my interpretation is wrong?
- What assumptions have I made about my colleague or the situation?
- How have I possibly contributed to the problem between us?
- Other than this person's age or generation, what else could explain their behavior?

That last question is important because of a cognitive bias called *fundamental attribution error* — the inclination to observe another person's behavior and assume it has more to do with their personality than with their circumstances. That's why you might tell yourself the project delay was a result of your colleague's lack of commitment when it was actually because, unbeknownst to you, they were dealing with a family crisis or simply had too much on their plate. Interestingly, we do the opposite when it comes to ourselves: If you're running behind on a project, you probably focus on all the reasons for the delay, not on the idea that you're from a generation of uncommitted workers.

**Be aware of common tensions.** It can be easy to blame a conflict on generational differences, because some stereotypes have kernels of truth to them. Believing that Boomers are technologically savvy might be hard if your Boomer parents, for example, are not.

But rather than seeing any differences as flaws in the other person, it can help to acknowledge that tensions regularly come up between people from different generations. Below are some common tensions that can lead to conflicts. On the left are attributes and values that are

frequently (and stereotypically) assigned to younger generations, and on the right are ones often linked to older people:

- efficient communication vs. rich communication
- high technology vs. low technology
- progressive values vs. traditional values
- feeling entitled to advancement vs. earning advancement
- innovation vs. status quo
- life outside work vs. commitment to work
- egalitarian vs. hierarchical
- meaning vs. money

Recognizing that these tensions exist can help to depersonalize a disagreement you and your colleague are having. And you can go a step further and embrace the fact that these are often positive, even productive, tensions to navigate. Rather than determining who's "right" and who's "wrong," accept that people see the world differently — and that's not only OK but likely helpful to the work you're trying to accomplish together. For instance, if you're always pushing to try new things and an older colleague tends to argue that what has worked previously should be preserved, your team is more likely to land on a good balance between innovating and sticking with the tried-and-true.

**Address the specific problem.** Instead of seeing a colleague and yourself as two opposing factions from drastically different generations, imagine that there are three entities in the situation: you, the other person, and the problem between you. If your colleague dismisses your input, that is the problem to address; don't try to take on their entire worldview based on their age. Or if they are consistently failing to meet targets in a way that negatively affects you, that is the problem — figure out how to tackle it.

Ask yourself: *What's my goal? What do I need to get the work done?*

If you're under pressure to complete a presentation by a certain date, and a younger colleague in sales is complaining about how much data you need from them, don't waste your time lamenting how lazy their generation is. Focus on how to get the numbers so that you can hit your deadline. Perhaps later you can explain to your coworker how their griping impacted you and ask how to make future requests easier for them.

**Name the bias and commit to challenging it.** Putting a label on the dynamic between you and a coworker can be tempting. "This might be an age thing..." or "We're from different generations, so..." But statements like those can backfire, even if you intend them to be helpful or clarifying. People immediately feel defensive when you attribute their behaviors, especially one you're annoyed with, to their entire generation.



Travis Rathbone/Trunk Archive

This doesn't mean you shouldn't talk about generational differences. Naming the tensions can be useful, but be careful not to pigeonhole your colleague. Instead, you might call out stereotypes. For example, you could say something along the lines of, "According to the media, my generation is lazy and yours is stuck in their ways. I think we can agree that neither of those things is true." Or "I know there are a lot of misconceptions about both of our generations — that people my

age are out of touch and people your age are entitled. That's not how I see myself or you." You might even follow up with a promise: "If I have a problem or potential conflict, I won't attribute it to your age or

generation. I'll address the issue directly, and I hope you'll do the same for me."

**Emphasize similarities, not differences.** We are more likely to empathize with people if we identify with them in some way. Rather than emphasizing (even in your own mind) all the ways you're dissimilar from your colleague, find ways to show them you're alike. Ask a younger colleague what it's like to be starting out in your industry, or what challenges they're excited about taking on. Ask an older colleague what it was like coming up in the industry, or what kinds of obstacles they've had to overcome in their career. Then, listen and relate where you can, sharing your own experience. Expressing interest can disarm tension.

Seeing advice is another way to bridge a perceived gap. What does the other person have to teach you? What could you use their counsel on? You can say something like, "I know we often see things a bit differently, so I'd love to get your perspective on this."

**Focus on a shared goal.** Along the same lines, it can help to align yourself with your colleague. Is there a task or a project that you can tackle together, channeling your collective talents and energy in positive ways? Or a problem you can help them solve?

Of course, teaming up with a coworker who you feel is judging you may be unappealing. But having a shared goal could help ease the tension and get you pulling in the same direction. Here are some ways you could suggest this:

- “I know we both care about getting this project done on time. Can we talk about how we can work together to accomplish that?”
- “We can both make our team/department look good here.”
- “I think we’d knock it out of the park if we took this on together.”

**Agree on how you’ll work together.** It goes without saying, but so many conflicts are the result of misalignment on how best to get things done. One way to address a current conflict, and prevent future ones, is to make clear how you and your colleague will work together. Just because you’re on the same team and care about the same goal doesn’t mean you’ll have the same preferences. So, take the time to have conversations about the processes you’ll use to collaborate, and be willing to accommodate what your colleague wants. Flexibility is key. Maybe you believe text messages are the most efficient way to handle in-the-moment issues; your colleague may disagree. Or perhaps you prefer to send summary notes after your meetings, even though your coworker doesn’t think they’re necessary.

I’ve worked with people who write down their work preferences in a “user guide” to help jump-start those conversations. The document explains everything from why they’re a vegan (and how that might impact team meals) to their typical work hours to the value they place on efficiency. It wasn’t a list of demands about how we would work together, but a way for us to align on exactly how we’d communicate, give feedback, and interact.

One thing I find helpful when working with people of various ages is reminding myself that age is just a point in time. It’s cliché, I know, but we are all getting older. To cut through my instinct to stereotype or judge coworkers of other generations, I have a mantra: “That was me. That will be me.” Whether I’m frustrated with a younger coworker who keeps coming up with new ways of doing things or annoyed with an

older colleague who starts sentences with “When I was your age...,” I try to remind myself that I was once there, and I will likely be there. We all will.



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# How Shadow Boards Bridge Generational Divides

They let younger employees partner with senior leaders on strategic initiatives. **by Jennifer Jordan and Mahwesh Khan**

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**A shadow board is a group of** young, nonexecutive employees tapped to work with the executive board on strategic initiatives. It's designed to introduce a company's (typically middle-aged) leadership team to new perspectives and insights, thereby helping to drive strategy. The shadow board might contribute to initiatives as significant as developing a new marketing plan, redesigning a business model, or updating key processes in the organization's value chain. It can also shift corporate culture in two ways: Board members can gain access

to new perspectives and younger employees can experience the inner workings of a board and share what they learn with their peers.

As we welcome Gen Z into the workplace, such initiatives are more important than ever. While the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, and Millennials are still learning how to work together, the addition of Gen Z has brought different challenges to light. Research reveals that this newest generation of employees has suffered the most from Covid-19 isolation, and many workers have been remotely onboarded to teams they still haven't met in person. Gen Z also cares a lot about diversity and inclusion, having entered the workforce during Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and gender diversity movements.

Forming a shadow board with representatives from a younger generation or two is an effective way to navigate this shift among employees — and prepare for new customer segments and market dynamics.

### **What Shadow Boards Contribute**

We spent five years studying the shadow boards of more than two dozen organizations across Europe, Asia, Africa, and the United States. These organizations ranged in size from very small (25 employees or fewer) to very large (more than 200,000 employees) and included professional service firms, energy giants, regional banks, and nonprofit organizations. All had formally announced the creation of a shadow board within the previous three to five years.

Through our research, we found that the organizations gained two primary benefits. First, they were better able to test and pilot initiatives that were important to younger employees and customers. Second, they more effectively bridged gaps between workers of different generations, which enhanced respect and understanding across the hierarchy.

**Testing ideas.** Shadow boards can serve as safe spaces for the sharing and testing of new initiatives before implementing them at scale.

For example, at Mövenpick Hotels & Resorts, the senior executive team had been discussing the need to create a booking app for more than a year. All of the company's competitors had such apps, so it seemed like a no-brainer to develop and roll one out. The IT department conducted extensive feasibility studies, but just as the company was preparing to look for vendors, management ran the idea by the shadow board — and members balked. "Why would you guys waste your time and money making an app?" they said, explaining that no one wanted to download another app or remember another password. The senior management, IT, and commercial teams considered this view and worked with the shadow board to develop a direct web interface instead. "It was a very cool moment," recalls Craig Cochrane, senior vice president of talent and culture. "I don't know how much time or money we would have spent going down the app route for no particular gain, had it not been for the shadow board giving us that feedback so bluntly."

We spoke to several executives in other companies who agreed that testing ideas with their shadow boards allowed them to stay connected to the changing expectations of younger demographics and empowered them to pursue bolder strategies.

**Bridging gaps.** Shadow boards give both senior executives and rising young talent regular opportunities to communicate with one another, fostering understanding at both levels. The younger, less-experienced employees learn the complexities of the business, see how leaders make decisions, and get advice on their goals. The senior executives get new information and insights from different parts of the company and form personal relationships with up-and-comers in the pipeline.

The exploration division at TotalEnergies launched its shadow board, a group of employees under the age of 35, in the second quarter of 2021. One member describes the experience as a win-win that builds empathy between generations. “Sitting next to the executives and seeing how complicated it is to make decisions for large groups of stakeholders makes us more aware of the realities of leadership,” he explains. “And it’s beneficial for management since we introduce topics that they might not be aware of yet.”

The executive sponsor for the board, Gautier Baudot, echoes those sentiments. “At a critical time in our industry, the shadow board provides insights about how the next generation sees the future of the profession, and we get to know the rising talent,” he said. In addition, “we’re able to provide learning opportunities to the members of the shadow board. [They] receive mentoring and unparalleled visibility across the organization.”

### **Forming a Shadow Board**

If you think your company could benefit from a shadow board, here are four steps you can take to form one.

**Step 1: Define your generational target.** Which generation or generations do you want advice from? If your goal is to understand the views of your youngest consumers and employees, look to Gen Z. But if it’s to redesign business models or rethink the organizational structure, you might want to look to Millennials.

**Step 2: Recruit a diverse group.** Once you define your target generation, bring in people who represent different genders, races, functions, cultures, and other types of backgrounds.

Some companies choose candidates from their formal leadership development pools. Others have an open application process for all employees in the selected generations. We recommend the latter approach since it creates more enthusiasm around the shadow board, typically generates a more diverse pool of applicants, helps to uncover hidden talent, and makes employees feel better represented even if they aren't selected. Some organizations combine both strategies, asking designated high potentials to apply and bringing them together with employees nominated by managers or by themselves.

One executive team we know even found that the shadow board members selected through the open application received better executive assessments than those picked from the high-potential pool.

As far as size, the number of people on your shadow board should match, as closely as possible, the number who sit on the executive board. Having a fairly proportional representation allows for an equal balance of voices on both sides, as well as the opportunity for the shadow board to understand what it "feels" like to be on a board the size of the executive committee. Avoid creating a group that is significantly larger, as complexity of decision-making grows exponentially with the addition of people in a team.

**Step 3: Define the time commitment.** Across the organizations we studied, members of shadow boards were expected to add the role to their regular responsibilities without extra compensation. By maintaining those dual roles, they were able to keep tabs on what was happening on the ground, report back to and hear from senior leaders and fellow board members, and take the insights and ideas discussed into their day jobs.

But candidates should understand up front that being on the shadow board is a big commitment. Organizations must be clear on how much time someone is expected to contribute and ensure that the tasks assigned don't cause anyone to exceed that amount. We recommend recruiting people with the self-discipline to balance both roles and a true desire to participate. That's why we endorse the standard policy of not paying people for shadow board work: While the evidence is mixed, financial remuneration could create a perverse incentive, overshadowing young employees' intrinsic motivations to contribute to the strategic direction of the organization. In addition, we think it's important that shadow boards not create a financial burden for companies, which is why the decision of whether to start one should be purely about the value the group could bring, rather than about budgetary concerns.

**Step 4: Embed the board into organizational decision-making.** For a shadow board to have impact, it needs concerted, focused, and deliberate coordination by its sponsors.

One of the biggest mistakes we came across in our research was failing to onboard members and guide their interactions with the executive board in a structured way. The two groups comprise less- and more-experienced people, respectively, from two different levels and generations, so it will take some work to ensure that they can communicate effectively and cooperate. We recommend a formal onboarding period for both boards.

For example, Shakespeare Martineau, a UK-based law firm, set aside several days for an offsite where shadow and executive board members got to know one another and devised their governance guidelines. The CEO, Sarah Walker-Smith, explained that her team did preparatory work ahead of time, giving assignments to participants to demonstrate

that everyone's voices would carry equal weight at the onboarding sessions. She noted that some executive board members were initially apprehensive, feeling their authority could be undermined. But ultimately, "the prework created common ground and established informal rules of engagement between the shadow and main board, which enabled the retreat to be a resounding success," she said.

After the induction period, the two boards should meet separately and then together to further discuss how they will interact. Important questions to consider include: Will the shadow board be present at every executive board meeting, or a subset of them? Will a representative of the shadow board be elected to attend executive team meetings and share the shadow board's viewpoints, then report back to their own board? Will the representative role rotate across the shadow board, or be held by one person throughout the board's tenure?

Best practices are to hold several joint board meetings and to have a shadow board representative at some executive meetings. This method allows the shadow board to stay abreast of management decisions while still giving the executive board the autonomy it needs.

### **Potential Pitfalls**

While shadow boards can make lasting contributions to organizations, they can also present challenges. When forming and running a shadow board, be on the lookout for two key pitfalls.

**Lack of CEO or executive committee sponsorship.** When a shadow board fails to have impact, this is often the reason.

In one company we studied, the shadow board was the brainchild of the CHRO. While she made a convincing argument for why it would benefit

the organization, the CEO saw it as a distraction and even a threat. The board lasted one year, and none of its recommendations were taken.

In another case, a shadow board supported by the CEO was formed and just as quickly disassembled because other members of the executive team, who were worried about the company's survival, didn't buy in.

To avoid this pitfall, you need to establish a clear business case for the shadow board that resonates with all stakeholders. The key sponsor must also show their commitment to the board and its success. "I take it seriously, so they take it seriously," MgciniSihlalo Jordan, the deputy CEO of Deloitte Africa, told us. Publicly celebrating some early wins, like finalizing a deliverable or making a strategic choice, can help to support the business case. And manage expectations about the value the shadow board is expected to bring and the timeline it should happen on.

**No clarity or purpose.** A second major pitfall is a lack of clearly defined output or deliverables. Without such deliverables, shadow boards can be perceived as just another top-management initiative meant for show rather than for substantial strategic or cultural contribution.

Specifically, these can include projects or specific assignments and mandates. For example, at TotalEnergies the shadow board is tasked with learning what the next generation thinks about careers in energy exploration. A regional bank assigned its shadow board to find methods for attracting and retaining the young customers who were flocking to fintechs. It's not enough to merely ask for opinions from your shadow board. You need to know what the organization will do with them.

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During one of the most tumultuous times in recent business history, shadow boards are an effective way to break down generational barriers, build trust, and bring diverse groups together to solve problems and respond to fast-evolving market dynamics. When done correctly, with the right planning and goals from the top, shadow boards can put management's finger on the pulse of the organization while also keeping its eyes on the future.



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# Is Generational Prejudice Seeping into Your Workplace?

Age stereotypes can undermine your programs, policies, and decision-making. **by Kristi DePaul and Vasundhara Sawhney**

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Visitors use their mobile devices to take pictures of themselves posing in a pink ball pit at the Supercandy Pop-Up Museum in Cologne, Germany, in 2018. (Photo: Rolf Vennenbernd/DPA/AFP via Getty Images)

**The year is 2005. YouTube has just** launched, and social media usage is on the rise. Mariah Carey and Gwen Stefani are vying for the top song of the year. The first cohort of Millennials is stepping into the workforce. And the business world has plenty to celebrate: The economy is

booming, job offers are plentiful and competitive, and technology is advancing faster than ever.

It sounds like a youthful happily ever after. But there was a plot twist: Millennials were eyed warily by their employers and colleagues.

Report after report emphasized how much Baby Boomers and Gen Xers needed to change to accommodate this new generation of lazy, entitled, and disloyal workers and how these young folks would disrupt the workplace as we knew it. The media latched on to these generalizations, reporting that Millennials wanted more “me” time on the job, only took “yes” for an answer, and let their parents assume a peculiarly active role in their professional lives.

As a result, company leaders and senior employees did change, creating processes and policies based on these beliefs. Ping-Pong tables and beer on tap became priorities, constant feedback the gold standard, work-life balance more important than meaningful career progression.



Staff relax with a game of table tennis at the Quattro call center on the outskirts of New Delhi in 2008.  
(Photo: Findlay Kember/AFP via Getty Images)

Did these changes actually help Millennials succeed at work? Hardly. While some companies reported lower turnover rates after introducing flexible work schedules, aggressive engagement policies, and wellness programs, the “me me me” generation was actually burning out. Turns out it was filled with workaholics; many discontented Millennials embraced side hustles amid the burgeoning gig economy and the uncertainty of the Covid-19 pandemic. (And no, those Ping-Pong tables weren’t necessary.)

As Millennials ourselves, we have been subjected to pervasive stereotyping (“I’m sure you prefer Slack over email”) and condescending assumptions (“You’ve been here for two years. Time to move on?”). If you’re part of this generation, you’ve probably experienced bias like this too. Workers of all generations have — when it comes to our supposed differences from each other, there are plenty of stereotypes to go around.

This made us wonder: Does intergenerational anxiety stem from *actual* differences? Or is it created by the mere belief that certain disparities exist? And if it's the latter, what can we do to thwart those stereotypes before we create mismatched workplaces for generations to come?

## Why Generational Biases Exist at Work

Beliefs about generations have long provided a flawed but convenient framework for managerial thinking and decision-making. Our research for this article uncovered a few reasons they persist.

**We put things in buckets to make sense of them.** According to Michael Kramer, former chair of the department of communication at the University of Oklahoma, “Humans naturally seek simplified explanations for their own and others’ behavior through a process of sensemaking, especially during uncertain times. Constructing and adopting stereotypes is one way of doing that.”

Bobby Duffy, a professor and the author of The Generation Myth: Why When You’re Born Matters Less Than You Think, agrees. “We like stories about who we are and who we’re not, and we like to categorize everything into what it is and what it’s not,” he told us. These stories are appealing, especially when they’re vivid and memorable, with labels and anecdotes behind them. “And that’s certainly what’s happened with generational labels,” he added.

All of this can make us feel closer to colleagues of our generation. “We feel that when we are born matters because there is a sense of connection to our peers...They have gone through what we have gone through. It feels intuitive. And it works really well as shorthand communication in headlines or when we want to sum up complex things in simple labels,” Duffy said.

Managers who are nervous or unsure about leading a new age cohort — particularly when the media is putting them on high alert — may rely on generational labels as shortcuts for engaging and attracting those workers. Duffy noted that leaders sometimes use stereotypes as scapegoats when something isn't working. "When you believe that it's not your fault as an employer — that it's just this weird generation coming into the workforce and placing unreasonable demands on you — you shift the blame onto them" instead of understanding and addressing the root issue.

**Rosy retrospection plagues us.** Cognitive psychologist Gordon Bower found that our memories are reconstructed when we recall them — a process prone to manipulation and errors. Various types of memory bias can affect our decision-making in both positive and negative ways. Rosy retrospection, or declinism, is one such bias: It refers to our tendency to minimize the negatives of the past, leading us to view it more positively than the present.

Duffy says that, as a result, we think things used to be better than they are now and believe everything is going downhill. "Coupled with generational thinking, we feel the current situation is dreadful; clearly, the new generation is at fault and will change everything," he explains wryly. When we look for someone to blame, a new cohort could, conveniently, fit the bill.

But if you feel that young workers today are being too demanding (whether about wanting better tech infrastructure or sporting tattoos and beards at work), you're probably forgetting that you, too, were insistent and intent on forging your identity at that age. Or as one illustrative example proffered: "The hippies of the late 1960s became the dress-for-success yuppies of the 1980s."



A stockbroker for L.F. Rothschild in New York City, 1984. (Photo: Barbara Alper/Getty Images)

**Employers are vying for talent in any way they can.** Consider Google, with its nap pods, on-site laundry service, free snacks, and colorful beanbag chairs. What began as a data-driven recruitment and retention strategy — projecting the company’s “cool quotient” to encourage a robust applicant pool and lengthier employee tenures — soon became an industry benchmark that others measured branding efforts against.

More recently, companies have used popular insights to “seem less square.” They’re marketing themselves as culturally diverse (Millennials expect a diverse workplace), providing collaborative environments (Millennials work better in groups than alone) and flexible work schedules (Gen Zers love work-life balance), and keeping their Instagram profiles up-to-date (both generations like that one) to attract younger people. Firms are also conducting extensive employer brand surveys to reveal the priorities of specific generations — yet many may

not be unique to any age group, like better compensation packages and meaningful work.

**Generational stereotypes have created a cottage industry.** From books to podcasts to consultancies, there are any number of lucrative reasons to assert that generational differences do, indeed, exist and are central to the workplace. “There’s a whole industry around generations,” Cort Rudolph, an industrial and organizational psychologist and faculty member at Saint Louis University whose research focuses on work and aging, told us.

Because managers are led to believe they must adapt their approaches for different generations — and are unsure about how to do that — they often seek help that can provide insights and guidance. As a result, “companies go out and hire generational experts to come in and clean up intergenerational conflicts,” says Rudolph.

And it’s not cheap. As of a few years ago, some consultants were charging \$20,000 to \$30,000 per hour, and Source Global Research estimated that U.S. organizations spent \$60 million to \$70 million on generational consulting in 2015 alone. The long-term success of such efforts remains to be seen (we’re still debating if Millennials will ever get the workplace they want), but meanwhile generational consulting related to Gen Z has become popular.

## Moving Beyond Generational Thinking

But is it really so bad if companies try to leverage popular insights to win over every generation at work? Well, possibly yes. “We’re basing a lot of practice decisions, a lot of policies, a lot of approaches in the workplace on pretty shaky science,” Rudolph explained. And it can negatively affect employees. In fact, for this article we posted a LinkedIn

poll to ask people if being part of a generation negatively influences how they're treated at work. Sixty percent of respondents said it did.

Often what's happening — which is less intentional than overt ageism — is reflected in organizational practices that, while appearing benign, aren't applied to everyone equally. Rudolph offered an example: the popular narrative that people from younger generations want more flexibility. "As a manager, I'm going to read that and then afford different levels of flexibility to people based on their age. What results is a policy that seems to be grounded in what a certain subset of the population wants — when in reality, *everybody* values flexibility."

Such beliefs can influence everything from how new teammates are onboarded, to how they are trained or mentored, to even how teams collaborate and communicate — and that breadth can pose great risk to organizations' age inclusivity and employee performance. One experiment found that trainers assigned to teach someone a computer-related task had lower expectations and provided worse training when they believed the person was older.

So, how do we design policies and processes that protect us from ageist behaviors, rather than relying on assumptions or stereotypes?

**Consider other explanations for employee similarities and differences.** "It's really difficult to separate out what is actually a generation from other types of influences that co-occur with time," noted Rudolph. Each of us has more in common with our older and younger counterparts than we might realize, which can be attributed to life cycle effects, or how we grow and change as we age. For example, younger professionals — who are typically less tied down by family obligations — are more likely to experiment with their careers and take risks to find the right fit, as compared with older workers, who are more

established in their careers. Ironically, a report from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that Boomers did as much job hopping in their twenties as Millennials at that age.

There are other kinds of effects that influence us too. A 2020 report found that people born in the same year or span of years may share some similarities (cohort effects), though they may have very different experiences and outlooks depending on social and economic factors or geographic location. People are also influenced by period effects, or events and changes (a pandemic, a war, a recession) that impact everyone at a given point in time. Attributing someone's behavior to one effect when it's due more to another effect can lead to misunderstandings.

For example, Millennials and Gen Zers are known for the stereotype that they switch jobs quickly. That might seem to be a cohort effect — young people today like to job hop, perhaps because they're disloyal to employers. But consider that both generations spent their formative years in a recession — a period effect. Members with access to higher-paying roles and industry connections or with the ability to live in a region with ample job opportunities may be doing fine. But many others haven't accumulated wealth the way their predecessors did and have comparatively sluggish earning trajectories. They've also started fewer businesses due to unfavorable economic conditions. These factors, combined with pension plans becoming outmoded and the fact that significant raises usually don't come from advancing in one's current company, have led many younger workers to job hop to seek higher wages — so they can devote more to retirement savings.

**Recognize that employees' needs are often universal.** Jessica Kriegel, a workplace culture expert and the author of *Unfairly Labeled: How Your Workplace Can Benefit from Ditching Generational Stereotypes*,

described to us a town hall meeting gone awry when a CEO stated that Millennials value work-life balance more than compensation. What he believed to be an innocuous comment — a compliment, even — caused an uproar. Employees of all ages complained to HR.

“Millennials were adamant that salary mattered to them and were concerned the organization had offered them less as a result of this work-life belief,” Kriegel explained. “And older employees insisted that work-life balance was important to them as well. People generally have a negative reaction to being told who they are and what they value.”

So, if managers and leaders should stop using generations as a framework for customizing policies, what should they use instead? Rudolph suggests focusing on actual, identifiable, and relevant differences by adopting a life-span perspective on aging at work — that is, focusing on the differences between and changes within employees as they age.

For example, you might base your policies on the assumption that only Millennials care about work-life balance, autonomy, or flexible working hours. But when you consider a life-span perspective, you realize that any caregiver would find those policies attractive, irrespective of generation. Offering tailor-made policies isn’t just an inefficient use of resources, as some employees may not want them; it also ties up resources that would be highly valued by those who actually need them.



Staff work at Janeiro Digital in Boston in 2018. Play spaces that were designed to recruit workers in their twenties are out; low-key but tasteful furniture is in, as are areas set aside for quiet work and group collaboration. (Photo: Craig F. Walker/The Boston Globe via Getty Images)

**Consider societal changes when crafting policies.** Task- or work-environment-related changes must address larger societal trends and universal factors, such as pay transparency (employees want to lessen the gender pay gap) or better work-life integration (work isn't the only thing employees want to do with their time).

For example, many couples are choosing to delay having children or not carry children themselves. In response, Zomato — India's biggest food-delivery app — introduced a 26-week parental leave that applies to all employees, including surrogate or adoptive parents as well as same-sex parents. “The needs of our people are more specific to their life stages and the roles they play at work and at home, as compared to the generation they belong to,” Daminee Sawhney, the company’s vice president, human resources and operations, explained.

Naturally, such policies shouldn’t be created in a vacuum. Zomato considers a combination of its culture and the feedback it receives from

employees about what they expect from the organization in the long term. “We don’t rely on generational studies or consultants to guide us. Instead, we enable our people to operate from a space of accountability and trust and believe in continually assessing and abandoning practices that no longer serve us as a collective,” Sawhney added.

The rise in remote work is another example of a societal change that is valuable irrespective of someone’s generation. SAP in India designed its WFH policy in 2013 in response to employee proposals. The policy has evolved through the pandemic and has been honed to address the future of work.

“Pledge to Flex is an excellent example of how we have taken perspectives of employees representing various personas on what flexibility and hybrid work meant to them and has stood the test of time,” Shraddhanjali Rao, the company’s head of HR, told us. “Today, we have a playbook that respects individuality and empowers our employees to choose their way of hybrid working, keeping their teams and business context in mind.”

Like the shift to working from home, some societal changes will be easy to identify and difficult to ignore. Others will require paying more attention to how new governmental policies might impact workers in your industry or to what other organizations offer employees, such as fertility benefits or tuition reimbursement. Maintaining an open internal dialogue within company forums can help leaders to further identify the supports that are most valued by their workforce.

The above recommendations may not entirely rid your organization of generational biases. But they can help you understand when focusing on generational differences might not be helpful. Only then can you

begin building programs and processes that meaningfully support an age-diverse workforce.

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# Work in the Era of No Retirement

Longevity is an opportunity for companies — but only if they can overcome ageism. **by Susan Wilner Golden**

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Born in 1935, Masako Wakamiya is one of the world's oldest iPhone app developers, a trailblazer in making smartphones accessible for the elderly. (Photo: Kazuhiro NOGI/AFP via Getty Images)

**When you think of workers in their fifties and older, you might imagine people nearing retirement and out of place in the modern office, with little interest in learning new tools and technologies.**

You'd be wrong. Older workers aren't lame ducks or relics. The older segment of the workforce isn't actually one segment; the demographic includes many types of workers — with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and desires — that you can expect to see around the office, at the store, and even in manufacturing fields for a long time to come.

Nearly everywhere in the world, the population is skewing much older than ever before. People over 65 composed 5% of the world's population in 1950, but this percentage is expected to increase to 16% by 2050, according to data from [World Population Prospects: the 2019 Revision](#). In the United States alone, 10,000 people turn 65 every day, and the number of Americans ages 65 and older, which was about 13 million in 1950, is about 58 million today; by 2060, [nearly 95 million Americans](#) will be 65 and older. Life spans have increased sharply since the early 20th century, except for the tragic loss of life since early 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Today, a 65-year-old in good health can expect to live to nearly 90. Experts in longevity believe that kids born this century should prepare to live to 100.

Perhaps more important, *health spans* — a term used to describe the years one can live without requiring care — are getting longer, too. And because people stay healthier into their sixties, seventies, and even eighties, they are working for many more years than ever before. In fact, just two years from now, [nearly 25% of the workforce will be 55 and older](#). Some of these workers choose to work until later ages, while others keep working because they can't earn enough between the ages of 20 and 65 to support themselves if they live to be 90. The financial demands on someone who lives to be 90 are far greater than those experienced by someone who only lives to be 70.

People ages 55 and older are the [fastest-growing segment of the American workforce](#), yet they are wildly misunderstood. Persistent

myths and stereotypes, along with straight-up ageism, pervade how we talk about older workers.

We need to change the discourse.

Workers' longevity is not a problem but an opportunity. To benefit from these individuals' experience and energy, however, your organization must be "age ready" — which means building infrastructure and systems to support and engage them.

### **Ageism's Persistence**

Studies confirm that ageism is widespread in the workplace and the job market. During the Great Recession, for instance, older workers in particular were negatively affected: A larger percentage of those ages 55 and older experienced long-term unemployment compared to younger workers, they were displaced longer, and they were more likely to reenter the workforce at a lower salary than in their previous job.

There's more:

- More than nine in 10 older workers see discrimination against people in their age group as somewhat or very common.
- Three out of five older workers report that they have seen or experienced age discrimination in the workplace.
- One-third of those concerned about losing their job in the next year list age discrimination as either a major or minor reason they expect this to occur.
- Among job seekers, 44% of older job applicants say they have been asked for age-related information during the application or interview process.

- Only 3% of workers report that they have made a formal complaint of ageism to a supervisor, a human resources representative, another organization, or a government agency.
- Nearly six in 10 older workers strongly support strengthening laws to prevent age discrimination.

In a research paper on the topic, coauthors Ashley Martin, a faculty member at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, and Michael S. North of New York University describe ageism as the last acceptable *ism*. Researchers in the field have identified two common myths that contribute to ageism.

**Myth #1: Older workers are more costly and don't add value.** Part of this myth stems from a commonly held belief that salaries and benefits for older employees exceed those for younger employees. Another common perception is that experienced workers are less productive and add less value to the workplace.

In reality, older workers reduce costs for employers and add value in ways other workers do not. During the Covid-19 pandemic, for instance, tens of thousands of retired health care professionals returned to work in hospitals, with words like *experienced*, *wise*, *essential*, and *trusted* used to describe them. Their value can also be seen in employment consulting firm Mercer's research, which has found that older workers bring an extra level of emotional intelligence to the workplace; additionally, older workers reduce costs because they are less likely to leave voluntarily and have lower turnover rates on teams they supervise. Older workers are crucial to creating environments with knowledge sharing and mentoring, and studies suggest that their presence strengthens group cohesion, collaboration, and resiliency.

These workers also contribute to innovation. The longevity sector is the fastest-growing sector in the world, estimated at \$22 trillion globally and nearly \$8 trillion in the United States. In virtually every industry, companies need a strategy for catering to older customers, and older employees can play a role in conceptualizing and developing products and services and bringing them to the market. A change in strategy is already happening at companies such as Warby Parker, which started as a direct-to-consumer eyewear brand that appealed to young adults but generated massive growth when it entered the market for progressive lenses for older people. Warby Parker's pivot required the company to generate a strategy for the market, including hiring and consulting people in the target market. The company learned what longevity customers (that is, older adults) wanted — fashionable frames at affordable prices — which differed from common assumptions about what these customers wanted. In the longevity market, there's even a term to describe the poor product designs that are based on the misguided assumption that older adults don't care about fashion or visual appeal: *big, beige, and boring*.

**Myth #2: Older workers struggle with technology and new skills.** This belief is reinforced by some marketing campaigns for tech products, but the image of a doddering old person unable to work their phone is an ageist trope. Many older workers are fluent in technology, and the pandemic provoked a spike in digital skills acquisition among older adults, who, like all of us, were forced into a Zoom world. Working remotely may have inadvertently become a great equalizer as well, as all workers became more fluent in the technology needed to thrive in the emerging workplace.

Where skills gaps do still exist, they can be filled. The reality is not that experienced workers can't learn new skills; rather, they are less likely to have been taught or independently experimented with these

skills and technologies already, according to Mercer's research. While younger adults are more likely than older adults to be earlier adopters of technology, there has been an increase in the adoption of key technologies by those in the oldest age groups over the past decade. Most important, older adults *want* to learn new technologies, just like other generations.

Organizations should stop focusing on what older workers don't know and instead consider what upskilling and training they can offer to maximize workers' desire to learn and contribute. Companies such as BMW, Best Buy, Salesforce, and Google provide opportunities for employees of all ages to maintain digital literacy, and they have seen great uptake and results from older workers. AARP and Google are collaborating to help low-income workers over 50 — particularly women and people of color — improve their digital skills. The program is set to launch in eight states, with plans to scale it to a national level.

## The Longevity Future

Longevity experts like to say that these myth-busting efforts are “turning ageism into sageism.” These experts believe organizations should recognize, reward, and reap the value that older employees can contribute thanks to their life experiences and knowledge. Companies should embrace this point of view in their boardrooms, workforce, and advertising and marketing campaigns. Given the unprecedented number of older adults who will be both employees and consumers in the coming years, it would be foolish not to.



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# I Was a Manager in an Ageist Workplace

Lessons on how to lead when stereotypes run rampant.

by Nicole D. Smith

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**A few years back, I decided to** chat with one of my team members, a man in his late fifties. I had recently started a new position as a manager — was just a few weeks on the job — and I wanted to see how people were adjusting to the change.

We found a quiet room and started discussing weekend plans and work projects.



As the conversation continued, I found a moment to bring up something I'd been thinking about.



“OK,” my employee replied, slightly suspicious yet curious. During my short time leading the team, I’d learned he was admired for both his talent and his tenure. So, getting his buy-in could mean others would be open to my idea.

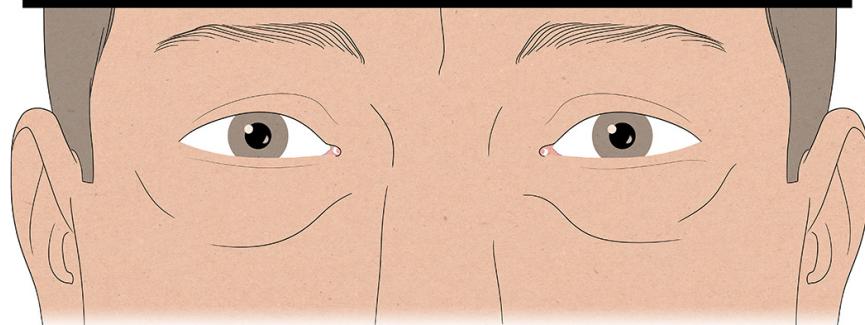


They seem to be smart and innovative. I think they could really help our work and take us to the next level.



He was silent, which made me a little uncomfortable. But I pressed on, explaining what the collaboration could mean — like learning new tools and fostering the support of a creative, visible group.

But as I outlined my vision of partnering with coworkers who were mostly in their twenties, he was less than enthusiastic. In fact, for a moment I thought I saw worry in his eyes.



After what seemed like forever, he awkwardly shifted his body.



Anuj Shrestha

This was the first of numerous concerning conversations I had over the next several days. I discovered that most of my team members — people in their fifties and sixties, many cherished contributors to our organization — had no desire to work with “those young people on the other side of the room.”

I also learned I was in a culture that normalized ageist behavior — one where making surface-level assumptions about younger colleagues was acceptable. And it went both ways: Younger employees often disparaged older colleagues’ technical skills and willingness to learn. They lamented, publicly and privately, that their knowledge, insight, and skills weren’t appreciated and that they were being obstructed from developing and advancing.

After I required my team to work on projects with younger coworkers, eventually they began to collaborate with the digital team openly and often. But this was the first time I’d worked in an organization where people perceived each other’s value, to some degree, in terms of their age rather than their contribution, commitment, and potential.

After this experience and several others, I continued to wonder about ageism and how it affects the workplace. And I haven't stopped asking questions: How do we define and identify ageism at work? What can managers do about it? And what are the potential consequences if they do nothing?

## What Ageism Is

At its core, ageism is discrimination based on age. In the United States, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act forbids it against people who are 40 or older. The World Health Organization (WHO) divides ageism into several layers: how we think (stereotypes), how we feel (prejudices), and how we act toward others or even ourselves (discrimination) because of age. Taken together, the WHO reports, those types of behaviors can affect physical and mental health and can even shorten people's lives by up to seven and a half years.

Researcher Justyna Stypińska and sociologist Konrad Turek conducted an extensive study that shows ageist behaviors at work can take two forms: *hard* and *soft*. Hard age discrimination is illegal or prohibited behaviors, such as firing, demoting, or severely harassing someone because of age. Soft discrimination, like an off-color joke or comment, isn't necessarily illegal and mostly occurs in interpersonal interactions. The soft form is the more common one, and women experience it more often than men. Since soft discrimination is mostly rooted in stereotypes, it can lead to people not valuing coworkers' contribution and perspectives and even negatively assessing their skill sets.

The primary victims of ageist work cultures tend to be at the poles — the youngest and oldest workers. Members of the first group are seen as inexperienced and having less to offer, which can make it difficult for them to find employment or negotiate with hiring managers for fair wages. Meanwhile, 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. When ageism is rampant, older workers might be seen not only in a negative light but also as lower status than even very young peers, despite having lower turnover and high-rated job performance.

People often equate generation with age. But when I talked to Peter Cappelli, a professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, he told me age and generation are not exactly the same. A generation is created when people experience something so distinctive and powerful that it leaves a unique impression on you and your cohort. Age has more to do with life stages, such as starting a career, having children, or preparing for retirement.

In the workplace 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. Experts say that if managers allow ageist behaviors to persist, employee job satisfaction, engagement, and commitment all decline.

### How to Identify Ageism at Work

According to Cappelli, ageism surfaces in different ways, starting with hiring.

“You can see it in the recruiting side,” he told me, even in job descriptions and interviews. There are key words typically associated with youth, such as *new ideas* and *fresh perspective*, as well as more positive ways of saying “older,” like *experienced*. If hiring managers require an applicant to list a grade point average, consciously or not they’re targeting people in a certain stage of life — typically those within a few years of graduation. Look, too, at how the company presents itself

through pictures on its website, marketing materials, and events. “If all you see are really young people, that tells you something,” Cappelli said.

Ageism also appears in HR practices and management decisions: promotions, terminations, training, leadership development, and project assignments. The types of employees who are groomed for and elevated to important roles may convey messages about age. Is it the case, for instance, that younger workers get all the promotions for digital-focused jobs?

Cappelli says that even office activities can be red flags. Offering foosball tournaments and unlimited beer after hours, for example, may attract workers of some age groups and not others.

To help identify ageism, managers can collect data. Qualitative data from one-on-one, informal conversations with employees can help unearth concerns that might have gone unnoticed. “Stay interviews” provide insight into how people feel before they decide to leave or retire. Remember to ask open-ended questions like *What can I do to support you?* and *What motivates (or demotivates) you?*

You can also use more-formal methods, such as employee surveys, to collect quantitative data. And look for age patterns in HR’s people analytics about who goes and who stays.

### **Combating Ageism at Work**

To combat ageism, Cappelli encourages managers to start with something simple, like how the company depicts employees visually. For example, ensure that in-office and public-facing images include people of all age groups.

The harder work is in changing behaviors: what people say, do, encourage, and accept. It all comes down to understanding. Lindsey Pollak, author of the book *The Remix: How to Lead and Succeed in the Multigenerational Workplace*, says managers can ignite change by creating multigenerational committees and seating arrangements. “What you tend to see in an office is all the executives of one age sit in one place, all the young people are in the bullpen, and all the middle managers are elsewhere. And I think that should be abolished.” She also says managers must be deliberate in getting to know employees of all ages — and getting them to know one another.

Leaders don’t have to let ageism quietly simmer, either. To spark change, start with language. Consider the comments, jokes, or labels people use to describe younger and older employees and whether they are microaggressions or are biased or insensitive. Overt terms, such as “old-timer” and “youngster,” should be eradicated, as should euphemisms like “seasoned” and “newbie.” Needless references to someone’s age set the stage for conflict. Think, too, about what your work culture values. Studies show organizations commonly use reward systems to shape norms. In your company, are managers who hire up-and-comers as celebrated as those who recruit established stars? Do leaders equally laud the skills of digital natives and the institutional knowledge of older workers? Both are needed for an organization to thrive.

Younger workers (and hiring managers of all ages) should be encouraged to think about the assets that older workers bring to the table: experience, social skills, the ability to work independently. Similarly, older workers should understand what younger peers can offer, such as being tech savvy and valuing diversity.

Finally, recruiting strategies should yield a diverse group of people, including older and younger candidates. Advertise with organizations that have members 55 and older as well as on job boards for college students and other relevant, frequently visited employment sites.

### What I Learned

I still think about when I wanted to bring that group of older employees together with the younger digital team.

As a manager, I had to understand how ageist ideas were affecting our work — and then be brave enough to change the culture and create an environment where everyone, however young or old, felt comfortable. Knowing this problem wasn't something I could tackle on my own, I asked other managers to have their teams work on projects with my direct reports; to set a good example, we got in the trenches with them on those collaborations.

I also built a mixed-age team by hiring people over 60, under 30, and all ages in between; helping young and older workers see their ideas through and become more visible in the organization; offering training in new technologies to my team members; and promoting one of my oldest employees.

Despite the initial apprehension, my team and several others in the office eventually learned to work together without worrying about age. Through the years, we became more inclusive and creative. We challenged the status quo, and in some ways we became the personification of the adage "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." Our differences helped us learn, and we made each other better.

Today, I challenge managers in my professional network to see the value in mixed-age teams. And I'm asking you to help all employees — from recent college graduates to those nearing retirement — see how pivotal their contributions are to your outcomes and organization.



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