

An age-old problem:

What can we do to tackle ageism in PR?



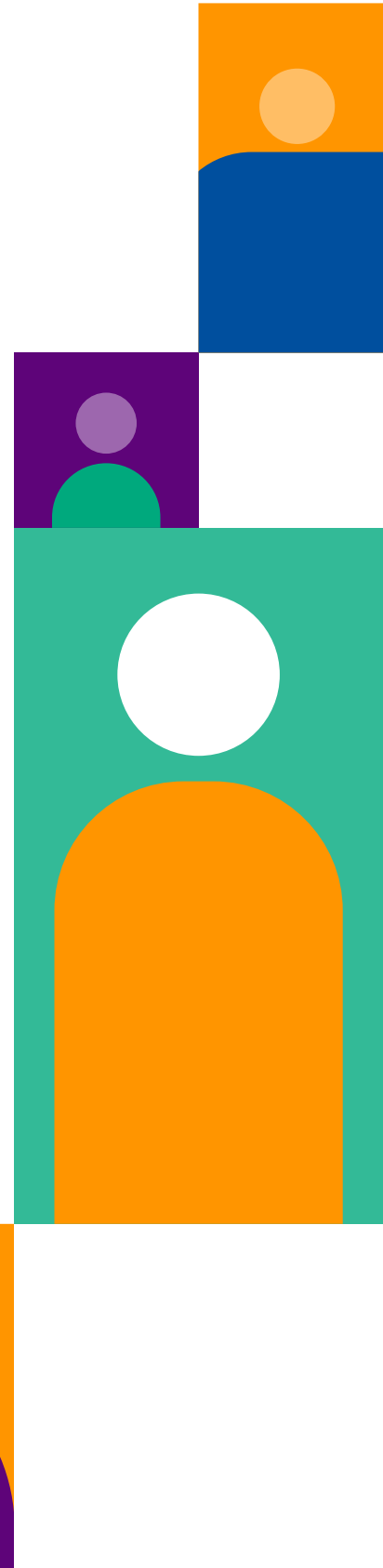
by
Jenny Manchester MCIPR
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Introduction

The public relations (PR) industry is often celebrated for its dynamism, creativity, and adaptability.

Yet, beneath this progressive veneer lies a persistent and underexamined issue: ageism. The UK workforce is aging and careers now extend well into later life: the employment rate for people aged 50-64 overall has risen to 71.2% from 68% a few years ago. However, the PR sector continues to reflect a disproportionately youthful demographic, particularly in agency settings. This imbalance raises critical questions about inclusivity, representation, and the long-term sustainability of talent in the profession. Recent research reveals a troubling pattern. The CIPR-funded 'Missing Women Study'¹ by Socially Mobile highlights the disappearance of thousands of mid-career women from PR roles, driven by systemic barriers such as inflexible working conditions, a male-dominated leadership culture, and the undervaluing of strategic communications work. Complementing this, Women in PR's 'Lost in the Industry, Found in Their Prime: Ageism Report' (2025)² shows how older women face compounded discrimination, often being sidelined despite their experience and expertise.

This research aims to add qualitative research to these studies to build specific actions or areas of action that the industry, organisations, and individuals can take to tackle ageism in PR.



This report presents findings from a qualitative research study exploring the lived experiences of ageism among PR professionals. The study draws on 44 semi-structured interviews with individuals across a range of roles, sectors, and career stages to investigate how age-related bias manifests in workplace culture, recruitment and retention practices, and attitudes towards older workers. Participants shared candid reflections on their career trajectories, perceptions of industry norms, and the barriers they have encountered as they have aged within the profession.

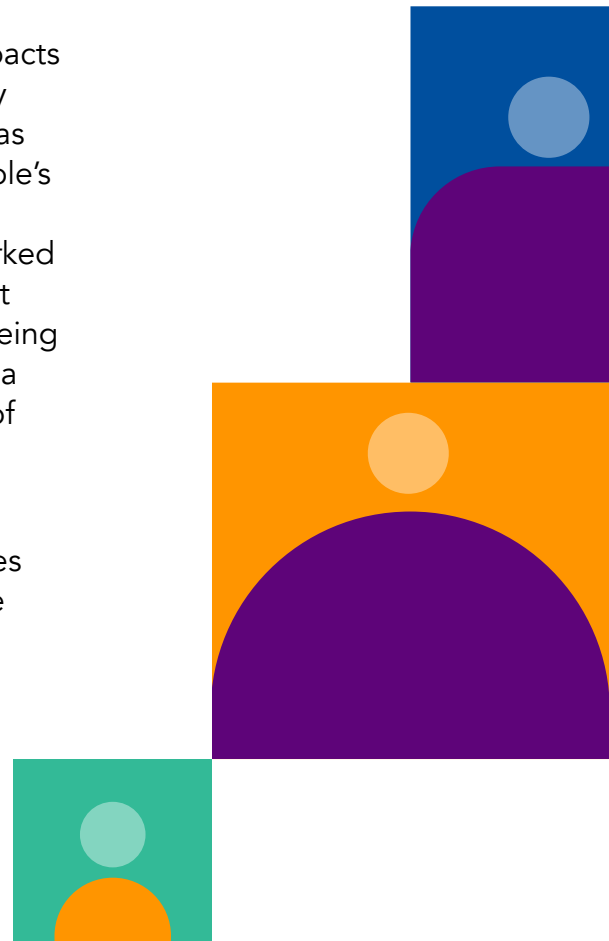
The research was conducted in collaboration with the CIPR to inform future policy, practice, and advocacy. It aims to amplify the voices of experienced professionals, explore attitudes to ageing and ageism in PR, and offer practical recommendations for creating a more age-inclusive industry.

By centring the perspectives of those directly affected, this report contributes to a growing body of work that calls for a more equitable and diverse PR landscape that values everyone's skills, regardless of their age.

Why do we need to tackle ageism in PR?

The central tenet of this research is that ageism negatively impacts people's lives, the organisations they work for, and the industry they are part of. Based on the testimony of those interviewed as part of this report and previous research, ageism impacts people's lives. The interviewees felt isolated, frustrated, angry and sad; they no longer felt welcome in an industry where they had worked for many years, simply because of their age. We also know that ageism at work influences people's mental and physical well-being (Centre for Ageing Better, 2023)³. It is also recognised that, as a result of intersectionality, ageism can exacerbate other forms of discrimination, e.g. gender discrimination.

While research in this area is limited, we do know that intergenerational and age-inclusive teams do better: businesses with a 10% higher share of workers aged 50+ compared to the average are 1.1% more productive (OECD, 2025)⁴.



Literature Review: Ageism in the UK PR Industry

Introduction

Ageism in the UK PR industry has become an increasingly pressing issue, particularly as the workforce ages and professionals seek longer, more sustainable careers. Despite the sector's emphasis on innovation and communication, it is perceived as being disproportionately youth-oriented, especially in agency settings. This literature review synthesises key findings from recent UK-based research, including the CIPR-funded Socially Mobile 'Missing Women Study' the 'Break the Silence' campaign⁶, Women in PR initiatives, and the CIPR 'State of the Profession 2024' report. It critically evaluates the methodologies and conclusions of these studies, identifies patterns and gaps, and presents a cohesive understanding of the current state of knowledge on ageism in PR.

Representation and Visibility of Older Professionals

The CIPR's PR Population Report (2024)⁵ highlights that only 21% of PR professionals are over the age of 50, a figure significantly lower than in other sectors such as manufacturing. This underrepresentation is particularly stark for women, who face compounded challenges due to age and gender biases. Women in PR's '40 Over 40 Power List'² campaign aims to counteract this invisibility by celebrating experienced professionals, yet the need for such initiatives underscores the systemic nature of the issue.

Workplace Culture and Age Bias

Several studies, including 'Break the Silence', reveal that PR agency culture often prioritises what it perceives as youth, speed, and trend-savviness over experience and strategic insight. Older professionals report being stereotyped as less creative or adaptable, despite evidence to the contrary. The 'State of the Profession 2024' survey found that 62% of respondents over 45 felt their age negatively impacted their career progression. This cultural bias is reinforced by award schemes such as '30 Under 30', which implicitly equate success with youth.

62% of respondents over 45 felt their age negatively impacted their career progression

Recruitment and Career Progression

Recruitment practices in PR often reflect implicit age bias. Job adverts frequently use coded language such as 'rockstar' or 'digital native', which signals a preference for younger candidates. The 'Missing Women Study' notes that older applicants are often overlooked for roles requiring innovation or digital skills, despite having relevant experience. Women in PR's research further indicates that women over 45 are significantly less likely to be promoted, with many reporting being passed over in favour of younger, less experienced colleagues.

Gendered Dimensions of Ageism

Ageism in PR is deeply gendered. Women in PR's studies show that women face a double bind: they are expected to prove their competence repeatedly, while men are often promoted based on potential. The 'Break the Silence' campaign reveals how older women are frequently pigeonholed into support roles or sidelined from leadership opportunities.

Alongside the time taken out by women due to caring responsibilities, this pattern is thought to contribute to the attrition of experienced female professionals from the industry, particularly in agency settings.

Organisational Structures and Flexibility

The literature repeatedly points to a lack of flexible working arrangements as a barrier to the retention of older professionals. The 'State of the Profession 2024'⁵ report found that only 28% of PR agencies offer formal flexible working policies. In contrast, in-house roles are often perceived as more accommodating, with better human resources (HR) infrastructure and support for caring responsibilities. This disparity contributes to the migration of older professionals from agency to in-house roles.



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Methodological Strengths and Weaknesses

The studies reviewed employ a mix of quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, offering both breadth and depth. The CIPR's large-scale surveys, including the 'Missing Women Study' provide valuable statistical insights, while Women in PR's campaigns offer rich narrative data. However, research tracking career trajectories over time is lacking.

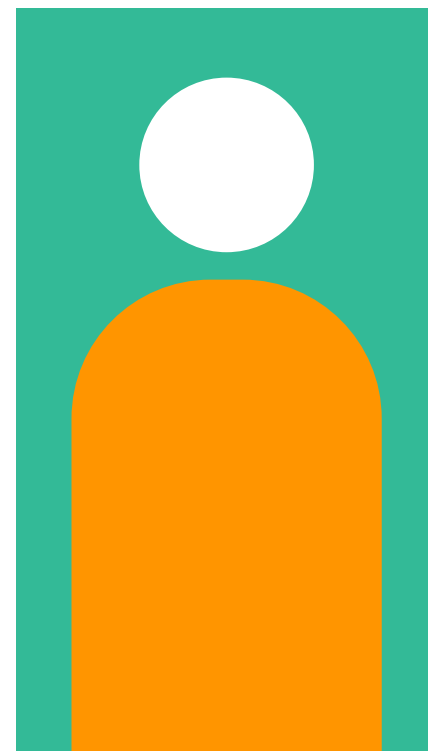
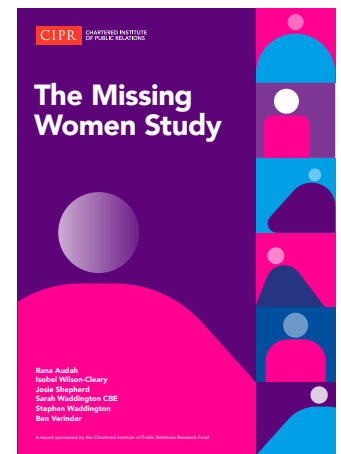
Additionally, most studies focus on gender and age in isolation, with limited exploration of intersectionality (e.g., race, disability, socioeconomic background).

Gaps and Future Research Directions

The need is clear for more intersectional research that considers how ageism interacts with other forms of discrimination. Future studies should also examine the impact of age-inclusive policies on organisational performance and employee well-being, which would help identify messages and activities encouraging employers to act and move towards a more age-inclusive culture. Moreover, comparative research between agency and in-house environments could yield actionable insights for improving retention and progression pathways.

Summary

The existing literature paints a consistent picture of ageism in the UK PR industry, particularly in agency settings. Older professionals, especially women, face cultural and structural barriers that limit their career progression and visibility. While initiatives like Women in PR's campaigns and the CIPR's reports have raised awareness of the issue, systemic change remains limited. Addressing ageism in PR needs a multifaceted approach, including policy reform, cultural change, and more inclusive recruitment and retention practices.



Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to explore experiences and perceptions of ageism in the PR industry. The approach was chosen to allow in-depth exploration of personal narratives, contextual factors, and nuanced attitudes.

Participant Recruitment

The sample size was 44 participants who responded to various callouts on social media for people who had experienced ageism or had reflections on ageism in PR. Participants were asked if they were happy to speak about their experiences or reflections as individuals working in PR, their experience as an employer, or both perspectives.

Although participants were self-selecting, targeted callouts through various diversity networks ensured the sample included professionals across age groups (45+), different genders, work settings (in-house/consultancy), and seniority levels.

Sample

A total of 27 interviewees wanted to discuss their experiences working in PR over the age of 45.

- 6 of these 27 identified themselves as coming from a minority ethnic background.
- 20 were women.
- 7 were men.
- 15 wanted to talk about their experiences as employers and their perspectives on ageism in PR.

Two representatives from the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) Equity and Inclusion Board and the CIPR, respectively, were also interviewed to understand the professional bodies' perspectives and views on ageism in PR.



Participants represented various sectors with a mixture of in-house and consultancy. Sectors represented included fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), charity, membership organisations, and lifestyle/consumer.

Process

Semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded on Microsoft Teams or by telephone. Informed consent was obtained from all parties, and names and identifying details were anonymised, except for the interviews with the professional bodies, where interviewees were clear that they were speaking on behalf of the PRCA/CIPR.

Data storage: Secure, encrypted storage in compliance with GDPR.

Voluntary participation: Participants could withdraw at any time without consequence.

The interviews were scheduled to last around 30 minutes. Interview guides were created for the key areas of questions, depending on whether the participant was answering as an individual, an employer or both.

The topic areas included:

- career trajectory and current role.
- experiences of working in PR as an older PR professional, including any experience of age-related bias.
- perceptions of industry culture.
- HR practices and career development.
- attitudes towards older professionals.
- recommendations for change.

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.



Analysis

Thematic analysis using the approach described by Braun & Clarke (2006)⁷ was employed to analyse the data.

This included familiarisation with data by reading and re-reading transcripts, coding transcripts, developing and labelling themes and subthemes by combining initial codes, re-checking them against the original set of data, and making final revisions to labels and content.



Research Findings



Research Findings

Some clear themes arose from the interviews with participants across the industry.

Theme 1: Culture

i) Society

Participants who spoke about their experiences of ageism in PR highlighted that the PR industry reflects our wider society, specifically how the culture of our society values the contribution of older people:

"I think society has a huge role to play in how we view older workers. There's this pervasive idea that once you hit a certain age, you're no longer valuable or capable."

"Society's obsession with youth is really damaging. It affects how we see ourselves and how others see us, especially in professional settings."

"The way society treats older people is a reflection of our values. We need to start valuing experience and wisdom more."



In contrast, one participant who is an HR lead for her agency reflected that, in her opinion, ageism is not a societal issue:

“The problem for me as an HR professional is that the talent pool reflects wider society. People out there don’t think PR is for them when they reach a certain age, so we simply don’t get many older people applying for roles. Also, it is a matter of fact that once people get older, their priorities change, and many people, once they get to a certain level, realise they want the freedom of freelancing. That isn’t a problem. Let’s not make it one.”

ii) PR Industry

“There’s a few of us older people, and yet we’re not very visible... I think that’s across the PR industry in total... it always tends to be the younger person.”

The speaker contrasts agency culture with in-house environments:

“The culture in agencies... is much more ageist in the way that you have nowhere to go once you reach a certain level... In-house, you can stay at that level and be quite comfortable.”

People across the industry perceived a stereotypical underestimation of older PR professionals’ digital skills:

“The industry puts a cultural emphasis on youth, trendiness, and digital fluency, so TikTok, flash mobs, rather than digital strategy, and this, of course, can marginalise any of us who are older professionals.”

“Just because I am older, people don’t expect me to have any social or, I guess, digital skills... I think digital PR has made ageism in our industry so much worse.”

Alastair McCapra, CEO at the CIPR noted that AI had the potential to worsen the divide between generations in the industry with middle managers (most likely to be middle-aged) facing the brunt:

“It seems to me that PR is more likely to be like the tech sector than the legal, and we will have an increasingly divided workplace. The junior level will be task focused and will use AI a lot. The value of seniors to the organisation will no longer be so much in their ability to perform more sophisticated tasks, as in their ability to bring in fee income (in an agency) or deal with senior people in other teams/organisations. The middle levels will get knocked out.”

People also felt that there was a perception across the PR industry that, as an older professional, you can only be seen as a “safe pair of hands”:

“And that’s it: once you hit 50, you will always just be seen as the ‘safe pair of hands’ candidate. I am not saying I am not, but I really have to go to interviews really determined to prove that I can also be creative and innovative. You have to change people’s perception as soon as they see you online or in an interview.”

“I am so tired of the industry consensus that your age determines your level of creativity. I can’t stop thinking that in any other industry, we don’t penalise people for being a certain age. In fact, in, say, architecture, there doesn’t seem to be this same culture that, as soon as you reach a certain age, you are perceived as less creative.”



i) Organisational culture

The research highlights key aspects of organisational culture in the PR industry. One interviewee describes feeling like *“the grandma in the room,”* especially in sectors like FMCG, entertainment, and hospitality. This suggests a cultural emphasis on youth, trendiness, and digital fluency, which can marginalise older professionals. The interviewee also notes a shift in the industry generally from *“strategic thinking”* to *“fun, tactical”* campaigns, which may undervalue the depth of experience and strategic insight that older professionals bring.

Another significant issue is the cultural disconnect and sense of belonging. The metaphor of being an *“avocado”* with a narrow window of being *“just right”* captures the perceived age-related shelf life in PR. Gendered ageism is also prevalent, with women who were interviewed about their experiences highlighting that they felt that older men in the industry were more likely to be celebrated.

Women, on the other hand, face compounded challenges, especially if they have taken time out for caregiving.

Men also responded to the callout for interviewees, comprising nearly a third of individual responses and raising issues similar to those raised by women. However, given the high number of women working in PR, the issues raised by this and other large-scale research are disproportionately faced by women. It is not possible to identify specific quantifiable differences between the way men and women experienced and reacted to their experiences of ageism in PR. However, several interesting themes emerged which would be worth exploring in further research. For example, the men who were interviewed around their individual experiences all conveyed concern and anger at the system, at the industry that enabled the ageism they had experienced. Female participants also articulated these sentiments, but additionally conveyed feelings of sadness and disappointment at being ‘let down’ by both their specific employers and the broader industry. A number of women became visibly upset during the interviews:

“Having worked so hard for so long in what can be a brutal world, I am not so resilient - being treated like this makes me feel all the time, what can I do to change people’s minds about my age? What magical skill do I need, so that my age doesn’t come into the conversation?”

"It's no surprise that I am being faced with redundancy as the oldest person on the team, but I can't help feeling so sad that this is how my agency assessed me, discounting all the loyalty I have given... (no matter what they say)"

A number of interviews called out a lack of visible role models who reflect their career stage:

"You never see an older PR professional - say over 50 - on the 'Work with Us' page on a website. Never."

Another interviewee describes a pervasive assumption that older professionals must either be in top leadership or freelance roles. This reflects a cultural rigidity in PR that fails to accommodate diverse career aspirations among older professionals.

They critique the agency model's fixation on hierarchical progression, noting that it marginalises older professionals who seek lateral or flexible roles:

"I was excluded from meetings. I wasn't invited to drinks after work... people just assumed that I wouldn't want to go."

In terms of freelance roles, one professional noticed the need for the industry to value the expertise that freelancers bring to the profession:

"Often older [than people in-house] they provide a level of expertise and flexibility which allows employers to tap into the value of older professionals."



Theme 2: HR Processes and Structures

The research identifies several issues within HR processes and structures.

i) Recruitment

Recruitment and progression are major concerns, with participants reporting that they felt older applicants were largely absent from recruitment pipelines, particularly at mid to senior levels. Even senior roles are increasingly filled by younger candidates, suggesting systemic age bias in hiring.

An interviewee describes how their extensive experience is often undervalued, with people feeling that their CV was being auto-rejected due to being “too experienced”:

“I’ve been told by a couple of recruiters... to somehow condense all my skills and experience... [they say] employers don’t want to see all of that.”

“I have come second three times...and then I find out later on, normally via LinkedIn... the person that got the job is at least 15 years younger.”

“HR managers need to make more of a level playing field... I just don’t get it.”

“It’s incredible that HR departments don’t realise... of course you’re going to find out who got the job.”

“I’ve seen so many jobs asking for ‘bundles of energy’... You know what they’re saying: they don’t want older people.”

The employers' perspective on the challenge of recruiting and retaining age-inclusive teams was limited. Some felt there was little more they could do beyond the existing diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) recruitment policies.

As one HR manager said:

"It is about creating the widest pool of talent and skills, through our existing advertising and networks."

Interviewees speaking as employers sometimes felt a lack of support in this area:

"I sometimes get blinded by the sheer number of DEI schemes. It is clear that in some areas the industry has a problem, but what we really need is practical support and direction from professionals, and by this I mean the CIPR or PRCA to help."

The CEO of a smaller agency commented:

"I do look around and see fewer and fewer teams made up by people of all ages. Is it a problem? I mean it is likely that more and more people, once they get to a certain level, will want to go freelance to help them manage their caring responsibilities. And that's ok."

The feedback from candidates was that, in reality, the existing recruitment practices they faced when applying for new roles in PR agencies and in-house were complicit in cementing age bias in recruitment:

"I have tried. But they use the same old tired networks, the same application processes, which means deleting half your experience to fit in the boxes."

They critique vague feedback on applications that masks age bias:

"The feedback I got was that the other candidate had more chemistry with the similarly-aged MD ... When you say 'chemistry', what you are really saying is cultural fit and ageism."

ii) Skills and Career Path

One interviewee described a "ceiling" in career progression, where staying at a certain level is interpreted as a lack of ambition, especially under new leadership that they perceived as prizing youth and dynamism. According to this participant, "dynamism" was a term used by leadership in this PR agency and is often associated more widely with youth. This theme was specifically highlighted by professionals in agencies and in-house; they wanted to remain at their level, but they felt this was viewed negatively by more senior people.

"I know I have value in a PR team... It's so unbelievable that that value isn't recognised."

Another interviewee's experience illustrates how older professionals are often excluded from stable employment. They critique how cost is used to justify exclusion from senior roles, suggesting that fractional roles and flexible contracts were seen as viable alternatives that could retain senior talent without inflating budgets. One interviewee also highlighted how freelance and consultancy paths were not equally accessible, underscoring the need for structural reform within organisations to support older professionals who lack financial safety nets or are in a single household.

Training and development opportunities are also unevenly distributed. While junior staff have *“training courses coming out of your ears,”* senior staff, where most older workers sit, are *“left to your own devices”*.

None of the interview participants directly highlighted any training they had received. In fact, despite being expected to train others, one participant found this was no guarantee of receiving training themselves:

“I can’t remember the last time I had training. I’m expected to provide the training to more junior members of the team, but no one ever gives me any training or support.”

The lack of training for older PR professionals was not only mentioned by people currently working in agencies, but in-house as well.

One participant repeatedly requested training but was denied:

“I did ask for some training support... and I was turned down... I thought that my age played a part in that.”

“I haven’t been offered any training opportunities in the last three or four years... even though I’ve gone to management.”

Mentoring exists, but when mentioned by interviewees, it is largely one-directional (older to younger), with little reciprocal investment in the development of senior staff.

iii) Flexible Working

Flexible working was important to participants in terms of supporting them at work as they grew older. Participants’ reasons included *“caring for frail parents”*, *“supporting a partner with mental health issues”* and *“struggling with managing work with the menopause symptoms”*. Some issues, however, involved access, people feeling able to work flexibly as they grow older, and signalled a need for a different kind of flexible working than required by those in earlier stages of their career or other phases of life:

"Flexible working is ridiculously gendered and ageist... focused around the needs of younger people... the only people that have ever understood my request... are managers who are the same age as me or older."

One interviewee contrasts the support offered to younger parents with the lack of accommodation when looking for a flexible working arrangement as an older PR professional:

"Everybody went on maternity leave and came back on three days a week - that was allowed... but what I needed was just some flexibility... and it was a real no."

"It was just felt that they couldn't allow me the flexibility of working shorter days in the office ... but they managed to for younger people."

The interviewee highlights how flexible working is perceived as a privilege rather than a standard, especially for older employees:

"Flexible working is quite the norm in most organisations. And I think also the flexible working you need is different in your 50s than it is in your 30s."

"There's a real lack of flexible working... I'm expected to be at my desk at 9:15 and there till 4:45."

"I put in a flexible working request... I didn't get it... It almost got to the case of me walking out."

The participant highlights the need for more flexible work structures:

"I've tried to ask for flexibility, but it is difficult... employers need to meet us halfway."

The participant notes disparities in flexible working opportunities:

"In my organisation... we offer all sorts of flexibility... agencies are still notoriously poor at that, but the hidden expectation is that you are lucky, you need to really appreciate it and be grateful."

An HR manager was frustrated by the response of older workers concerning flexible working:

"I do notice and sometimes feel frustrated by older PR professionals who complain about a lack of flexible working. Why don't they just ask for it? Younger PR professionals do; the policy is there and available to everyone."

A CEO of a mid-sized organisation commented:

"I often see a gap between younger people and older people's request for flexible working in that older colleagues feel it is harder to ask for it. I am not sure why."

Retention and exit pathways are another issue, with respondents feeling that they were "aged out" of agencies and pushed into freelance work, not always by choice, but due to a lack of viable senior roles. One interviewee expressed concern that older workers are subtly nudged towards roles they do not want or are seen as "pasture-ready," which undermines morale, retention, and their confidence in their abilities.

Theme 3: Attitudes Towards Older PR Professionals

i) Issues between colleagues

Within organisations, the research reveals pervasive negative attitudes towards older PR professionals. Subtle exclusion and stereotyping are common with participants, with one interviewee recounting microaggressions such as jokes about bedtimes or cultural references they “*probably won’t get*”. These jokes, while framed as humour, reinforce exclusion. One of the interviewees avoids client meetings to allow younger colleagues to build rapport, suggesting internalised ageism and a belief that clients prefer youth.

Despite their extensive experience, participants pointed to the feeling of being defined by their age by comments from colleagues, for example:

“I get, like, comments about my age on a daily basis. I’ve been called grandma twice in staff meetings.”



"Any sort of social interaction in the office, my age comes up... I've been called, like, the mum in the office."

"It was ok to be Black and raise genuine issues at work, but I felt once I got into my late 40s, I felt eyes rolling and people thinking, here she goes again."

Another interviewee describes being excluded from meetings and campaigns:

"It was being left out of key meetings... not consulted, but other people were who happened to be younger."

Other participants made similar comments:

"Somebody made a Dad joke at one of our town hall meetings about me, and that really upset me."

"I've never been invited out once. And obviously, I'm the only freelancer who's 15 years older."

"I often get people making ageist comments or commenting on my age. They say, 'I can't believe you're this old' or 'How does it feel to be this old?'"

One interviewee describes being perceived as someone who, due to their age, is seen as “*part of the furniture*” rather than a strategic leader. *“I was very much seen as... the person who sort of gets things done, part of the furniture.”*

They advocate for a return to valuing experience over the “cool factor,” and for more visible celebration of older professionals in industry media and leadership.

The lack of visibility and value for older PR professionals can also create tension between generations of PR professionals. For example, some interviewees were in danger of making assumptions about younger PR professionals:

“My boss knows she can hand stuff over to me and not worry like she would with younger PRs... she trusts me because I have maturity and ability. Younger PRs just don’t have it in the same way.”

Employers also noticed a difference between older and younger PR professionals based on their experience. They felt that it was getting worse, particularly as more older PR professionals left the industry and went freelance:

“I see far fewer teams made up of older and younger PR professionals across the industry, which of course has an impact in that it cements differences in working styles... but it also means that you don’t get that synergy from different ideas and ways of getting things done. You get more and more conflict. It can be exhausting.”

ii) Line manager

One of the themes that prompted the most engagement was the role of the line manager in either supporting older PR professionals or cementing an ageist culture.

Respondents had mixed feelings about their line managers' roles in addressing ageism. While some found their managers helpful in challenging ageism, others had the opposite experience. Regardless of their views, respondents consistently evaluated their managers through an age lens, highlighting our tendency to focus on age:

"The only people who have ever understood my request for flexible working are managers who are the same age as me or older."

"My manager was 20 years younger and was absolutely useless... very threatened by me... he couldn't get his head round a consultant doing a communications manager role."

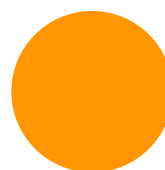
"My manager's got no idea that the way he spoke to me reinforced that age bias."

iii) Self-directed ageism

Interviewees reflected on their internal, self-directed ageism, which may have been driven by society or by experiences that influenced how they approached opportunities in PR:

"Being managed out... has had a massive impact on my confidence... I approach job interviews expecting to see people's faces fall when they see me."

"Why would you want to go to a party where you're not invited?"



Discussion

To effectively tackle ageism in the PR industry, it is essential to understand the multifaceted nature of the issue discussed in the literature review and findings and to acknowledge that the research question **What can we do to tackle ageism in PR?** requires a multifaceted answer. Ageism in PR manifests in various forms, including cultural biases, recruitment practices, career progression barriers, and workplace attitudes, and addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that involves cultural shifts, policy reforms, and practical interventions and commitment from a variety of organisations and people, including professional bodies, individuals, and employers.

Cultural Shifts

The theme of the impact of culture on ageism in PR emerged in this research and was linked to other areas of the findings, for example, the role of HR. This is supported by the CIPR-funded 'Missing Women Study' by Socially Mobile.

These findings and those of other research show that older professionals in the PR industry feel less valued than their younger counterparts, as demonstrated by the age-based comments they heard and a lack of visibility due to their age, which translates into fewer opportunities for career progression and development.

To counteract this, it is crucial to foster, through individuals, employers and PR industry leaders, a genuine cultural shift that celebrates experience and diversifies role models. Promoting inclusive networks and mentorship programmes that encourage reciprocal investment in the development of both junior and senior staff can help bridge the generational gap.

A thread running through this theme of culture was the importance of valuing the experience of older PR professionals, with some participants finding that their contributions and experiences were simply not recognised. Examples of age bias included being asked to shorten their CVs, not being considered for promotion, and even being "shuffled out towards freelance work".

The literature review highlights that the CIPR PR Population Report (2024) found that only 21% of PR professionals are over the age of 50, significantly lower than in other sectors. This underrepresentation is particularly stark for women, who face compounded challenges due to age and gender biases. Women in PR's '40 Over 40 Power List' campaign aims to counteract this invisibility by celebrating experienced professionals, yet the need for such initiatives underscores the systemic nature of the issue.

Inclusive Recruitment and Training

Recruitment practices in PR often reflect implicit age bias, with job adverts frequently using coded language that signals a preference for younger candidates. Implementing more inclusive recruitment practices that actively seek to diversify the age profile of candidates is essential. Additionally, providing training and development opportunities for employees at all career stages, with a focus on enhancing the skills and knowledge of senior staff, can help address the lack of training opportunities for older professionals.

Age-related assumptions were often subtle but persistent, influencing hiring decisions and internal advancement. This finding aligns with the research, where participants described being viewed as “safe pairs of hands” but not as innovative or creative. The findings indicate that employers in the industry require support to help them navigate and implement changes that support a more age-inclusive approach to recruitment and retention within broader DEI strategies. One respondent talked about a plethora of initiatives in this area that, however, were not focused on the specific challenges faced by HR managers in PR (as opposed to other sectors).

In an industry without a single route into the profession, a mandatory qualification, or a continuing professional development (CPD) process, it is difficult for potential employers to identify the difference between two candidates who profess skills and expertise, in media relations, for example, but have different levels of experience. The findings of this research demonstrate that recruiters may choose what they believe to be the most cost-effective option without fully understanding the meaning of the different levels of experience for their organisation.

Recognition and Appreciation

The findings indicate that people are not being valued. Promoting a culture of respect and appreciation for the diverse experiences and skills that older workers bring is vital. Creating opportunities for older professionals to showcase their expertise and implementing recognition programmes that celebrate their contributions can help combat age-related stereotypes and assumptions. Some of the comments and behaviour experienced by people on account of their age are shocking and is also a reflection of a wider societal view about the value of older people. This view is then reinforced by cultural norms in PR environments and the perpetuation of the cycle of ageist exclusion – because it is rare that people talk about it and so often there are no solid policies in organisations to tackle it.

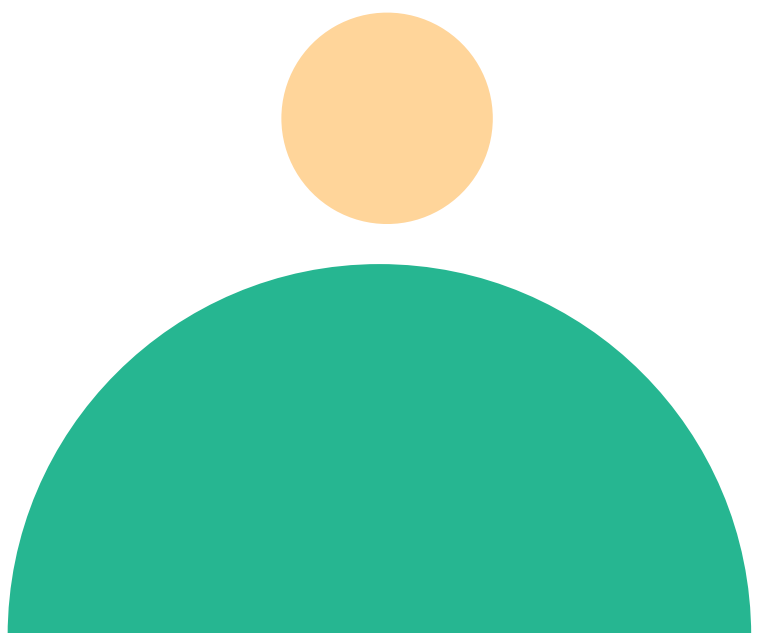
Policy Reform

Reforming HR policies to ensure transparency and fairness in recruitment and promotion processes is crucial. This includes eliminating age bias and creating pathways for lateral growth and stability without stigma. This was particularly true in agencies; the theme that emerged was that employees felt being seen as not wanting more seniority and being content with their current role was a problem. While this could be an issue with organisational culture, HR policies need to support moves to become more age-inclusive. One way to do this is for flexible working arrangements to become more open, varied and accessible to people at different life stages. While people knew that their organisation technically offered various ways of working, culturally it was difficult to ask for something other than a flexible working pattern that was most commonly used by new parents returning to work.

A culture divide appears to exist between older PR professionals' perceived ability to access flexible working policies and what HR managers and employers feel are available. More could be done to overcome this by focusing on creating a more age-friendly culture. For example, do HR managers and line managers understand how to apply existing flexible working policies across the age range? If not, should life stage-specific policies exist to protect older workers? The literature also consistently points to the lack of flexible working arrangements as a barrier to retention for older professionals, which these findings support. For example, the 'State of the Profession 2024' report found that only 28% of PR agencies offer formal flexible working policies.

Recruitment and progression are major concerns; older applicants are largely absent from recruitment pipelines, particularly at mid to senior levels. Even senior roles are increasingly filled by younger candidates, suggesting systemic age bias in hiring. Another interviewee describes how their extensive experience is often undervalued, with their CV being auto-rejected as “too experienced”. Employers should also be encouraged to provide clear and constructive feedback to candidates, avoiding vague responses that mask age bias.

Another important aspect of recognition and appreciation is objectively recognising the value that older PR professionals bring. In this profession, neither CPD nor professional membership is mandatory, with no specificity regarding standards expected at certain levels in some parts of the industry. Whether in the recruitment process or within organisational culture, these professionals were often perceived as too expensive; their value to a team, client, or campaign was not clearly articulated, whereas their cost was. This approach, unfortunately, can translate into a desire by some organisations to move what is seen as expensive in-house resources into more flexible freelance support. Not valuing experience in PR contrasts with other sectors, such as law, where the level of experience and length of time working in the profession are more valued. There is potential here for a dedicated interview guide for PR recruiters, aimed at line managers and HR professionals. This could support employers in identifying the skills and standards required for roles and effectively eliciting these qualities through interviews, without relying on an individual’s age to make assumptions about their level of expertise.



Support and Advocacy

Providing support and advocacy for older workers through professional networks and industry bodies is essential. This includes offering legal advice, career counselling, resources for addressing ageism in the workplace, and the opportunity to join specific professional networks focused on their needs. By implementing these recommendations, organisations can create a more inclusive and supportive work environment that values the contributions of older professionals and fosters their career development.

The literature review highlights the intersectionality between ageism and other forms of discrimination, such as gender and disability. Women in PR's studies find that women face a double bind: they are expected to prove their competence repeatedly, while men are often promoted based on potential. The 'Break the Silence' campaign shows that older women are frequently pigeonholed into support roles or sidelined from leadership opportunities. This pattern is thought to contribute to the attrition of experienced female professionals from the industry, particularly in agency settings.

The findings of this research align with and expand upon the existing literature on ageism in PR. The 'Missing Women Study' (2025) and the 'State of the Profession 2024' survey provide quantitative data that support the qualitative insights gathered from the interviews. The underrepresentation of older professionals, particularly women, and the cultural biases that favour youth are consistent themes across the literature and the research findings.

However, this research also challenges some current understandings by highlighting the nuanced experiences of older PR professionals. For example, the interviews reveal that older professionals can feel marginalised due to not only age but also a lack of meaningful dialogue between generations. This finding suggests that fostering intergenerational collaboration and mutual understanding is crucial for creating a more inclusive industry.

The limitations of these interviews are that participants were self-selected. Given the small sample size, the findings are not generalisable, but this research provides rich, contextual insights that complement recent studies on the experiences of older PR professionals.

Thematic saturation was reached, but further research could explore more intersectionality (e.g., race, disability).

Recommendations and Next Steps



The research presents the following recommendations for individuals, employers, professional bodies and the wider industry to tackle ageism in PR.

1. We need to make PR workplaces more age-inclusive.

Individuals

Everyone can play a role in making PR workplace culture more age-friendly. All of us have a responsibility to think about the words we use and the actions we take concerning ageism, as it is the most commonly reported form of discrimination across all sectors and industries.

Employer Action

This report includes an Employer's Checklist and signposts additional information from the Centre for Ageing Better's Age-friendly Culture toolkit. These resources outline key steps employers can take to create a more age-inclusive culture in their organisations, while ensuring that age is fully embedded within wider EDI policies.

Industry Action Plan

Concerted action by the professional bodies (CIPR, PRCA) is needed, with the support of grassroots movements in the industry, such as Women in PR and the 'Break the Silence' campaign, to develop a single coherent action plan that includes:

- A pathway to encourage employers and individuals in the industry to use existing resources to foster a more age-inclusive culture across the sector.
- Development of a new guide to support recruiters in challenging age bias (more information below).
- Establishment of a clear campaign to challenge the wider stereotypical societal view that PR is an industry only for younger professionals. This is an opportunity to redress this misconception through clearer standards and more specifically targeted campaigning by the industry's professional bodies to reach other business audiences and the general public.

2. Employers need to review and revise their policies through an age-friendly lens.

Flexible working

Employers should implement and promote flexible working arrangements that adapt to people's changing needs throughout their working lives, using successful examples from within the industry as models of good practice.

Revise Recruitment and Career Progression Practices

This research has highlighted that recruitment practices in PR at times reflect implicit age bias. Job advertisements still use coded language such as "rockstar" or "digital native." Candidates who reach the interview stage or are aiming for promotion face a challenge: recruiters who cannot recognise that candidates can be a "safe pair of hands" but also be creative and innovative at any age. The 'Missing Women Study' notes that older applicants are often overlooked for roles requiring innovation or digital skills, despite having relevant experience.

The industry needs to develop a guide for PR employers to support them in tackling age bias in interviews and the recruitment process.

3. Employers and industry must support more intergenerational collaboration through existing mentoring schemes and create opportunities for more age-diverse teams to work on specific projects.

The research highlights a gap in meaningful dialogue between generations in the PR industry. Current mentoring programmes are one-directional, focusing on older professionals mentoring younger ones, and lack reciprocal investment in developing senior staff. The CIPR is doing outstanding work with the Taylor Bennett Foundation, but this focuses on mentoring minority ethnic professionals.

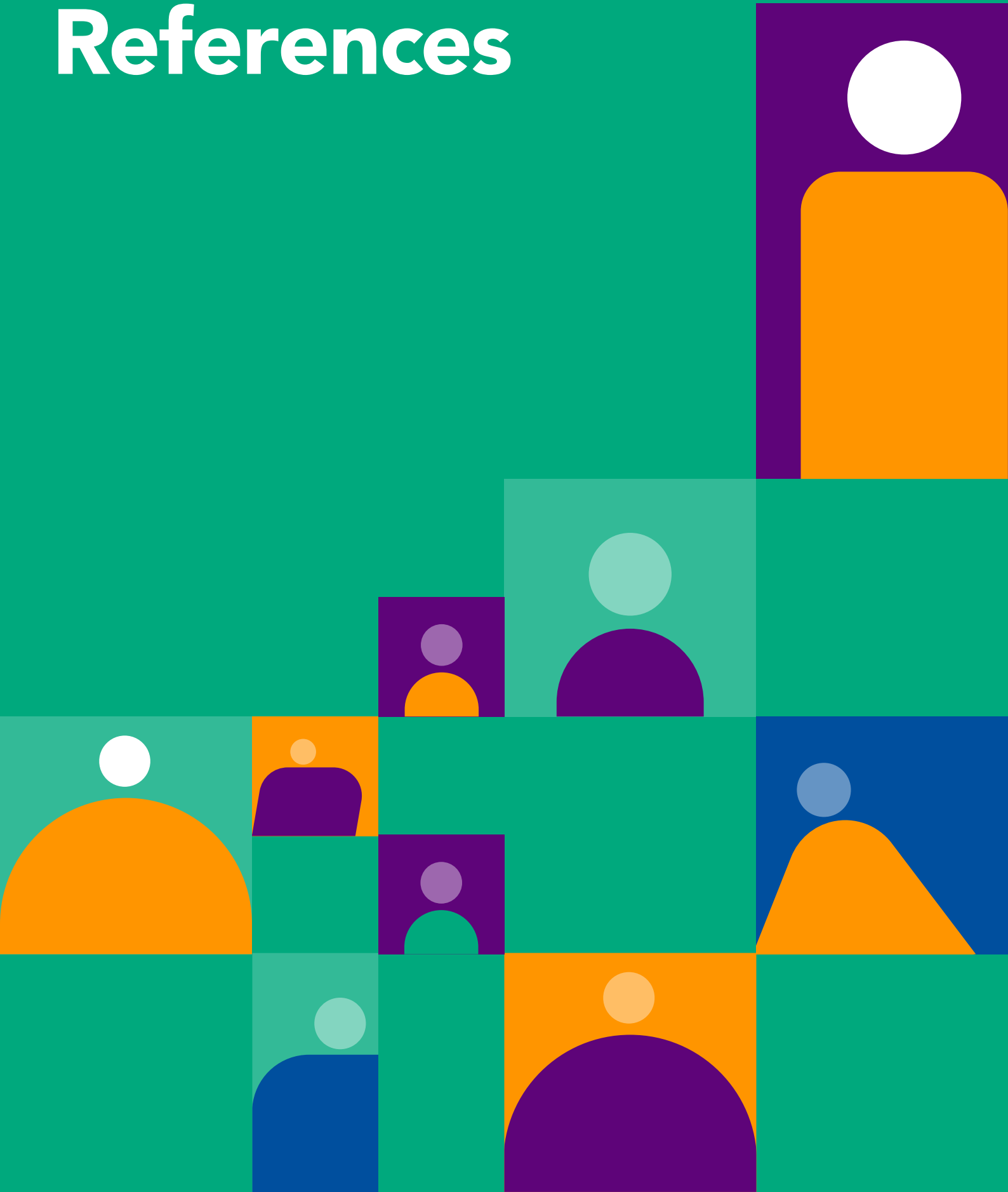
To bridge this gap, fostering intergenerational collaboration and mutual understanding is essential. Ensuring age-diverse industry judging panels and projects can help create a more inclusive work environment where the skills and experience of older professionals are valued alongside those of other colleagues.

4. Conduct further research on the following topics, among others.

- Research should investigate the economic benefits of tackling ageism in PR.
- Intersectional research should consider how ageism interacts with other forms of discrimination.
- Future studies should also examine the impact of age-inclusive policies on organisational performance and employee well-being.



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+44 (0)20 7631 6900

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