Ageism: The New Menace for the IT Workforce in India & How to Tackle It

Rati Hegde* and Abhishek Kumar**

ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the phenomenon of ageism, characterized by the manifestation of adverse attitudes and behaviours directed towards oneself or others based on age. The repercussions of ageism include stereotypes and discriminatory conduct within interpersonal relationships. The primary aim of this conceptual paper is to explore ageism within the Information Technology (IT) sector in India and propose strategies to mitigate its detrimental effects. Despite the pervasive existence of ageism in the Indian IT industry, disproportionately affecting older employees, it can serve as a catalyst for fostering a culture of continual upskilling and reskilling among this demographic. Policies focused at promoting active ageing by using an inclusive approach towards intergenerational contact among all age groups can help reduce the negative impacts of ageism.

* Columnist & author

** MSc student, NCHM-IH, India

INTRODUCTION

Ageism, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), encompasses stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination based on age, affecting both individuals and society as a whole. In the dynamic realm of Information Technology (IT), where innovation propels progress, the repercussions of rapid technological advancements pose challenges, particularly for those struggling to keep pace, especially in technology-driven sectors. The IT industry, highly favoured by students, notably in countries like India, is often perceived as offering immediate job opportunities upon completion of basic degrees.

While it is true that the Software industry abounds with job prospects for the young and inexperienced, a myopic focus on the initial two decades of one's career can be detrimental. The assumption that growth will naturally accompany accumulated experience may not hold true for everyone. Questions arise about the fate of those unable to ascend the career ladder or adapt to evolving technologies. More disconcerting is the plight of those at the upper echelons of income,

facing uncertainties about salary increments and job security, especially in a country where "permanent" government jobs are still sought after.

The prospect of companies shutting down after employees have dedicated a decade or more of service adds to the apprehension. Difficulty in securing new jobs or maintaining previous income levels in a different job compounds the challenge. A prevailing sentiment that career growth in IT after the age of 40 is contingent on branching out or continuous skill updates. The downsizing of staff, common in the industry, underscores the pressure on employees to remain billable resources to secure their positions.

In such a landscape, the notion of staying with the same company until retirement seems unrealistic. The debate arises: Does a decade of repetitive tasks continue to offer comparable experience and salary growth? A considerable number of IT professionals above 45 redirect their careers toward allied industries, leveraging their expertise to maintain systems in sectors such as healthcare, insurance, or law. Notably, the post-COVID era has witnessed an increased willingness to adopt digital technologies for health monitoring, online consultations, and financial services, creating opportunities for those with experience in data entry and system maintenance.

Examining the animation industry provides a vivid illustration of how technological shifts impact careers. The transition from 2D to 3D animation demanded rapid adaptation to new software, causing some professionals to exit the industry while others embraced the change. This example highlights that, as some doors close, new ones open—in this case, the rise of YouTube creators.

Considering these shifts prompts a crucial inquiry: To what extent does ageism pervade the IT industry in India, and how can individuals navigate and address these challenges? This conceptual paper aims to explore the prevalence of ageism in the Indian IT sector and proposes strategies for effectively managing and mitigating its impact on professionals in this dynamic field.

Demographic landscape and the healthcare challenge in India

A seldom-addressed aspect is the repercussion of ageism on health, particularly within the healthcare industry, where age-related discrimination is notably pronounced. The level of attention and care accorded to individuals during periods of illness, particularly in the context of hospitalization, is significantly influenced by the age of the patient. There exists a societal conditioning that prioritizes the allocation of medical resources towards the younger demographic, ostensibly under the presumption that younger individuals merit precedence in life-threatening situations. Consequently, patients below the age of 65 receive disproportionate attention and resources, while older individuals encounter a perceptible bias, with families displaying a reluctance to invest extensively in the hospitalization and treatment of elderly members.

The demographic landscape in India underscores the gravity of this concern, with the elderly population projected to reach 158.7 million by 2025, comprising approximately 20% of the overall populace (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2008). Furthermore, it is anticipated that by 2050, the elderly population will surpass the number of

children below 14 years, constituting a substantial 45% of the nation's demographic composition. Concurrently, a sizable proportion of the population, approximately 25%, falls below the age of 18, highlighting the significant reliance on individuals within the working age bracket (18-60 years) as primary income earners.

Complicating matters is the lack of comprehensive state-sponsored security benefits or income, placing families in precarious situations when confronted with severe illnesses or hospitalization, particularly concerning elderly members. The escalating need for healthcare services with advancing age exacerbates this challenge. Notably, the National Family Health Survey of 2004–2005, as referenced in the UNDESA report, indicates that a mere 10% of households in India have at least one family member covered by health insurance. Given that approximately 83% of healthcare expenses are categorized as out-of-pocket, excluding coverage from insurance or governmental schemes, a substantial portion of household income is diverted towards healthcare costs, notably in families featuring elderly members.

The vulnerability of the elderly is compounded by their high dependency rates, often stemming from factors such as widowhood, divorce, or separation, with a majority being women (70%). This demographic reality sheds light on the increasing desperation among individuals for political freebies, a phenomenon notably prevalent in populous countries such as ours. Additionally, the economic challenges of providing employment opportunities for individuals above the age of 60 in a densely populated nation further accentuates the complexity of addressing the multifaceted issues arising from ageism within the healthcare landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review explores various aspects of ageism with primary focus on IT industry in India, examining 28 research articles published between 2016 to 2023. There has been extensive research conducted by prior scholars on ageism, its impacts, and strategies to address it, however, there appears to be a noticeable scope for further examining ageism, specifically within the IT industry in India. The articles examined in this literature indicate towards some common underlying themes that can be associated with ageism.

Ageism and Stereotype

Ageism refers to the prejudice, discrimination and negative attitudes towards others or oneself, based on the person's age. The theme encompasses the concept of ageism, its prevalence, impacts on individual and society, recommends strategies to combat and reduce ageism.

TABLE 1.

Findings	Implications	Reference
Negative stereotypes of ageing affect our perception towards older adults	One should attempt to reduce ageing stereotypes and misconceptions	(Macdonald, Levy, 2016)
Ageism has proved to be a contributing factor in employment related discrimination and the associated barriers	Organizations should focus on creating age inclusive policies, promoting intergenerational collaboration	(Maria et el 2019)
Younger individuals seem to have developed ageist attitudes and stereotypes about ageing and older adults	Educational programs should include education about positive ageing	(Donizzetti, 2019)
Ageist attitudes are also constructed out of cultural factors	With more and better cross-cultural understanding we shall be able to dispel negative ageist attitudes and behaviour	(Ng & Lim, 2021)
The impact of ageism also disturbs the mental well-being of older adults	One shall focus on inclusivity by addressing ageism stereotypes and promoting active ageing	(Swift, 2017)

Active Aging and the Workplace

Active ageing can be defined as the act of optimizing life opportunities for optimum health, participation, and security in order to enhance the quality of life as we age. The theme explores the concept of active ageing within the workplace context, identifying factors that affect active ageing among older adults, along with recommendations about interventions and policies that promote active ageing.

TABLE 2.

Findings	Implications	Reference
Older adults in workplace face age related discrimination	Organization should focus on creating age inclusive working environments	(Couto & Rothermund, 2019)
Workplace policies and practices that are not age inclusive, can become obstacle towards active ageing in older adults	HR policies and practices should be age friendly and promote active ageing	(Lytle & Levy, 2019)

Older workers often face challenges in negotiation during employment and later in navigating ageism stereotypes in workplace	Organizations should provide support and resources for promoting active ageing among their older workforce	(Harris, Krygsman, Waschenko, & Laliberte Rudman, 2018)
Organizations can benefit by promoting intergenerational collaboration among their workforce resulting in enhanced workplace dynamics	Workplace policies and practices should be designed to foster intergenerational contact and collaboration among their workforce	(Harris, Krygsman, Waschenko, & Laliberte Rudman, 2018)
Improving age related knowledge and skills by making use of training and education programs about active ageing is an effective way to reduce ageism stereotypes	Organizations should focus on developing training and educational programs to promote intergenerational collaboration among their workforce	(Maurya, Sharma, & Muhammad, 2021), (Lytle & Levy, 2019)

Education and Intergenerational Contact

Education and intergenerational contact bring our attention towards the importance of knowledge about aging, as well as positive interactions across different age groups at different stages throughout their life. The theme examines the role of education about ageing, intergenerational settings, and positive contact experiences in promoting shared understanding and collaboration among people of all age consortium.

TABLE 3.

Findings	**Implications**	**Reference**
Ageist attitudes and stereotypes have proven to be reduced through education about ageing	Aging education should be included in the educational curriculum and training programs	(Maurya, Sharma, & Muhammad, 2022)
Attitudes towards ageing proved to improve with positive intergenerational contact among people of all age consortium	We shall focus on promoting positive intergenerational contact	(Maurya, Sharma, & Muhammad, 2022), (King & Bryant, 2017)
Due to the lack of knowledge about aging one happens to develop ageism stereotypes	Programs can be created to promote public awareness and knowledge about aging	(Maurya, Sharma, & Muhammad, 2022), (King & Bryant, 2017)

Ageism and Workplace Discrimination

Ageism and workplace discrimination refers to all acts of unfair treatment, bias, or exclusionary practices based on person's age in workplace. The theme investigates the prevalence of age-based discrimination in workplace, its impacts on older workers, and suggests interventions to prevent ae based discrimination in workplace.

TABLE 4.

Findings	Implications	Reference
Age relate discrimination among workplace occurs in both hard and soft forms	Policy makers should focus at reducing both forms of aging discrimination	(Stypinska & Turek, 2017)
Older employees' outcomes and performances in workplaces is affected by the prevalence of age-based stereotypes and biases	Organizations should try to promote awareness about aging and provide diversity training to their employees for promoting better intergenerational collaboration	(Stypinska & Turek, 2017)
The prevalence of ageism found in employment and hiring practices affects job seekers well-being by inducing anxiety and stress	Organizations should provide support and resources for older job seekers and promote age inclusion and diversity	(Franz, Werse, & Talbert, 2022)

Successful Aging and Well-being

Successful aging and well-being can be described as a way of living that focuses on promoting optimal physical, cognitive and emotional well-being of an individual along with active participation in meaningful activities throughout life. The theme tries to understand the interrelation between successful ageing and workplace, impact of ageism on successful ageing, attitudes towards successful ageing of self and others, as well as social support on well-being outcomes.

TABLE 5.

Findings	Implications	Reference
The ability to maintain increased physical activity, engagement and motivations to work is a key indicator of successful aging among older workers	Organizations should focus on developing strategies that aim at supporting successful aging among older workers by promoting higher levels of ability and motivation among them	(Lytle et al., 2021)
Ageism and negative attitudes towards age often proves to be a hinderance in active ageing among older individuals	Ageism should be tackled by promoting positive attitudes towards aging to promote active aging among older generations	(Dorien et al., 2020)

Research by Swift (2017) suggests that ageism and negative age stereotypes can lead older people to withdraw from social situations due to self-stereotyping processes or perceived threats. Stypinska et al. (2021) highlight the various ageism stereotypes prevalent among individuals by categorizing them under hard and soft age discrimination, such as incompetence, burden, frailty, and unproductiveness.

Harris et al. (2018) observe that generational stereotypes strongly influence intergenerational interactions in the workplace. Individuals tend to relate to generational categories rather than focusing solely on age as they age. This suggests that generational dynamics can contribute to age-based discrimination and reinforce negative age stereotypes within organizations.

Boehm, Schröder, and Bal (2021) highlight the role of HRM practices in adapting to demographic changes and promoting the well-being of older employees. Their findings suggest that HRM practices can help postpone retirement while maintaining motivation, performance, and health in the aging workforce. Kundu and Mor (2017) indicate that employees, regardless of their diversity backgrounds, positively acknowledge diversity and diversity management, emphasizing the importance of inclusive practices for older workers.

Levy (2018) proposes the PEACE model, which focuses on education about aging and positive contact experiences with older adults as key factors to reduce negative ageism. Providing education on aging can help in reducing ageism among individuals, therefore combining education and intergenerational contact can enhance attitudes toward older adults and aging knowledge (Lytle & Levy, 2019).

The WICS model, as suggested by King and Bryant (2017), can assist organizations in identifying areas for improvement in their work environment, fostering positive intergenerational contact, inclusiveness, and reducing age-based stereotypes and discrimination. The model emphasizes the importance of adapting to demographic changes and synchronizing technological advancements with the aging workforce.

Rosales and Svensson (2021) shed light on ageism in the tech industry, where workers over

35 are often considered old and face challenges such as becoming managers, being less interested in new technology, and encountering difficulties when learning new software. Organizations should recognize and address age-related stereotypes prevalent in the tech sector to create more inclusive work environments. Komp-Leukkunen et al. (2021) stress the crucial role of the work environment in shaping older workers' experiences of digitalization and adaptation to technological changes. They recommend age-balanced team building, age-adjusted change management, and utilizing the competencies of older workers to facilitate successful digital transformations.

Van Kampen et al. (2023) suggest that by promoting positive self-esteem among older individuals, we can avoid them from being affected by self-ageist behaviours. They also highlight the importance of third age learning as a means of active and healthy aging, emphasizing that learning has no age limit. Knowledge sharing, including both donating and receiving knowledge, can increase awareness of ageism among young workers. It was found that positive intergenerational climate and knowledge sharing practices positively influence young workers' job satisfaction. Frizly et el. (2021).

Wong and Tetrick (2017) argue that organizations should recognize individual differences among older workers and tailor jobs to accommodate their unique abilities and preferences. Cognitive crafting, reframing job perceptions, and emphasizing personally meaningful job features can help older workers maintain congruent and positive work identities.

The literature review provides insights into the multifaceted nature of ageism and highlights its prevalence among employment sectors in various industries globally. It helps us understand the impacts of age-related biases in employment, career advancement and performance evaluations on older workers. The review also emphasize about how negative ageist attitudes can become hinderance to active aging among older adults. Promoting age diversity and intergenerational collaboration can lead to enhanced workplace engagement among older employees. In a country like India, where old age is seen as a time for taking upon renunciation and leaving behind the materialistic world for spiritual worship, reducing age-related biases would need collaborative efforts that goes beyond just managing workplace age diversity, but also promoting acceptance and cultural awareness among the public.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS AND COMPANY LEADERS

Here are recommendations which can be considered:-

1. Government brings out schemes which enforce savings for those in the employable age, in a manner that annual payments/returns are made only after retirement/60 years of age, till death of the employee and his/her spouse. It could be on the lines of Social Security benefits available in First World countries. In cases where the person falls below poverty line or is unemployable, the Government should contribute to this fund in the name of the person.

2. Companies contribute a small percentage/fixed amount in the name of every employee to the above scheme every month, even if the employee works only for a few months.

3. Such a scheme should be made mandatory even for temporary staff, contract laborer's and

those on contract/consultation, etc.

4. Retail businesses, hotels, restaurants and those in the service industry should be given small incentives for employing people above the age of 60, even if it is on a part-time basis.

5. Companies need to ensure that ageism does not trump loyalty and humanism. For this they need to train their staff on a regular basis to keep up with the times. If retrenching older staff becomes necessary, help them to find their footing in newer jobs or in different sectors. Also, HR executives can have regular sessions to educate staff in savings and investment options.

6. Constant upskilling: The only way to stay ahead today is to train the brain to look forward to changes, innovations and welcome continuous skill development and risk taking. Self-training in saving and investment techniques is also one of the most necessary skills one needs to learn young, to sustain oneself in trying times. According to a web development expert, individuals from older generations often grapple with the challenge of reconciling their established coding practices with the present technological landscape. Formerly intricate coding tasks, such as creating pull-down menus, are now rendered commonplace and freely accessible. This paradigm shift can induce feelings of obsolescence among seasoned professionals, necessitating the unlearning of extensive coding methodologies and the acquisition of new skills in adapting to modern tools like Widgets and Search Engines. While end users benefit from simplified applications and anticipate rapid changes, developers find themselves burdened by the demanding task of mastering novel approaches to maintain client satisfaction. Consequently, even smaller enterprises encounter challenges related to ageism, impacting their ability to attract new clients and retain existing ones.

Amidst this scenario, a positive aspect emerges as larger corporations increasingly invest in training initiatives for their workforce to adeptly navigate evolving technologies. Continuous training programs are systematically implemented throughout the year across various organizational tiers, facilitating a smoother transition to evolving expectations. According to Shri Vivek Grover, a Director in one of the prominent Big 4 firms, enlightened companies with robust work cultures and ethical frameworks recognize the value of retaining their personnel instead of resorting to cyclical hiring and firing practices. However, this enlightened approach is yet to permeate certain sectors, particularly unicorns and smaller startups, driven by an urgency to curtail expenses and achieve rapid outcomes. These entities often prefer recruiting youthful talent capable of self-training on the job. A silver lining in the whole thing is that many companies, especially the bigger ones, have started investing in training their own staff to adapt to new technology. Continuous training programmes are conducted round the year for staff at various levels to help them cope with the change in expectations.

CONCLUSION

Ageism is when we have certain stereotypes about people or ourselves based on age, feel negatively towards them because of their age, and treat them unfairly or differently because of it. We let our preconceived notions about people dictate how we feel about them and our treatment towards them because of their age.

Ageism has made people feel less secure in their jobs in the technology sector but the flipside of this has been that it has made people feel the need to learn further and keep upgrading their

skills. Here is what individuals can do to beat ageism:

1. Make sure that you attend every training programme offered by your organization and keep updating your knowledge.

2. If you get a chance to take up assignments abroad, especially in Technologically advanced countries, do take it up.

3. Remember that 40 is the new 60 when it comes to retirement. Difficult as it may sound, financial goals have to be achieved by the time you are 40 years of age. Do not have substantial loans beyond that age, because then every time your career boat is rocked, you will feel more stress than necessary.

4. Keep networking and making connections, because that is where you will find help in getting job offers.

5. Give back to society: Recently Sujit Chattopadhyay was presented the Padma Shri for Literature and Education. After 39 years of work as a teacher, he retired. But he just did not want to hang up his boots, because he felt that he was still capable of giving to society. He started a free coaching centre called "Sadai Fakirer Pathshala" in 2004 and now has over 3000 students per year, most of whom are young tribal girls. And they have gone on to be employed in various industries. When ageism hits, it is time to give back to society.

It's important to realize that what matters is not age, but the ability to adapt and improve oneself. Add a little empathy to that and there will always be room for people of all ages in all sectors.

Future research directions

Further research can be undertaken to understand the long-term effects of ageism and age-based stereotypes on older workers career progression, job satisfaction and overall well-being and how these factors contribute towards active ageing among older individuals. In the light of inclusivity, further study should be conducted to understand the impact of age diversity and intergenerational contact on team dynamics and performance to bring awareness about the benefits of fostering inclusive work environments. While prior research focused on creating frameworks for intervention with the aim of reducing ageism, future research can be conducted to gauge the effectiveness of these interventions by evaluating the outcomes of educational programs, intergenerational initiatives, and age inclusive practices. Further research in this area would contribute towards the development of evidence-based interventions, policies and practices that promote age diversity, increase awareness and knowledge about aging, and support healthy and active aging among older individuals.

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