

The Impact of Ageism in the Workplace

Theories of Diversity and Inclusion

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Abstract: *To have a competitive edge in twenty first century, organizations are looking for agility, innovation, flexibility to change, and adoptability to new technologies in their workforce. Since these competencies are generally associated with younger adults, the value of knowledge and capability of an older workforce are often overlooked. This ignorance often leads to ageism in HR practices, adversely affecting organizations' collective performance and bottom-line. Thus, HR professionals are expected to use their knowledge and power as an impetus to eliminate the prejudices harming individuals, organizations, and societies.*

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To have a competitive edge in twenty first century, organizations are looking for agility, innovation, flexibility to change, and adoptability to new technologies in their workforce. Since these competencies are generally associated with younger adults, the value of knowledge and capability of an older workforce are often overlooked. This ignorance of ten leads to ageism in HR practices, adversely affecting organizations' collective performance and bottom-line.

Ageism, coined by Butler, 1969 (as cited in Fullen, 2018, p.1), refers to discrimination and practices based on the age of a person. Ageism consists of stereotyping, lack of respect, and negative attitudes and behaviors toward older individuals (Levy, & Pruchno, 2018, p.1). The terms "older individual" and "older workers" mainly describe people 40 years and older (Zacher, Kooij, Dorien, and Beier, 2018, p.2). Ageism forces older workers to exist the job market despite having the capability and desire to continue with their employment. This early departure can limit an organization's access to the scarce human resources and further create a vacuum in the future of labor market.

As stated by the Population Estimates and Projections of the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2030, all baby boomers will be older than age 65, expanding the size of the older population (USCB, 2018). This change in population structure is a global phenomenon and a product of the increased longevity and improved lifestyles. Refusing to hire and retain older individuals, ageist organizations are more likely to experience hardship in a shortage of labor supply (Alpopi, Nica, Oancea, & Balu, 2019, p.3). Nevertheless, few organizations are addressing the issues related to their aging workforce, and neglecting the potential, experience, and knowledge that this group has to offer.

Many studies have pointed to the negative impacts of ageism both at the individual and organizational level. For instance, at the individual level, ageist behaviors have a damaging effect on older individual's wellbeing; and decrease their job satisfaction, self-perception, engagement and performance (Lagacé, Van de Beeck, & Firzly, 2019, p.3). At the organizational level, according to Parker, Downie, and Lewis, (2019, p.2), ageist organizations lost key knowledge and expertise and saw rising cost in recruitment and training. In addition, they lost the advantage of having different

approaches and attitudes that a diverse age group can provide (Parker et al., 2019, p.2). Generally, organizations focused on the younger labor market experience the aforementioned challenges because their decisions are based on two false assumptions. These fallacies are cost factors and stereotypes regarding the competency of older workers.

Cost effectiveness is a major consideration for organizations regarding HR policies and practices. These costs are associated with compliance with the ADEA's policies on reasonable accommodations for older Americans, as well as accommodative, developmental, maintenance, and utilization HR practices. Accommodative HR practices are defined by Zacher et al., (2018, p.3) as the reduction of workload, additional paid leave, and support for age-related losses. Developmental HR relates to training and developmental opportunities; maintenance HR includes flexible schedules and ergonomic adjustments; and utilization HR practices are job enrichment, lateral moves, and leveraging employees' existing knowledge (Zacher et al., 2018, p.3).

The implementation of these HR practices first appears to be costly. However, studies have suggested that the benefits of positive outcomes of age diversity overshadow the costs of HR practices related to hiring and retention of the older workforce. For example, age inclusive organizations experience a reduction in turnover costs and lower age discrimination claims (SHRM, 2004). Furthermore, Fewell (2019, p.1) suggest that an organization's market value will increase with both years of experience and age diversity. An organization's bottom line also is positively affected via knowledge sharing, employee motivation, commitment, engagement, and improved performance (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013, p.3).

Age-related stereotypes are the second factor impeding age diversification in organizations. Older workers often exit the job market due to both self-stereotyping and perceived stereotypes in organizations. Any type of stereotyping has an internal effect on the way individuals define them; thus, they behave accordingly (Bentley, Teo, Catley, Blackwood, Roche, & O'driscoll, 2019, p.3). Self-stereotyping includes negative assumptions held by the older individual, which results in a lack of self-efficacy and security. Based on stereotype embodiment theory, individuals learn to

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stereotype from a young age, which manifests as self-stereotyping as they age (Bentley et al., 2019, p.3). Likewise, Swift et al. indicated that this stereotyping negatively affects employment and disadvantages older workers (as cited in Bentley et al., 2019, p.3). That is, feeling unfit to the organization's climate; mature workers lose motivation and decide to exit the market. The perceived stereotyping is related to the perceptions, assumption, and attitudes of organizational members toward older employees or applicants. Employers' attitudes toward ageism affect decision making and result in marginalizing older employees' performance, development, and ability to build new skills (Raab, 2019, p.14).

The following are common assumptions about older adults: lack of acceptability for the client market (Parker et al., 2019, p.6); less ambition and competitiveness (Cao, et al., 2019, p.1); resistance to change, declining performance, as well as cognitive and psychological impairments (Fullen, 2018, p.1). Moreover, the older workforce is perceived as inferior in characteristics such as adaptability, trainability, and interest in new technologies (Parker et al., 2019, p.2). Older employees according to Villano, (2019, p.2) stay in higher positions longer, depriving younger employees of the skills potentially needed to start their own businesses. Recent studies, on the other hand, have debunked all of these erroneous age-related perceptions.

A recent survey conducted by McDonalds UK has concluded that employees working in mixed-age teams are generally happier, more than half the employees preferred to work with various ages, and 84% of customers enjoyed mixed ages on the restaurant teams (Parker et al., 2019, p.3). Furthermore, as the older coworkers enjoy passing their knowledge, the younger workmates also appreciate the benefits of shared information and experiences (Parker et al., 2019, p.7). The result is a high performing team work which will strengthen an organization through knowledge sharing and older workers' satisfaction (Lagacé et al., p.16).

Contrasting the perception of declining performance, a review of 24 studies found that performance, motivation, and productivity increase with age (Fullen, 2018, p.1). And contrary to common assumption, older adults have been proven to favor learning and working with new technologies (Raab, 2019, p.18). The loyalty and reliability of the older workers has also out waited the perception about their resistance to change (Lagacé et al., 2019, p.3). Generally, studies have suggested that young and older adult share the same level of capabilities and performance (Tresh, et al., 2019, p.2).

This inquiry explored common misconceptions and stereotypes about ageism and its negative impact on organizations. HR professionals are expected to use their knowledge and power as an impetus to eliminate the prejudices harming individuals, organizations, and societies. Rising life expectancies and healthier lifestyles have improved the physical and cognitive capabilities of the population worldwide. Thus, older adults are more motivated to stay engaged and work past their traditional retirement age, using their knowledge and experiences. An age inclusive mindset provides a great opportunity for HR

practitioners to identify and leverage existing resources available in an organization's labor pool. Age-inclusive HR practices, increase collective organizational performance, escalate competitive positioning, protect against shortages in the future, contribute to the humanization of the workplace, and promote healthier lifestyles in society.

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