AGEISM & DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

Policy Measures to Address Ageism as a Barrier to Adoption and Use of Digital Technology

KEY MESSAGES

- Ageism is a key barrier that affects design, adoption and use of digital technology.

- Ageism in the context of digital technology occurs on the macro (design & policy)-, meso (social and organizational environment)- and micro (individual)-level. These three levels also interact and influence each other.

- A paradigm shift is needed in our understanding of: What digital technologies older persons want and need; older individuals' abilities to use digital technology; and how older persons are included and have a "say" in the design process of digital technology and related policies.

- In order to improve digital literacy and increase use and adoption of digital technology among older persons, policy interventions need to focus on eliminating stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination based on age, rather than accepting ageing per se as a barrier to the use and adoption of digital technology. Such interventions could include:

  - Tackling digital technology related ageism through awareness-raising and training.
  - Aiming for a partnership with older persons in the design and research process.
  - Empowering older persons in accessing and using digital technology.
  - Fostering inclusion of older persons in digital technology related policy contexts.

AUTHORS

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[1]Defined as technological devices, services or platforms that use, collect, and often process data and are connected to the internet, other devices, or apps [23], such as smartphones, healthcare apps, online banking and shopping, etc.

INTRODUCTION

Equal opportunities to access and use digital technology[1] are at stake in an increasingly digitalized and ageing society. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the digital divide has become more apparent than ever, due to the importance of using digital technology for managing communication, everyday tasks, healthcare and social participation. In the past two decades, accumulating and disadvantaging factors that hinder equal access and technology adoption, such as level of education, socio-economic background and age, have been widely explored and addressed on policy agendas. As more and more services and everyday tasks move online, some older persons become increasingly disenfranchised and deprived from their right to full societal participation. Importantly, use of digital technology and digital literacy highly fluctuate between countries. For example, in 2020 within the European Union (EU-27), 61% of people between 65-74, used the internet in the last three months, with great variations across countries from 25% to 94% [1]. These numbers indicate on the one hand that the digital divide persists, on the other hand, there are positive developments and older people are increasingly engaging in digital technology.

Ageism and digital technology

Research evidence on technology adoption models posit that two major factors influence use and adoption of digital technology, namely, ease of use and perceived usefulness [2,3]. One of the most used models, the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), considers chronological age as a main barrier to access digital technology [3]. This notion has also become widespread in discourse on older persons' abilities and willingness to learn and use digital technology. Additionally, some recent models and reviews consider attitudes, anxiety and social influence as additional influencing factors [4,5]. Contrasting the unquestioned assumption of age as a barrier, latest evidence suggests that a possible barrier to access and adopt digital technology is not chronological age as such, but rather, ageism towards older persons and internalized (self) ageism [6,7]. Ageism is commonly defined as the stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination towards people on the basis of their age [8]. Indeed, research and policies on digital technology use in later life are often based on the perception that older age and ageing is a "problem", constituting a major burden to healthcare systems and societies [9,10]. Technology, on the other hand, is commonly depicted as the solution to solving so-called "problems of ageing" [11].

Age-stereotypes related to older persons' use of digital technology are not only reflected in policy and research but also become obvious in the design of digital technology as well as in the individual's choice to adopt a digital technology. Older persons are often stereotypically portrayed as technophobic, less capable and unwilling to adopt new digital technology [12,13]. Oversimplified binary categorizations into "user" and "non-user" or "adopter "and "late-adopter" are widespread and undermine the heterogeneity of older peoples' abilities and motivations to use digital technology. Moreover, older age with regard to digital technology is often associated with physical and cognitive decline and low technological competences and desires [14]. Consequently, the majority of the "gerontechnology" and "age-tech" market focus on care and healthcare-related technologies, a focus that is often policy driven. While many older individuals indeed express high willingness to use healthcare technologies if needed [15,16], older persons also have motivations for a wider range of digital technologies that can meet additional needs. Other types of digital technologies for leisure, personal development, socializing, mobility, etc. seem to be shortcoming [17].

Countering the stereotypes

The definitions of "old age" in relation to digital technology often varies from age 50+ to 75+. This grouping often does injustice to the fact, that older persons are a highly diverse population group. People have different opportunities and resources to access and profit from contemporary digital advancements. Against widespread stereotypes, which devalue older individuals as less able and unwilling to learn and engage in new digital technology [12,13], evidence proves the opposite. A great proportion of older persons report high willingness to learn to use new digital technology and consider many digital technologies as relevant to their lives [18,19]. This also becomes evident in a recent report by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) [20], demonstrating that digital technology use (e.g. smartphones, tablets, smart home technologies) in adults aged 50 and above has consistently increased since 2014, and for many devices, adoption is nearly comparable to younger adults. For instance, the majority of older persons uses smartphones (86% of those aged 50-59, 81% of those aged 60-69 and 62% of those aged 70 and older). In fact, the 'baby boomer' generation is currently the most rapidly growing group of Internet adopters [21]. Communication via video-call or online services are widely accepted and desired means accompanying older persons in their everyday lives.

The various levels of ageism in the context of digital technology

While acknowledging that various factors might hinder the use and adoption of digital technology, this policy brief calls to address the under-looked impact of ageism. Ageism in the context of digital technology may occur on the macro-, meso- and micro-level [22], while these levels also interact and influence each other [23]:

1. The macro-level: Design & policy – How stereotypes and exclusion of older adults (discrimination) shape the design of digital technology products and policies, and consequently our daily environment.

2. The meso-level: Social and organizational environment – How other people's stereotypes (family, friends, service providers, healthcare professionals, etc.) influence the use of digital technology by older persons.

3. The micro-level: The individual – How age-stereotypes are internalized over the life course, and impact how people view their ability to use digital technology as they age.

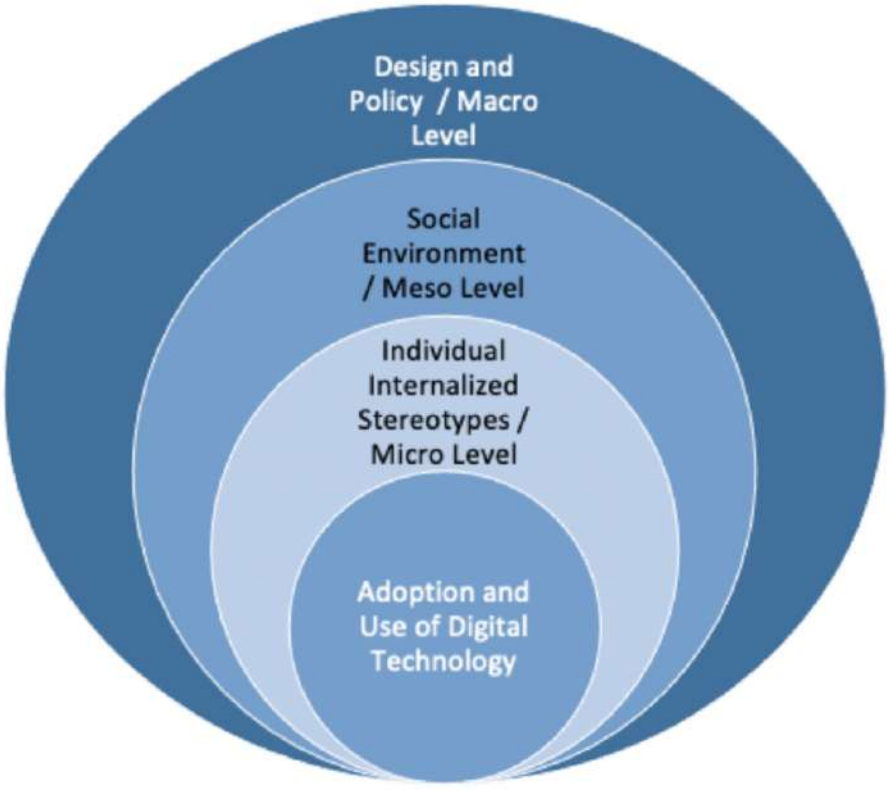
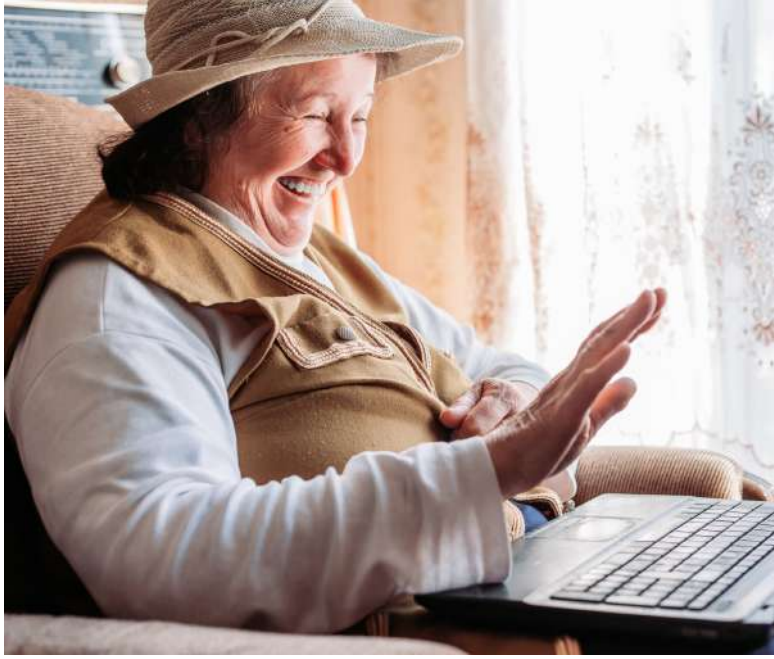


Figure 1: Three levels of ageism in the context of adoption and use of digital technology.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In the following part of this policy brief, we provide further evidence and examples of how digital technology related ageism operates on these three levels. Based on this evidence, we suggest implications and recommendations to tackle ageism in the context of digital technology and improve policymaking that intends to close the age-based digital divide.



The macro-level (policy, research and design)

Older age is often automatically associated with cognitive, physical and social decline [14]. This is reflected in research, policy and digital technology design processes, that commonly depict older people as a deserving target-group for technological interventions while presenting technology as the solution to “problems of aging” [23]. Yet, this major focus on health care digital technology as well as ageist digital technology designs, for instance, the so-called “pensioner phone” can become reason for non-use, as they might not meet peoples’ actual needs. More importantly, such digital technologies are often viewed as stigmatizing and are thus avoided. This mismatch between what older persons want and what is designed may be attributed to the common exclusion of older persons from digital technology design processes [24]. While inclusive and co-design approaches have recently gained popularity, older end-users’ needs often remain unknown and involvement of older individuals in the design process often takes place only in the final phases of evaluation of the design and marketing. Mere involvement of older persons in final stages of the design process, only to legitimize the product rather than to truly seek for the end-user’s feedback, can be viewed as a form of exclusion, that may hamper the adoption of (potentially useful) products [25].

The meso-level (social environment)

Ageism as occurring in the context of the social and organizational environment (family members, healthcare, peers or work colleagues) can determine experiences of failure and success with regard to digital technology adoption [7,26]. Younger generations’ negative attitudes about older persons’ abilities to use digital technology can hamper successful digital technology learning and further increase the age-based digital divide [27]. For example, in 2019, the meme “OK Boomer” was widespread among teenagers and younger adults. It involved stereotypes ascribed to the baby boomer generation and portrayed older persons as “digitally inferior” and resistant to technological changes [27]. This is critical, as intergenerational contact and learning are crucial to enhance older persons’ digital technology adoption [28,29].

The social environment also involves healthcare workers or other services that require social interaction. In the healthcare context, ageism is known to influence diagnosis, prognosis and treatment [30]. A recent study found that healthcare professionals hold highly negative attitudes towards older persons' abilities to use healthcare digital technology [31]. Such negative attitudes towards older persons' abilities to use digital technology could potentially lead to discriminatory practice, such as not offering technology-based treatment or assistive technologies to older patients based on the ageist belief that they won't be able to use it. Notably, healthcare professionals' biases might influence the design of future healthcare technologies as well.

The micro-level

Negative self-perceptions of ageing or internalized age stereotypes can be activated through disadvantaging or ageist policies, designs, discourses or social interactions. For instance, ageist designs of technologies or digital technology usually advertised for the young, can activate negative age-stereotypes and make ageing individuals feel older or less capable [32,33]. Ageist environments have the power to affect older persons' willingness to engage but also the ability to succeed in performing more complex tasks, like using digital technology (e.g., online banking, e-shopping). If older individuals themselves have internalized the belief that older people cannot learn anymore or are less capable of using digital technology, they may be at risk of actually having greater problems in adopting new digital technology [26]. Alarmingly, the less digital technologies are used, the more prone older individuals are to negatively perceive their own aging related to personal competence beliefs [34]. In contrast, participation in cognitively demanding activities, such as digital technology, positively affects physical and cognitive functioning [12], increases self-efficacy, self- image, self-esteem, social coherence and autonomy in later life [14].

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

01

Tackling digital technology related ageism through awareness-raising and training:

Ageism can impact the use, adoption and design of technology products and services. Greater awareness to this problem needs to be raised among policymakers, designers, healthcare professionals, and the general public. Launching campaigns and adding content on the effects of ageism in digital technology to existing and new education programs and anti-discrimination training is recommended. Ageism in the context of digital technology can also be tackled by fostering intergenerational contact and learning [35]. Digital literacy course conductors should receive training on inclusive and ageism-free teaching. Tailored intergenerational programs and interventions addressing the heterogeneity of older persons, facts on ageing, experiential learning and positive exposure can effectively deconstruct age stereotypes in the context of technology and contribute to the creation of a more positive narrative about later life digital technology usage [36, 37]. More so, capacity trainings for professionals (e.g. healthcare), targeting age stereotypes with regard to digital technology may ensure more equal digital technology based treatment and better health outcomes [31].

02

Aiming for a partnership with older persons in the design and research process:

In order to ensure development of services and technologies that older persons need, want and can use, it is highly recommended to meaningfully involve older end-users throughout all stages of research and design processes. Starting with the assessments of users' needs, and not only in final stages of marketing (e.g., evaluation). The involvement of older persons should be recognized as a partnership, mutually beneficial to all stakeholders, where older persons are viewed as experienced experts and advisors [25].

03

Empowering individuals of all ages in accessing and using digital technology:

In order to enhance digital technology use and decrease negative effects of internalized ageism, digital literacy trainings in ageism-free and intergenerational learning environments can ensure greater access to needed digital technology. Ensuring access to lifelong learning, including tailored digital literacy interventions for older persons, can empower young and old individuals in becoming more digitally engaged and holding more positive attitudes towards their own ageing [26, 28, 37].

04

Fostering inclusion of older persons in digital technology related policy contexts:

While the definitions of “old age” in research and policy vary from 50+ to 75+, the heterogeneity of older persons in relation to digital technology should be acknowledged both in research and policy discourses in order to develop effective interventions that aim at closing the digital divide. This brief stresses the need for policy to reflect the diversity of older persons and to include older persons from various backgrounds in planning and decision making. More so, it is important to acknowledge the diversity of older persons and involve potential end-users, in accordance with the type of digital technology that is being designed.

CONCLUSIONS

This policy brief emphasizes the idea that ageism can be a barrier to digital technology use and adoption. The implications and manifestations are present in the very idea of how and which digital technologies are developed and promoted by policies (macro level); ageist expressions and practices of organizations, professionals, families and caregivers (meso level); and finally, stereotypes that are internalized over the life course (micro level).
Subsequently, these different levels interact and influence each other, meaning that the solutions might lay in tackling each level individually but should also be viewed in a holistic manner.
In line with the concerns about use and adoption of digital technology among older persons, and the vast development of digital technology, this report calls to stop considering chronological age by itself as a barrier, but rather to aim for policies and interventions that can eliminate stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination based on age.
A paradigm shift throughout these different levels is therefore needed, acknowledging the diverse needs and interests with regard to the use of digital technology among older people. Individuals of all ages should have a “say” within the design of digital technology regarding style, type and user-friendliness. Change is also needed in the education of organizations and professionals in society focusing on how older persons should be treated as individuals with the ability to evolve, learn and use digital technology.

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Hanna Köttl[2] and Ittay Mannheim[3] [4] are both PhD researchers in the Marie Skłodowska-Curie research and innovation program called EuroAgeism.
Hanna Köttl’s research examines the potential association between internalized ageism and everyday ICT use in later life and also explores environmental factors that contribute to the internalization of negative age stereotypes over the life course. Ittay Mannheim’s research focuses on the role of ageism as an influencing factor on the use and design of digital technology. More specifically, his research explores how ageism can be a latent factor influencing how older adults are involved in the design process, and how age-stereotypes and stereotype activation can influence attitudes towards the abilities of older people to use digital technology.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This policy brief was supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement No 764632 as part of the EuroAgeism program. Both authors contributed equally to writing this policy report.
We wish to thank our supervisors, colleagues and consortium partners from AGE-platform Europe, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), European Centre and World Health Organization (WHO), for reviewing this policy brief and contributing with useful feedback. We specifically thank Nena Georgantzi and Julia Wadoux from AGE-platform Europe for their support and guidance throughout the process of writing this policy brief.

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This policy brief is part of a project that has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 764632.

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Ageism in the Media

Policy Measures to Reduce Stereotypical Representations of Older People in Long-Term Care

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EuroAgeism policy brief 2021

Executive summary

Older people are stereotypically portrayed in the media at two extremes of a spectrum, either the healthy and happy retiree, or the frail and sick older person in need of care.

Older people living in residential long-term care are particularly portrayed in a homogenous way. Individuals exposed to stereotypical portrayals could develop a distorted view of the realities of older people and later life.

The negative portrayals could harmfully influence older people's self-esteem as well as younger people's perceptions of ageing processes.

This policy brief addresses the issue of ageism in media portrayals of older people and later life relating to residential long-term care.

This brief calls for more authentic, balanced, diverse and thoughtful portrayals of older people in the media, as well as seeking accountability of content producers as a critical way of reducing the portrayals of older people that may lead to ageism.

Policy measures are suggested for mitigating ageism in the process of generating media content (digital and print) about older people and later life relating to long-term care.

Specifically, we recommend to:

1. include a heterogeneous long-term care ageing experience in media portrayals;
2. reduce social stigmas surrounding residential long-term care;
3. encourage education in ageism and construct new images of long-term care;
4. provide training for media professionals working around residential long-term care;
5. support providers of care to tackle the privacy issue of residents.

These policy measures can be taken and tailored by media professionals and health care and long-term care professionals considering the given media, institutional and social contexts.

Introduction

Ageism refers to the stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination towards others or oneself based on age [1]. Ageism is a social problem that has harmful effects on the health and wellbeing of older people. A systematic review of health consequences of ageism involving over 7 million participants finds that ageism has detrimental impacts on older people's health at the structural and individual level [2].

Ageism is pervasive and evident in many social institutions, such as work and employment, health and long-term care, and advertising and the media [3]. The media, including films, television, print and social media, generally echoes and reinforces negative and offensive depictions of older people [4]. Older people and later life are often portrayed stereotypically in advertising and the media, which does not allow for generating heterogenous meanings of being old.

As illustrated in previous international studies on media portrayals of older people, the portrayals tend to be polarized negative and positive depictions of either wholly disempowered, frail, and lonely people, or healthy, sociable, and happy adults [5]. Positive portrayals include youthful, healthy and socially active people filled with vitality and joy [8], while negative portrayals include older people as being less technologically competent and looked after [6, 7]. Mass media depictions of older people in long-term care are especially negative [15].

Such media depictions are stereotypical and can guide our thinking of older people and ageing processes. The polarized depictions risk perpetuating societal stereotypes of older people, which can lead to ageism. Negative portrayals have been found to have a negative impact on older people's physical, mental, behavioural and social functioning [9]. One study found that stereotypical portrayals in print media could harmfully influence younger people's perceptions of older people and thus compromise sound intergenerational relations [10]. Given that the media is one of the institutions producing and reproducing social constructions of old age, promoting fair and diverse media portrayals of older people is an important aspect of social justice and age-power balance [5].

Tackling ageism is addressed as an important issue in policy and advocacy [4, 11]. In policy documents, the media is suggested as an effective tool to combat ageism by increasing the recognition of older people's contributions to family, community and society, as well as confronting negative images of ageing [12]. The present policy brief integrates the findings of our research and previous studies on media portrayals of older people which can be used to inform policy and practice to reduce ageism in the media around residential long-term care. The policy audience includes stakeholders in public authorities, educational institutions, residential long-term care institutions and media organizations that work on producing media materials about older people and later life relating to residential long-term care*.

* Residential long-term care refers to senior living settings that provide care to residents living in one facility together. Care ranges across a spectrum of care needs, including facilities for independent living, assisted living, memory care, personal care, and skilled nursing.

Stereotypical portrayals of older people living in residential long-term care

With a focus on residential long-term care for older people, the portrayals of residential care include the dependent and frail older people, often receiving care.

Previous research points to the mostly negative tone and impressions of danger and fear in North American news media covering residential care [13, 14]. The disastrous discourse of residential care and the negative portrayal of older people as being at risk and vulnerable were especially apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic [15]. Our research has shown that these portrayals of residential care and residents persist, as older people are often spoken for and excluded from the public dialogue about their care and support. Two semi-systematic reviews of existing research on media portrayals of older people found that negative portrayals were dominant in Western and Asian print media, with older people viewed as more of a burden, as frail non-contributors to society [9, 16]. These depictions were globally widespread in print and social media in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic [17, 18].

More recently, it has been found that long-term care institutions and civil society organizations tend to portray older people in need of care and support as socially and physically active in their media profiles [19–21]. Such narrow portrayals distance from the infirmity in long-term care and rarely reflect realistic lives of older people, which suggests an attempt to break the negative stereotype of older people in care settings as wholly frail and vulnerable. While the producers of such stereotypically "positive" portrayals appear to create a new way of thinking about older people and later life, they inadvertently create an idealistic image of the older persons' health status.

Challenges to non-stereotypical portrayals

Our research has found that the stereotypically polarized portrayals of older people and later life in the media can be partly attributed to the exclusion of older people from generating portrayals of themselves, as well as from discussing residential care and issues beyond the care services they receive. Residents of long-term care face several challenges to engagement in this process, including institutional factors as well as issues relating to privacy and ethics.

Media professionals (e.g., journalists, photographers, communication officers) could possibly encounter a dilemma in visually presenting the oldest-old people when preventing unethical practices and data breaches. As a case in point, long-term care providers believe that it is offensive to display residents in insecure and uncomfortable situations and disclose information about declining health [22]. Additionally, municipal officials argue that they must protect privacy, which led them to use the photos of body parts of older people such as wrinkled hands [23], effectively disembodying the older person. These practices can result in the under-representation of older people, especially the oldest-old members of society.

The restricted access to long-term care institutions could result in a distorted portrayal and exclusion of older people's voices in the media. Journalists and other outside entities seeking to interview residents may be prohibited from speaking to a resident by facility managers. The managers argue that restricting access is for the residents' protection but simultaneously express desire to control the narrative surrounding long-term care institutions and portray it in a positive light.

Since residents receiving long-term care may face hearing, cognitive, technological, or other types of impairments, content producers (from both within and outside of long-term care institutions) may perceive challenges that discourage them from including residents' authentic voices and experiences. In this regard, it is less likely for content producers to capture the real conditions of older people in long-term care, engage them in constructive conversations concerning public issues, and make them feel they are heard and seen. The lack of consultation and first-hand experience with older people in long-term care could contribute to a dominance of portrayals of active, healthy, and youthful older people in the media. Another study finds that the marketing purpose of long-term care institutions was one of the factors contributing to mainstreaming the portrayal of socially active and physically healthy residents [22].

Capturing more diversity and complexity in media portrayals of older people could help us move beyond the simplistic binary-dichotomy towards a more nuanced understanding of heterogeneous experiences among ageing individuals.

Policy recommendations

1

Include a heterogeneous long-term care ageing experience in media portrayals.

Long-term care residents can directly participate in creating media agendas, generating portrayals of ageing experiences, and evaluating images of their lives in long-term care institutions that are intended to meet the informational needs of residents, family relatives and the general public. It is imperative to ensure the inclusion of diverse residents' authentic voices and to construct ageing experiences from a first-person perspective, as this can help long-term institutions with creating alternative portrayals of older people and ageing. Residents can be provided with cameras or smartphones to capture and show daily routines and activities if they want; additionally, they can be invited to take part in media policy development and assessments of media content.

We encourage the institutions to recognise the potential of residents, present their coherent life stories, as well as highlight heterogeneity in later life in terms of personal goals, interests, hobbies and feelings. Media portrayals can highlight residents' potential in several aspects, such as their pro-social behaviours, knowledge of life, self-reflection or insight, social decision making, spirituality and different perspectives [26].

2

Reduce social stigmas surrounding residential long-term care.

Stigmatization of residential long-term care can include the unfavourable image of old age which equates old age as a sign of decline and perceives older people as no longer human [24]. This may lead to patronizing and ageist media messages. Thus, content producers should be sensitive to the discourse of old age in the given society when they report on issues relating to residential long-term care.

We suggest drawing attention to both the problems in residential care needing improvement, as well as the benefits of residential care for older people, such as improved quality of life and socialization that many residents experience. Including and focusing on the individuals' lived experiences, while being conscious of the harmful effects of stereotypically portraying older people, will promote an authentic image of residents living in long-term care settings. In practice, producers can present explicit messages combating ageism in their content and advocacy, and work with researchers and policymakers who have specialist knowledge on media and long-term care. When tackling ageist portrayals, media producers should also address stigmas surrounding long-term care.

Policy recommendations

3

Provide training for media professionals working around residential long-term care.

There is a need to offer professional training for different media professionals (e.g., journalists, visual designers, advertisers) in terms of promoting inclusive portrayals of older people. The communication guidelines, such as *Campaigning to Tackle Ageism: Current Practices and Suggestions for Moving Forward* by World Health Organization and *Framing Strategies to Advance Ageing and Address Ageism as Policy Issues* by FrameWorks Institute can be used in such professional training. It is also crucial to train media professionals to improve their communication with older people and residents in long-term care. For instance, they should clearly introduce their design of media programmes to residents, be aware of the person's health issues which perhaps influence her/his speaking and understanding, as well as be attentive to challenges or opportunities associated with the communication environment (e.g., the aspect of digital divide).

4

Encourage education in ageism and construct new images of long-term care.

The media is one major force that shapes societal perceptions and attitudes towards old age and ageing. It has been commonly found to (re-)produce and perpetuate negative construction of old age (seen as ageism). Ageist perceptions and behaviours among content producers can lead to negative portrayals of older people in the media and advertising [25]. To better reduce stereotypical portrayals of older people, governments and authorities should allocate financial resources to support education in ageism and construct newer images of old age in the media, including experiences of residential long-term care. This is important for fostering a fundamental shift in how we think about old age and ageing.

Policy recommendations

5

Support providers of care to tackle the privacy issue of residents in the media.

Health care professionals, long-term care workers, managers of long-term institutions and healthcare providers should understand the importance of not overstepping residents in regard to their representation in the media, but rather promoting residents' experiences of ageing and care. The media production process should respect individual residents' preferences and support their understanding of the process and consent. Additionally, residential care management may receive training on national and region-specific health information privacy laws to understand how to support outside entities' efforts to access residents while still following established protocol.

Collaborating with media professionals and supporting their access to speaking with residents without oversight or interference can promote a more authentic image of ageing, including the positive outcomes of care. Furthermore, allowing for an authentic portrayal of the care experience can draw attention to areas for improvement in the care setting which can prompt governmental and policy support and aide to facilities in times of need.

Conclusion

Accountability of media content producers may entail the increased participation of older people and other civil society actors (e.g., older people's and care users' organisations) in generating and evaluating social content relating to older people, while also supporting older adults to engage in policymaking and with public issues.

Authentic, balanced, diverse and thoughtful media portrayals of older people in residential long-term care are necessary for reducing ageism in the media and society. When residential care homes need resources during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, realistically portraying residents' experiences can support the well-functioning of care homes and optimize the delivery of service and distribution of funds and support. While identifying problems in long-term care is important to improve care conditions, it is necessary to balance this messaging with new portrayals of older people and the inclusion of diverse lived experiences in content production. Training and support of content producers can possibly reduce the portrayals that lead to ageism.

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Acknowledgements

We thank Nena Georgantzi, Annika Taghizadeh Larsson, Liat Ayalon and Angela Kydd for reviewing this policy brief and contributing with constructive feedback.

This policy brief is part of a project that has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 764632.

September 2022
Federica Previtali

AGE(ISM), DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN THE WORKPLACE

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO AGE-INCLUSIVE PRACTICES AND JOB INTERVIEWS

Executive summary

The problem

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) is a topic of interest for an increasing number of organisations, private or public, and Human Resources (HR) professionals. DEI policies enable workers' full potential and advance companies' social sustainability. Inclusivity boosts work engagement and a growing number of employees expect their management to support DEI policies and implement them in practice. Within DEI, age is slowly being introduced as a social category to be better understood and managed in the workplace. The United Nations have declared 2021-2030 the Decade of Healthy Ageing and companies and **HR professionals can play a major role in making organisation a place to age healthy. The attention toward age, as a social category and identity, is strategic for companies, not only because the workforce is ageing, but also because, ageism is the most experienced form of discrimination across all ages in Europe** (Eurobarometer, 2019).

This policy brief addresses two issues: 1. **a gap in the knowledge about age and ageism in the workplace,** and 2. **a gap between policies and practice in DEI and fighting ageism**. First, age is considered a chronological variable to be managed, but it is often neglected as an identity matter. Second, DEI policies' effectiveness is unclear, and professionals are left alone in translating public commitment into everyday practices. To close these gaps, tips and recommendations are listed, among others, **a guide to age-inclusive job interviews** and **training based on the social and interactional dynamics in the workplace.**

There is much more to say about age and ageism in the workplace, this brief focuses on understanding age and ageism, making DEI an accountable goal, diversity training and age-inclusive job interviews. For a more coherent discussion, please see the policy report by Varlamova et al. (2021).

The recommendations

01 INSTITUTIONAL GOALS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The first step to creating a change is to engage in an ethical and political discussion at the management level about putting DEI and the fight against ageism at the core of efficient organizational practices. Management can foster diversity, inclusion, and equity by setting it as an accountable goal in internal practices, not only as public commitment. Once accountability for DEI is defined, then training and guidelines about defining and tracking it can be put in place.

The recommendations

02

KNOWLEDGE OF AGE(ISM)

To actively fight ageism, professionals need to gain more knowledge about age and ageism itself. Age is more than chronological age, and ageism is more than overt discriminatory actions. Educate yourself, your workers and your managers about age and ageism. Age and ageism are situational and relational, so a one-size-fits-all explanation is not enough.
To understand age and ageism involve your workers in a discussion about them: how do they experience them? Where? When? Policies are more accepted if they are co-created, and they are more successful if they are shaped to the context. Including minorities workers, that experience multiple discriminations in their daily jobs, is fundamental to fostering inclusion and unfold what are the taken-for-granted norms in your company.
Analyse your company, and track your internal data about diversity, age distribution, age in teams, promotions and recruitment.

03

TRAINING ABOUT BIASES IN WORKPLACE PRACTICES

Training is a necessary part of age-inclusive actions to educate professionals and guide them towards creating a more inclusive environment. Training is more effective if tailored around workplace practices. Biases, also on age, are used by professionals on certain occasions and to achieve certain goals at work. To be effective and have an impact, consider implementing training including actual examples of workplace interactions and based on workplace practices (e.g., recruitment). Offering such training to all workers at the beginning of their position and throughout their careers will support the creation of an inclusive environment and the actualisation of equal processes.

Definition of main concepts

AGE

Age is a social category on which groups can be formed and identities are defined. It is often conceived as chronological age, or calendar age (when you were born), but it is more complicated than that. Age is relational, context-dependent, and accomplished in interaction. It entails psychological age (the self-perception or social perception of age), subjective age (how old an individual feels depending on the context, and the age group with which they identify), organisational age (ageing inside the organisation), life stage (the changes associated with moving through different stages of life and expectations related, e.g., from working life to retirement) (Previtali, et. al, 2020; De Lange, et al., 2021).

AGEISM

Ageism is defined as stereotypes (how we think), prejudices (how we feel), and discrimination (how we act) based on age towards ourselves or others (WHO, 2020). It concerns every age. It relates to feeling the "wrong age" or being considered "too young" or "too old" for something or being someone.
Ageism is linked to the normative notions of life stages, or what are we expected to be at a certain age. In our daily life, ageism is a set of discursive practices in which we are all to some extent involved. Everyday ageism is very common, and it does not take the form of only a single discriminative action but is a complex nest of cumulative practices, which are often perceived as normal (e.g. complaining about older/younger colleagues). Ageism is more discreet than overt and liable age discrimination.

AGE DISCRIMINATION

In the EU, workers are legally protected against age discrimination. Age discrimination entails being treated unfairly when applying for a job because of age, colleagues treating someone badly (calling names or making jokes) because of their age or refusing to be promoted or receive training because of age. Age discrimination refers to legally reportable behaviours.

DIVERSITY

Diversity is more than a headcount matter. Diversity of identities is the diverse intersection and belonging of social categories, including gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, language,(dis)ability, age, religious commitment, or political perspective.

INCLUSION

Inclusion is about everyone. It means that persons with different identities feel and are valued, leveraged, and welcomed within a given setting. It entails understanding the complex shaping of identities, the intersection of social categories, and tracking the power dynamics that minority groups face in the workplace.

Introduction

Working in an inclusive environment that does not discriminate against personal diversities is a commitment by an increasing number of organisations, and a new goal for HR professionals. **Age is the most common ground for harassment and discrimination in the workplace: 35% of workers between 50 and 64 years old and 42% of workers over 64 years old experience it** (OECD, 2020; Varlamova et al., 2021). Workers feel discriminated against because they are either "too young" or "too old" when looking for a job and, in the workplace. Moreover, in Europe, **employees feel that not enough is done to support age inclusion in their workplace** (Eurobarometer, 2019).

The **ageing of the workforce** is a demographic change that is currently reshaping the look of the labour force. The increase in longevity and the related increase in retirement age led to the prolongation of working life. Prolonging careers also means that people of different chronological ages are cohabiting in the workplace. **Ageism does not only concern older workers (whether considered older than 40, 50 or 60 years old) but everyone.** Age-related workplace policies consider ageing and older workers (Bohem & Bal, 2020) but lack a focus on ageism. **Age stereotypes are barriers, especially to inclusive recruitment** (Abrams et al., 2016). In addition, due to the subtle ways through which ageism operates, an ageist culture might be reproduced without HR professionals and managers acknowledging it.

Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) is a concept that has taken a central role in businesses, governments, non-profits, and other organizations. **DEI is a tool that can be used to create a more age-inclusive workplace and address the widely spread, though overlooked, phenomenon of ageism. Ageism, as a form of inequality, is often overlooked.** Even equality advocates report prejudices towards older persons and may sustain certain types of ageism, such as defending the necessity that older persons should step back to leave space for younger generations (Martin & North, 2021).

The gap between policy and practice in the workplace

The challenge: Putting the manifesto into action

At the European level, one of the main initiatives promoted to fight discrimination in the workplace is the **Diversity Charter** (European Commission, 2020). In 2010, the European Commission launched the EU Platform of Diversity Charters to sustain enterprises, public institutions and NGOs in promoting and valuing diversity, inclusion, and solidarity in their activities. Organisations can sign the charter and **publicly commit to creating and maintaining an inclusive work environment for all their employees, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, age, disability, and sexual orientation.**

This type of charter is signed by higher management and often implemented, in practice, by HR professionals through DEI initiatives. Usually, DEI is a set of spot-on interventions implemented by the HR team. **It is still a challenge for HR professionals to raise awareness around DEI and encourage commitment across all functions. Sharing the ownership of DEI actions can help raise commitment in the workplace.**

A recent review paper about discourses and ageism shows that **certain managerial discourses about diversity can be even counter-beneficial for organisations** (Previtali et al. 2020). When equality policies are in place, but their use in local workplace practices is not clear, managers might fear behaving inappropriately towards workers. This leads to avoiding the delicate matter and further excludes, for example, older workers and reinforces ageism (Phillipson et al., 2019). **The gap between signing "the DEI manifesto" and actualizing it in practice is detrimental to the effective promotion of diversity and the realization of equality and inclusion on an everyday level**.

The challenge: Accountability and effective workplace practices

Research investigating **effective institutional practices shows that the effectiveness is dependent on the institutional goal towards which these same practices are directed** (Torien et al., 2011). When we ask whether HR practices are effectively inclusive, we need to question which are the institutional goals towards which these practices are directed. For example, a DEI policy is to perform diverse and inclusive recruitment. Nevertheless, in daily practice, recruiters might need to achieve competing goals, such as being time-efficient and expediting decisions. Time efficiency might hinder the inclusivity of the process and push workers to use some short-cuts or biases in their decisions, such as age-job fit.

A recent review on ageism in working life demonstrates that **one of the most widespread ageist discourses, which also influence recruitment practices, is the "age-job fit" or "team fit"** (Previtali et al., 2020). Workers are denied positions because their age would not fit the organisation. Hence, in their daily practices, HR professionals might be uncertain if they should follow a time-efficient, may be biased, process or inclusive, not routinised one. **Incoherent and unclear definitions of values and goals empty DEI policies of their efficacy and, therefore, make unclear who is accountable for what in workplace practices.**

The gap between policy and practice

The solution: Set DEI and fighting ageism as institutional gaols and define accountability

Policies are put into practice in everyday working life by employees through their social interactions. **Defining the institutional goals of workplace processes and practices is a political and ethical question.** Considering the tension within this question will help management create a lasting change in their organisation. **A clear and public commitment will support the accountability of DEI values in policies and practices.**

Start, support, and perform a continuous, integral and inclusive discussion about whether DEI is an organisational goal, for which workers are always accountable, regardless of other competing objectives. This will support the moral accountability of local actions and achieve a general commitment. Moreover, this definition can **help workers to feel safe in promoting DEI values also when they might compete with other organisational goals**. If the organisation is accountable for DEI, then it becomes part of workers' organisational identity.

When committing to diversity and inclusion, do not only publicly endorse the charter, but make sure to **create a culture** that supports it. This is possible by defining which organizational goal each process supports and making sure that this is not in contrast with fighting ageism and is diverse and inclusive, also regarding age.

Ageism causes disengagement

in a compay of 10.000 employees

it causes 5.000 days of absence

which equal a loos of -600.000 $/year

It has been shown that ageism entails disengagement, and disengagement implies, in a company of 10,000 people in the US, 5000 days of absence, resulting in an economic loss of $ 600,000 per year. (Wilson, 2006)

Age and ageism in the workplace

The challenge: Understanding diversty and age

Diversity is often treated as a headcount matter (e.g., how many workers are over 50 years old?). A more critical understanding of diversity, and social identities, including age, support more effective implementation of DEI (Koellen, 2019). Diversity is more complex than a rainbow representation of external features. It entails understanding the **complex shaping of identities and tracking the power dynamics that minority groups face in the workplace.**

Age is more complex than chronological age (De Lange et al., 2021). Coherent and comprehensive policies about age will stem from a coherent understanding of what age is and how it is perceived at work by workers themselves. Age is situational and contextual, as are all identities. People do not embrace only one identity per time and across all situations, but identity is flexible and can be negotiated based on interactional goals and situations.

Recent research based on analysis of real performance appraisal reviews showed that workers can invoke their age, in the form of their experience or in the form of the passing of time within the organisation, to accomplish different goals (Previtali & Spedale, 2021). Therefore, not only workers can resume different types of age identities depending on what their goal is, but they can employ age stereotypes to achieve the business at hand, such as justifying their performance. **Managers** accept these accounts, which are in line with shared age stereotypes, in the workplace, and **lose opportunities to look behind the "age" and better understand the real motives that hinder or support performance.**

The solution: Take a bottom-up approach and engage in discussion about age and ageism

Understanding age involves a discussion about age, age identity and ageism. Policies are more effective and more accepted if they are context-sensitive. **Inspire your internal policies through a discussion with your workers and HR professionals that will put them into practice.** Moreover, the discussion needs to include and give room to the minorities that are representing diversity. **Age intersects with gender, origin, and sexual orientation. Ageism intersects with racism, sexism, etc.** Actions that for the majority are perceived as non-discriminatory can be perceived as prejudicial by minorities, so their point of view needs to not only be included but listened to and represented. **Age is more complex than chronological age,** and if policies address ageing and ageism, they will be more effective if deriving from a coherent understanding of what age is and how it is perceived at work by workers themselves.

Strat and support an open discussion to produce a joint understanding of what diversity is, how it is lived in the organisations, what stereotypes, prejudices and discriminations are, and how they are perceived by workers from all levels. **To uncover hidden biases, the discussion can address the assumptions and taken-for-granted norms in the workplace** (e.g., what is the taken-for-granted age, are measured in place only for younger or older workers, who are the talents?). Often ageism is more hidden than blatant discrimination, and it can be silent and hidden behind taken-for-granted norms, actions, and guidelines.

Diversity training

The challenge: Effective training on biases

In the list of examples of good practices introduced by the Diversity Charter signatories, there are "training sessions on unconscious bias put in place for recruiters and human resources professionals" (European Commission, 2022). The underlying assumption is that good intention are not enough, and we are vulnerable to the habits of our minds and to our culture, which is embedded with prejudice (Cox & Devine, 2019). **Research has proven that age biases do affect organisational decisions:** older workers are less favourably employed (Ahmed, Andersson & Hammarstedt, 2012; Berde & Lazlo Mago´, 2022; Zaniboni et al, 2019) and managers believe that older workers have fewer physical stamina, less ability to learn technologies (Van Dalen & Henriksen, 2019). Nevertheless, even among researchers, there is no agreement that people are acting in a biased way due to the mental construct called implicit biases. One criticism is that real life is different from experimental settings, where implicit biases are tested.

The goal is to properly handle biases in interaction, empower professionals to be, and make other, accountable for them, instead of deleting them. Studies on video recordings of real job interviews have found that age stereotypes are used in talk to construct solidarity with recruiters (Previtali, Nikander, Ruusuvuori, 2022). There is always a reason for which people employ prejudicial views and stereotypes, as there is always an institutional goal in workplace practices. **Alongside training on implicit biases, training based on social and interactional dynamics will be beneficial to give HR professionals and workers tools to act inclusively in their daily job.**

The solution: Promote training on biases based on workplace practices

Diversity is a delicate matter. This delicacy can result in workers not knowing how to best manage it in their social interaction and how to handle it when it surfaces.

Educational intervention is one of the key actions to advance the DEI agenda at an organisational level. Not only HR professionals, but each worker can take advantage of DEI training in their daily work. **Providing mandatory DEI training at the beginning of each position, not as a spot-on initiative, ensures participation in a coherent and inclusive organisational culture.**

When the institutional goal is to promote and ensure diversity and inclusion, including fighting ageism, employees can act on this goal to respond to the possible use of stereotypes during practices, without disrupting the processes and the conversation. Hence, training on diversity and inclusion can not only deconstruct the myths that biases entail but also be practice-oriented.

Training based on social interactional dynamics can foster an understanding of the "real" situations where biases are used in the workplace and develop strategies to respond to them. Reversing the training from a top-down to a **bottom-up approach, and focusing on the practices**, can contribute to reducing the gap between policies and practice by showing the real-life situation and giving **centrality to social interactions**. There is an increasing movement of communication training based on authentic examples of what happens during workplace interaction, which is proved beneficial e.g. crisis negotiation, and cold sell calls (Stokoe, 2020).

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO AGE-INCLUSIVE JOB INTERVIEWS

Recruitment and hiring are the key areas of intervention to ensure an inclusive workplace and fight ageism. Here are some practical suggestions for inclusive communication during job interviews, putting into practice the recommendations that are listed above. *The tips are based on scientific analyses of real job interviews.*

1

DEFINE WHAT YOU ARE LOOKING FOR, ALSO TO THE CANDIDATE.

One of the main obstacles to an inclusive recruitment One of the main obstacles to an inclusive recruitment process is the belief that there is an "ideal person-job fit" which is based on an appropriate candidate's age or stage of life. This job-fit ideal should be dismissed at the organisational level to prioritise competencies. Likewise, candidates should have a clear idea of what competencies are needed.

2

USE A LONGER SHORT LIST OF CANDIDATES.

Adding more persons to the short-list (for example from 3 to 5) is a way to include people that usually are not considered the "perfect fit" and increases the representation of minorities, women and different ages.

3

USE A PANEL OF RECRUITERS/HIRING MANAGERS

To prevent the influence of similarity on the decisions, also the recruiters' panel should be diverse regarding gender, age, origin etc.

4

USE A SET OF QUESTIONS, BUT ALLOW FOR INTERACTIONAL DIVERSITY

Having a set of questions can prevent asking different questions to different candidates because of their features. Nevertheless, job interviews are primarily an interactional process, so recruiters can allow interactional dynamics to emerge.

5

USE NARRATIVE QUESTIONS AND NOT CATEGORY-BASED QUESTIONS

Ask questions that invite job applicants to narrate their personal and work experiences, to create an inclusive process where the stereotypes linked to categories are not relevant. When possible prejudicial use of categories is mobilised in talk, a recruiter can always go back to ask about personal experience to avoid the "group-based" talk. Possible questions that can trigger stereotypical use of categories are: "what type of worker are you?" "What type of workplace do you work in?"; "Why are you the right person?". Instead, use narrative questions, such as "tell me about your workday", "walk me through an episode where you were under pressure", or "tell me what you did in X situation".

6

REFRAME AND DELETE THE POSSIBLE PREJUDICES

Ageist attitudes can emerge also during job interviews. Research has shown that the direct challenge of stereotypes might disrupt the conversation and the trust among speakers. Instead, re-formulating the stereotypical use of age, by focusing on the problem instead of the category is a way to "delete" the stereotypes from the conversation and focus on the topic (Stokoe, 2015).
For example, if a job applicant argues that they would be a good candidate thanks to their age, a recruiter could focus on the matter of "being a good candidate" and ask for an example for which he would be one of them, instead of agreeing or making the young a relevant criterion for selection.

Conclusion

This brief reflects on possible ways to bridge workplace policies and practices about diversity and inclusion, with an emphasis on ageism. The focus is on the obstacles that workers and HR professionals may face in their practices and how they can be resolved. **Creating an inclusive environment is a complex, holistic process, but more importantly, a collaborative one where accountability is defined and shared.**

To resolve the gap between policies and practices, **defining diversity & inclusion and fighting ageism as institutional goals** is a key step. In this way, workers will feel empowered to act upon them in their practices. **To empower workers to operate towards an inclusive workplace, training about diversity and inclusion is crucial**, already at the stage of employees' **onboarding.** This training, to be effective, stems from a bottom-up discussion about what diversity, age, and ageism are. This **discussion** gives voice to older and younger workers, as well as minorities. Training can cover implicit biases and they can be **practice-oriented** to provide a concrete reflection on what happens when biases are used in work-life.

Finally, the brief provides **concrete advice for developing inclusive communications in job interviews, derived from an analysis of real recruitment practices.**

Accountability

Make DEI and fighting ageism an institutional goal to promote accountability.

Training on age and ageism

Start bottom-up training with a discussion on age and ageism, giving voice to employees' understanding and minorities.

Focus on practices and biases

Develop training starting from where biases are used in practice and how to manage them in interaction.

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All ideas expressed and findings in policy breif are solely those of the authors and do not represent those of the funding agency.

Funded by the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme of the European Union

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 764632.

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September 2022
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AGE(ISM), DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN THE WORKPLACE

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO AGE-INCLUSIVE PRACTICES AND JOB INTERVIEWS

Executive summary

The problem

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) is a topic of interest for an increasing number of organisations, private or public, and Human Resources (HR) professionals. DEI policies enable workers' full potential and advance companies' social sustainability. Inclusivity boosts work engagement and a growing number of employees expect their management to support DEI policies and implement them in practice. Within DEI, age is slowly being introduced as a social category to be better understood and managed in the workplace. The United Nations have declared 2021-2030 the Decade of Healthy Ageing and companies and **HR professionals can play a major role in making organisation a place to age healthy. The attention toward age, as a social category and identity, is strategic for companies, not only because the workforce is ageing, but also because, ageism is the most experienced form of discrimination across all ages in Europe** (Eurobarometer, 2019).

This policy brief addresses two issues: 1. **a gap in the knowledge about age and ageism in the workplace,** and 2. **a gap between policies and practice in DEI and fighting ageism**. First, age is considered a chronological variable to be managed, but it is often neglected as an identity matter. Second, DEI policies' effectiveness is unclear, and professionals are left alone in translating public commitment into everyday practices. To close these gaps, tips and recommendations are listed, among others, **a guide to age-inclusive job interviews** and **training based on the social and interactional dynamics in the workplace.**

There is much more to say about age and ageism in the workplace, this brief focuses on understanding age and ageism, making DEI an accountable goal, diversity training and age-inclusive job interviews. For a more coherent discussion, please see the policy report by Varlamova et al. (2021).

The recommendations

01 INSTITUTIONAL GOALS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The first step to creating a change is to engage in an ethical and political discussion at the management level about putting DEI and the fight against ageism at the core of efficient organizational practices. Management can foster diversity, inclusion, and equity by setting it as an accountable goal in internal practices, not only as public commitment. Once accountability for DEI is defined, then training and guidelines about defining and tracking it can be put in place.

The recommendations

02

KNOWLEDGE OF AGE(ISM)

To actively fight ageism, professionals need to gain more knowledge about age and ageism itself. Age is more than chronological age, and ageism is more than overt discriminatory actions. Educate yourself, your workers and your managers about age and ageism. Age and ageism are situational and relational, so a one-size-fits-all explanation is not enough.
To understand age and ageism involve your workers in a discussion about them: how do they experience them? Where? When? Policies are more accepted if they are co-created, and they are more successful if they are shaped to the context. Including minorities workers, that experience multiple discriminations in their daily jobs, is fundamental to fostering inclusion and unfold what are the taken-for-granted norms in your company.
Analyse your company, and track your internal data about diversity, age distribution, age in teams, promotions and recruitment.

03

TRAINING ABOUT BIASES IN WORKPLACE PRACTICES

Training is a necessary part of age-inclusive actions to educate professionals and guide them towards creating a more inclusive environment. Training is more effective if tailored around workplace practices. Biases, also on age, are used by professionals on certain occasions and to achieve certain goals at work. To be effective and have an impact, consider implementing training including actual examples of workplace interactions and based on workplace practices (e.g., recruitment). Offering such training to all workers at the beginning of their position and throughout their careers will support the creation of an inclusive environment and the actualisation of equal processes.

Definition of main concepts

AGE

Age is a social category on which groups can be formed and identities are defined. It is often conceived as chronological age, or calendar age (when you were born), but it is more complicated than that. Age is relational, context-dependent, and accomplished in interaction. It entails psychological age (the self-perception or social perception of age), subjective age (how old an individual feels depending on the context, and the age group with which they identify), organisational age (ageing inside the organisation), life stage (the changes associated with moving through different stages of life and expectations related, e.g., from working life to retirement) (Previtali, et. al, 2020; De Lange, et al., 2021).

AGEISM

Ageism is defined as stereotypes (how we think), prejudices (how we feel), and discrimination (how we act) based on age towards ourselves or others (WHO, 2020). It concerns every age. It relates to feeling the "wrong age" or being considered "too young" or "too old" for something or being someone.
Ageism is linked to the normative notions of life stages, or what are we expected to be at a certain age. In our daily life, ageism is a set of discursive practices in which we are all to some extent involved. Everyday ageism is very common, and it does not take the form of only a single discriminative action but is a complex nest of cumulative practices, which are often perceived as normal (e.g. complaining about older/younger colleagues). Ageism is more discreet than overt and liable age discrimination.

AGE DISCRIMINATION

In the EU, workers are legally protected against age discrimination. Age discrimination entails being treated unfairly when applying for a job because of age, colleagues treating someone badly (calling names or making jokes) because of their age or refusing to be promoted or receive training because of age. Age discrimination refers to legally reportable behaviours.

DIVERSITY

Diversity is more than a headcount matter. Diversity of identities is the diverse intersection and belonging of social categories, including gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, language,(dis)ability, age, religious commitment, or political perspective.

INCLUSION

Inclusion is about everyone. It means that persons with different identities feel and are valued, leveraged, and welcomed within a given setting. It entails understanding the complex shaping of identities, the intersection of social categories, and tracking the power dynamics that minority groups face in the workplace.

Introduction

Working in an inclusive environment that does not discriminate against personal diversities is a commitment by an increasing number of organisations, and a new goal for HR professionals. **Age is the most common ground for harassment and discrimination in the workplace: 35% of workers between 50 and 64 years old and 42% of workers over 64 years old experience it** (OECD, 2020; Varlamova et al., 2021). Workers feel discriminated against because they are either "too young" or "too old" when looking for a job and, in the workplace. Moreover, in Europe, **employees feel that not enough is done to support age inclusion in their workplace** (Eurobarometer, 2019).

The **ageing of the workforce** is a demographic change that is currently reshaping the look of the labour force. The increase in longevity and the related increase in retirement age led to the prolongation of working life. Prolonging careers also means that people of different chronological ages are cohabiting in the workplace. **Ageism does not only concern older workers (whether considered older than 40, 50 or 60 years old) but everyone.** Age-related workplace policies consider ageing and older workers (Bohem & Bal, 2020) but lack a focus on ageism. **Age stereotypes are barriers, especially to inclusive recruitment** (Abrams et al., 2016). In addition, due to the subtle ways through which ageism operates, an ageist culture might be reproduced without HR professionals and managers acknowledging it.

Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) is a concept that has taken a central role in businesses, governments, non-profits, and other organizations. **DEI is a tool that can be used to create a more age-inclusive workplace and address the widely spread, though overlooked, phenomenon of ageism. Ageism, as a form of inequality, is often overlooked.** Even equality advocates report prejudices towards older persons and may sustain certain types of ageism, such as defending the necessity that older persons should step back to leave space for younger generations (Martin & North, 2021).

The gap between policy and practice in the workplace

The challenge: Putting the manifesto into action

At the European level, one of the main initiatives promoted to fight discrimination in the workplace is the **Diversity Charter** (European Commission, 2020). In 2010, the European Commission launched the EU Platform of Diversity Charters to sustain enterprises, public institutions and NGOs in promoting and valuing diversity, inclusion, and solidarity in their activities. Organisations can sign the charter and **publicly commit to creating and maintaining an inclusive work environment for all their employees, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, age, disability, and sexual orientation.**

This type of charter is signed by higher management and often implemented, in practice, by HR professionals through DEI initiatives. Usually, DEI is a set of spot-on interventions implemented by the HR team. **It is still a challenge for HR professionals to raise awareness around DEI and encourage commitment across all functions. Sharing the ownership of DEI actions can help raise commitment in the workplace.**

A recent review paper about discourses and ageism shows that **certain managerial discourses about diversity can be even counter-beneficial for organisations** (Previtali et al. 2020). When equality policies are in place, but their use in local workplace practices is not clear, managers might fear behaving inappropriately towards workers. This leads to avoiding the delicate matter and further excludes, for example, older workers and reinforces ageism (Phillipson et al., 2019). **The gap between signing "the DEI manifesto" and actualizing it in practice is detrimental to the effective promotion of diversity and the realization of equality and inclusion on an everyday level**.

The challenge: Accountability and effective workplace practices

Research investigating **effective institutional practices shows that the effectiveness is dependent on the institutional goal towards which these same practices are directed** (Torien et al., 2011). When we ask whether HR practices are effectively inclusive, we need to question which are the institutional goals towards which these practices are directed. For example, a DEI policy is to perform diverse and inclusive recruitment. Nevertheless, in daily practice, recruiters might need to achieve competing goals, such as being time-efficient and expediting decisions. Time efficiency might hinder the inclusivity of the process and push workers to use some short-cuts or biases in their decisions, such as age-job fit.

A recent review on ageism in working life demonstrates that **one of the most widespread ageist discourses, which also influence recruitment practices, is the "age-job fit" or "team fit"** (Previtali et al., 2020). Workers are denied positions because their age would not fit the organisation. Hence, in their daily practices, HR professionals might be uncertain if they should follow a time-efficient, may be biased, process or inclusive, not routinised one. **Incoherent and unclear definitions of values and goals empty DEI policies of their efficacy and, therefore, make unclear who is accountable for what in workplace practices.**

The gap between policy and practice

The solution: Set DEI and fighting ageism as institutional gaols and define accountability

Policies are put into practice in everyday working life by employees through their social interactions. **Defining the institutional goals of workplace processes and practices is a political and ethical question.** Considering the tension within this question will help management create a lasting change in their organisation. **A clear and public commitment will support the accountability of DEI values in policies and practices.**

Start, support, and perform a continuous, integral and inclusive discussion about whether DEI is an organisational goal, for which workers are always accountable, regardless of other competing objectives. This will support the moral accountability of local actions and achieve a general commitment. Moreover, this definition can **help workers to feel safe in promoting DEI values also when they might compete with other organisational goals**. If the organisation is accountable for DEI, then it becomes part of workers' organisational identity.

When committing to diversity and inclusion, do not only publicly endorse the charter, but make sure to **create a culture** that supports it. This is possible by defining which organizational goal each process supports and making sure that this is not in contrast with fighting ageism and is diverse and inclusive, also regarding age.

Ageism causes disengagement

in a compay of 10.000 employees

it causes 5.000 days of absence

which equal a loos of -600.000 $/year

It has been shown that ageism entails disengagement, and disengagement implies, in a company of 10,000 people in the US, 5000 days of absence, resulting in an economic loss of $ 600,000 per year. (Wilson, 2006)

Age and ageism in the workplace

The challenge: Understanding diversty and age

Diversity is often treated as a headcount matter (e.g., how many workers are over 50 years old?). A more critical understanding of diversity, and social identities, including age, support more effective implementation of DEI (Koellen, 2019). Diversity is more complex than a rainbow representation of external features. It entails understanding the **complex shaping of identities and tracking the power dynamics that minority groups face in the workplace.**

Age is more complex than chronological age (De Lange et al., 2021). Coherent and comprehensive policies about age will stem from a coherent understanding of what age is and how it is perceived at work by workers themselves. Age is situational and contextual, as are all identities. People do not embrace only one identity per time and across all situations, but identity is flexible and can be negotiated based on interactional goals and situations.

Recent research based on analysis of real performance appraisal reviews showed that workers can invoke their age, in the form of their experience or in the form of the passing of time within the organisation, to accomplish different goals (Previtali & Spedale, 2021). Therefore, not only workers can resume different types of age identities depending on what their goal is, but they can employ age stereotypes to achieve the business at hand, such as justifying their performance. **Managers** accept these accounts, which are in line with shared age stereotypes, in the workplace, and **lose opportunities to look behind the "age" and better understand the real motives that hinder or support performance.**

The solution: Take a bottom-up approach and engage in discussion about age and ageism

Understanding age involves a discussion about age, age identity and ageism. Policies are more effective and more accepted if they are context-sensitive. **Inspire your internal policies through a discussion with your workers and HR professionals that will put them into practice.** Moreover, the discussion needs to include and give room to the minorities that are representing diversity. **Age intersects with gender, origin, and sexual orientation. Ageism intersects with racism, sexism, etc.** Actions that for the majority are perceived as non-discriminatory can be perceived as prejudicial by minorities, so their point of view needs to not only be included but listened to and represented. **Age is more complex than chronological age,** and if policies address ageing and ageism, they will be more effective if deriving from a coherent understanding of what age is and how it is perceived at work by workers themselves.

Strat and support an open discussion to produce a joint understanding of what diversity is, how it is lived in the organisations, what stereotypes, prejudices and discriminations are, and how they are perceived by workers from all levels. **To uncover hidden biases, the discussion can address the assumptions and taken-for-granted norms in the workplace** (e.g., what is the taken-for-granted age, are measured in place only for younger or older workers, who are the talents?). Often ageism is more hidden than blatant discrimination, and it can be silent and hidden behind taken-for-granted norms, actions, and guidelines.

Diversity training

The challenge: Effective training on biases

In the list of examples of good practices introduced by the Diversity Charter signatories, there are "training sessions on unconscious bias put in place for recruiters and human resources professionals" (European Commission, 2022). The underlying assumption is that good intention are not enough, and we are vulnerable to the habits of our minds and to our culture, which is embedded with prejudice (Cox & Devine, 2019). **Research has proven that age biases do affect organisational decisions:** older workers are less favourably employed (Ahmed, Andersson & Hammarstedt, 2012; Berde & Lazlo Mago´, 2022; Zaniboni et al, 2019) and managers believe that older workers have fewer physical stamina, less ability to learn technologies (Van Dalen & Henriksen, 2019). Nevertheless, even among researchers, there is no agreement that people are acting in a biased way due to the mental construct called implicit biases. One criticism is that real life is different from experimental settings, where implicit biases are tested.

The goal is to properly handle biases in interaction, empower professionals to be, and make other, accountable for them, instead of deleting them. Studies on video recordings of real job interviews have found that age stereotypes are used in talk to construct solidarity with recruiters (Previtali, Nikander, Ruusuvuori, 2022). There is always a reason for which people employ prejudicial views and stereotypes, as there is always an institutional goal in workplace practices. **Alongside training on implicit biases, training based on social and interactional dynamics will be beneficial to give HR professionals and workers tools to act inclusively in their daily job.**

The solution: Promote training on biases based on workplace practices

Diversity is a delicate matter. This delicacy can result in workers not knowing how to best manage it in their social interaction and how to handle it when it surfaces.

Educational intervention is one of the key actions to advance the DEI agenda at an organisational level. Not only HR professionals, but each worker can take advantage of DEI training in their daily work. **Providing mandatory DEI training at the beginning of each position, not as a spot-on initiative, ensures participation in a coherent and inclusive organisational culture.**

When the institutional goal is to promote and ensure diversity and inclusion, including fighting ageism, employees can act on this goal to respond to the possible use of stereotypes during practices, without disrupting the processes and the conversation. Hence, training on diversity and inclusion can not only deconstruct the myths that biases entail but also be practice-oriented.

Training based on social interactional dynamics can foster an understanding of the "real" situations where biases are used in the workplace and develop strategies to respond to them. Reversing the training from a top-down to a **bottom-up approach, and focusing on the practices**, can contribute to reducing the gap between policies and practice by showing the real-life situation and giving **centrality to social interactions**. There is an increasing movement of communication training based on authentic examples of what happens during workplace interaction, which is proved beneficial e.g. crisis negotiation, and cold sell calls (Stokoe, 2020).

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO AGE-INCLUSIVE JOB INTERVIEWS

Recruitment and hiring are the key areas of intervention to ensure an inclusive workplace and fight ageism. Here are some practical suggestions for inclusive communication during job interviews, putting into practice the recommendations that are listed above. *The tips are based on scientific analyses of real job interviews.*

1

DEFINE WHAT YOU ARE LOOKING FOR, ALSO TO THE CANDIDATE.

One of the main obstacles to an inclusive recruitment One of the main obstacles to an inclusive recruitment process is the belief that there is an "ideal person-job fit" which is based on an appropriate candidate's age or stage of life. This job-fit ideal should be dismissed at the organisational level to prioritise competencies. Likewise, candidates should have a clear idea of what competencies are needed.

2

USE A LONGER SHORT LIST OF CANDIDATES.

Adding more persons to the short-list (for example from 3 to 5) is a way to include people that usually are not considered the "perfect fit" and increases the representation of minorities, women and different ages.

3

USE A PANEL OF RECRUITERS/HIRING MANAGERS

To prevent the influence of similarity on the decisions, also the recruiters' panel should be diverse regarding gender, age, origin etc.

4

USE A SET OF QUESTIONS, BUT ALLOW FOR INTERACTIONAL DIVERSITY

Having a set of questions can prevent asking different questions to different candidates because of their features. Nevertheless, job interviews are primarily an interactional process, so recruiters can allow interactional dynamics to emerge.

5

USE NARRATIVE QUESTIONS AND NOT CATEGORY-BASED QUESTIONS

Ask questions that invite job applicants to narrate their personal and work experiences, to create an inclusive process where the stereotypes linked to categories are not relevant. When possible prejudicial use of categories is mobilised in talk, a recruiter can always go back to ask about personal experience to avoid the "group-based" talk. Possible questions that can trigger stereotypical use of categories are: "what type of worker are you?" "What type of workplace do you work in?"; "Why are you the right person?". Instead, use narrative questions, such as "tell me about your workday", "walk me through an episode where you were under pressure", or "tell me what you did in X situation".

6

REFRAME AND DELETE THE POSSIBLE PREJUDICES

Ageist attitudes can emerge also during job interviews. Research has shown that the direct challenge of stereotypes might disrupt the conversation and the trust among speakers. Instead, re-formulating the stereotypical use of age, by focusing on the problem instead of the category is a way to "delete" the stereotypes from the conversation and focus on the topic (Stokoe, 2015).
For example, if a job applicant argues that they would be a good candidate thanks to their age, a recruiter could focus on the matter of "being a good candidate" and ask for an example for which he would be one of them, instead of agreeing or making the young a relevant criterion for selection.

Conclusion

This brief reflects on possible ways to bridge workplace policies and practices about diversity and inclusion, with an emphasis on ageism. The focus is on the obstacles that workers and HR professionals may face in their practices and how they can be resolved. **Creating an inclusive environment is a complex, holistic process, but more importantly, a collaborative one where accountability is defined and shared.**

To resolve the gap between policies and practices, **defining diversity & inclusion and fighting ageism as institutional goals** is a key step. In this way, workers will feel empowered to act upon them in their practices. **To empower workers to operate towards an inclusive workplace, training about diversity and inclusion is crucial**, already at the stage of employees' **onboarding.** This training, to be effective, stems from a bottom-up discussion about what diversity, age, and ageism are. This **discussion** gives voice to older and younger workers, as well as minorities. Training can cover implicit biases and they can be **practice-oriented** to provide a concrete reflection on what happens when biases are used in work-life.

Finally, the brief provides **concrete advice for developing inclusive communications in job interviews, derived from an analysis of real recruitment practices.**

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Focus on practices and biases

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Funded by the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme of the European Union

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 764632.

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Acknowledgements:
I thank Lisa Warth, Pirjo Nikander, Nena Georgantzi and my colleagues at Tampere University for their directions and tcommetns at various stages of the process

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