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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 goals 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 company of 10.000 employees



it causes 5.000 days of absence



which equal a loss 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 diversity 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, Ruusuvaori, 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 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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