

Respecting Generation Differences At Work



Things sure have changed. Gone are the days when the necktie defined a dress code at work, when break rooms had oversized ashtrays, and the occasional wink was common if not completely acceptable. Today, the workplace is governed by values that erase demographic differences, with consequences for those who don't respect their grounding in principles of mutual respect.

One of the new twists is something called ageism – discrimination based on age. While as illegal as racism and sexism, it remains the most prevalent and difficult to prove of all workplace prejudices. Because of economic realities that include the deteriorating state of the once-reliable corporate pension, there are more “older” people in the workplace than ever before, which means that unlike other workplace prejudices, ageism is actually on the rise.

Age Is Just A Number

Ageism brings emotional distress to workers who feel passed over, discriminated against, and undervalued. By the year 2010, nearly 40% of the workforce was over 45. Polls show that 78% of “older” workers have already experienced some form of age discrimination, and over half no longer feel confident at work. A startling 83% say they would be challenged to find a new job at all, much less one where the stress of dealing with ageism would be less.

Who's Is Who In The Age Of Ageism

Before baby boomers came a generation of workers that are still frequently found on today's payrolls. This generation (born before 1946) is composed of traditionalists who respect authority and generally prefer to go “by the book.” They are loyal and dependable, and for the most part they don't understand boat-rockers who, in their view, don't appreciate the value of having a job.

Baby boomers now in their late 40s to early 60s are more likely to be workaholics. Many have experienced their share of economic hardship, including retirement plans savaged by corporate failures or bad investments. Too often they are working because they have to as much as because they want to.

Generation-X workers (born 1965 to 1978) have a markedly different view of employment, often attributable to having seen their parents slammed by corporate disasters. They are traditionally less loyal, frequently changing jobs for more money, and they value their time off as much as their employer's bottom line.

And finally, with their bikes parked next to all the SUVs, is Generation-Y (born 1979 to 1997), who can't imagine a world without the internet or 200 digital channels. They have little patience with anyone who doesn't seem to grasp technology as a way of not only working, but of living, and while they respect authority, that only goes so far when those in power don't see the world through their cultural lens.

Can't We All Just Get Along?

The key to co-existence is acknowledging differences among generations and accepting the idea that each age group has both something to learn and something to offer. When an older coworker does something you don't approve of, try not to blame their age. Try understanding things from their perspective. Rather than criticize, ask about their reasoning and consider an offer to help. If you're an older worker and feel isolated from your younger peers, ask a clarifying question instead of offering advice. Both ends of the generational spectrum make the mistake of thinking they know more than the other, when in fact they both have something to offer the workplace. You may not end up swapping digital downloads, but you might learn something about each other, and you may make a new friend along the way.

This information is not intended to replace the medical advice of your doctor or healthcare provider. Please consult your health care provider or EAP for advice about a personal concern or medical condition.