

Too Old, Too Young, And Too In-Between – No Age Is The Right Age For Working Women



If you have encountered an allegation of ageism while conducting a workplace investigation, chances are that it involved an older employee who was passed over in favour of someone younger.

Ageism occurs when people are treated differently based on assumptions related to their age (or perceived age) regardless of their individual characteristics, capabilities, and work performance. Originally, ageism was thought to include stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination targeted at older employees. However, ageism can affect employees at every age and stage of their career. Research is beginning to shed light on the impacts of ageism throughout the career lifecycle, especially for women. Sadly, this research concludes that for many working women, no age is the right age for success.

What the research is saying about the effects of ageism on women

According to a recent survey conducted by Women of Influence+, nearly 80% of women have encountered age-related discrimination in the workplace.¹ The survey included respondents living across 46 countries. It found that a woman's age is linked to misperceptions about her performance and abilities, throughout her career, with peaks occurring during the initial decade of work (0-10 years) and, again, in later years (21+).²

Survey respondents reported that ageism manifested in many ways and had a significant impact on their careers. For example, they described experiencing derogatory comments and jokes based on age, being excluded from informal networking and professional development opportunities, being unfairly treated during promotion processes and being overlooked for high profile projects. Some reported feeling invisible at work.³

Respondents also said that ageism not only affected their professional opportunities but took a toll on their personal well-being. They described increased stress, lower self-confidence, and a need to overcompensate to prove their worth. Respondents reported that to look the "right age" for a job, they would take steps to appear older or younger, depending on the stage of their career. When a woman spends money and time to look a certain way to meet society's expectations in relation to her appearance, this is sometimes referred to as the "pink tax." This tax is an additional burden on working women.⁴

Another study, conducted by the *Harvard Business Review* in 2023 surveyed women leaders working in four industries in the United States (higher education, faith-based non-profits, law, and healthcare).⁵ The results of this survey were divided into three categories: young women (under 40), middle-aged women (between 40 and 60), and older women (60+). Ultimately, respondents reported experiencing a “never-right” age bias.⁶ For example:

Younger women:

- Reported experiencing “role incredulity,” a form of gender bias where women are mistakenly assumed to be in support or stereotypically “female” roles. They described being mistaken for students, interns, trainees, support staff, and administrative assistants. They also reported experiencing “credibility deficit,” which occurs when a woman’s statements and expertise are not believed because of her perceived inexperience. Reports of “role incredulity” and “credibility deficit” were particularly widespread amongst respondents who identified as women of colour.⁷

Middle-aged women:

- Reported that there is no reprieve for them. For example, they said that between the ages of 40 and 60 they were perceived as difficult to manage due to family responsibilities or “impending menopause.” Women in their fifties also reported that they were judged because they had not “aged well” or did not “look vital.”⁸

Older women:

- Reported that they were not seen as valuable or relevant as compared to their male counterparts who were the same age. They said that they were largely ignored once they turned 60. One respondent noted that, at 60, she was no longer seen as “worth investing in with training or mentoring.” Another said that she was perceived as “too old” to be considered in her organization’s succession plan.⁹

Moreover, the “Women in the Workplace Report 2024,” conducted by McKinsey & Company, concluded that ageism may be contributing to the phenomenon known as “broken rung.” “Broken rung” occurs when younger women, especially women of colour, are less likely than men to be promoted to the first rung of management. The report noted that for every 100 men promoted to manager, just 81 women were promoted. The numbers were even lower for women of colour, with just 54 Black women and 65 Latino women being promoted.¹⁰

Why this research is important for investigators

The recent research on ageism sheds light on the pervasiveness of this form of discrimination throughout women’s careers. It also highlights, once again, the compounding effects of intersectionality on Women of Colour. It is the role of an investigator to identify the signs of discrimination. In the case of ageism, to identify the signs effectively, an investigator needs to be aware that ageism affects employees of all ages.

Footnotes

1 “Exploring the Impact of Ageism on Women in the Workplace: How Age-Related Stereotypes, Biases, and Discrimination Practices Impede Success” (2024), online (Women of Influence+): (<https://www.womenofinfluence.ca/ageism/>) (“Women of Influence+ Whitepaper”).

2 Page 4 of Women of Influence+ Whitepaper.

3 Page 10 of Women of Influence+ Whitepaper.

4 Page 11 of Women of Influence+ Whitepaper.

5 Amy Diehl, Leanne M. Dzubinski, and Amber L. Stephenson, "Women in Leadership Face Ageism at Every Age" (June 16, 2023), online (*Harvard Business Review*): (<https://hbr.org/2023/06/women-in-leadership-face-ageism-at-every-age>) ("HBR Survey").

6 Para 4 of HBR Survey.

7 Paras 7 and 8 of HBR Survey.

8 Para 10 of HBR Survey.

9 Paras 5 and 6 of HBR Survey.

10 "Women in the Workplace 2024 report: The 10th-anniversary report" (September 17, 2024), online (McKinsey & Company): (<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace>).

The content of this article is intended to provide a general guide to the subject matter. Specialist advice should be sought about your specific circumstances.

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