

Ageism And The Baby Boomers: Issues, Challenges And The TEAM Approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the issues and challenges associated with ageism relating to the Baby Boomer generation in Corporate America. Stereotypes about older workers are examined along with types of discrimination facing Boomers. The TEAM approach is proposed to combat ageism in the workplace. The strategy includes using intergenerational teams, education and training, awareness, accountability, and accommodation and mentoring as key components.

Keywords: ageism, Baby Boomers, age discrimination, intergenerational teams

INTRODUCTION

Generational studies today are founded on the work of Karl Mannheim who in 1953 defined generations as a cohort of people with shared chronological, social, and historical parameters. Of the four generations currently in the workplace (traditionalists, baby boomers, Generation X and Generation Y) the baby boomers are the largest generation by far with 85 million members. (Trunk, 2007) As the traditionalists, born before and during World War II (Massey, 2005) retire, the Baby Boomer cohort holds leadership positions in most organizations (Gibson, Greenwood, & Murphy, 2008). Baby Boomers are also, however, subject to feelings of redundancy, relevancy, and resentment as they get older as a group. (Hastings, 2008). These and other ageist attitudes are of great interest, especially as they potentially affect so many people.

This paper examines issues and challenges related to ageism and the Baby Boomers. It goes on to suggest the TEAM approach as a strategy for maximizing the effectiveness of Baby Boomer employees while assuring that other employees and the organization are receptive to all the Boomers have to offer. We begin by defining the Baby Boomer generation and the values that they are likely to hold.

WHO ARE THE BABY BOOMERS?

Variations exist as to the years the generations begin and end, but this article uses 1946 to 1964 for the Baby Boomers as established by Strauss and Howe (1997) and Egri and Ralston (2004). Williamson (2008) sets the start date as 1945 and tells us that the majority of the Baby Boomers were born between 1945 and 1950, making them ages 59-64 today. Baby Boomers are known to be loyal and competitive workaholics (Crampton and Hodge, 2007) whose values were influenced by dramatic events such as the economic prosperity following World War II and the Vietnam War (Patota, Schwartz, & Schwartz (2007). Younger Boomers who grew up in the 60s were known for the values of sex, drugs, and rock & roll. (Brandt, 2008). Table 1 shows the generational descriptors associated with the Baby Boomers. (Gibson, Greenwood & Murphy, 2008)

Table 1
Generational Descriptors for the Baby Boom Generation

Comfortable with change
Company loyalty
Competitive
Entitled
Idealistic
Materialistic
Optimistic
Sandwich generation
Security oriented
Self-absorbed
Tech conservatives
Traditional family
Wary of authority
Workaholic

While many Baby Boomers are now in positions of authority in their organizations, Boomers function at all levels of the hierarchy and are increasingly the focus of age discrimination in the workplace.

AGEISM AND THE LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

Ageism or age discrimination in the workplace can be defined as the practice of excluding applicants or employees from all types of employment decisions based solely on the calendar age of the individual. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 set the stage by banning discrimination in the workplace based on race, color, sex, religion and national origin; however, it did not include age. In 1967, the Labor Department added age discrimination to the list with the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) which covered workers from the age of 40 to 65. (AARP, 2003). The ADEA applied to all employers with 20 or more employees including labor unions and employment agencies. Under this act, it became illegal to discriminate against an individual because of his or her age in regards to employment including hiring, promoting, firing, layoffs, benefits, and training. The act also protects employees against retaliation for filing an age discrimination charge or participating in an investigation, litigation, or proceedings under the ADEA. (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2008). It should be noted that in 1978, Congress extended the age range of the ADEA through the age of 70. (AARP, 2003). This seems particularly appropriate since near-retirement-age employees now find themselves not having adequate retirement funds and desiring to continue their careers or even start new careers.

In 1990, the Older Worker Benefit Protection Act of 1990 (OWBPA) amended the Age Discrimination in Employment Act by prohibiting employers from discriminating against older employees by denying them benefits. This law was a response to an earlier Supreme Court decision allowing a company to deny or reduce benefits to older workers. (AARP, 2003).

Over the years, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has seen an increase in age discrimination complaints. In 2002, they logged in a record 19,921 complaints.(AARP, 2003) Although 2004 complaints were down to 17,800, EEOC initiated a record number of age discrimination lawsuits including charges against Fortune 500 companies like Best Buy and Sprint. (Crawford, 2005). By 2007, age discrimination cases had increased to 19,103 and were the fastest growing type of discrimination case. (Grossman, 2008). In a study done for AARP, two-thirds of employees aged 45 to 74 reported having observed or experienced some type of age bias in the workplace (Grossman, 2008).

Unfortunately, despite the legislation that exists, many organizations have deep, pre-conceived ideas regarding older employees.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN THE WORKPLACE

Unlike some societies which revere and respect their senior population, the United States seems to practice ageism, i.e., systematic discrimination against older people strictly because of their age, as it does other types of prejudice. To understand the challenges to be overcome in the workplace, it may be useful to look at some of the stereotypes and myths which exist concerning older workers.

Stereotypes and Myths about Older Workers

A common misconception about older workers is that they are less physically able to do the job and more fragile than their younger counterparts. Studies continue to show, however, that older workers are absent less frequently and can be expected to remain healthy far longer than previous generations.

Many still believe the myth that age is a good predictor of performance and that performance predictably declines with age. (Dennis & Thomas, 2007, p. 85)

Likewise, managers and younger workers often assume that older workers are less flexible with change and lack technological skills or the willingness to acquire those skills. In actuality, opportunities to stay up-to-date may be in short supply for the older worker who is assumed to be “over the hill.” Baby Boomer employees, especially those born early in the generation and now entering their 60’s, are likely to encounter one or more types of discrimination in the workplace.

Types of Discrimination Facing Boomers

In 2006, the Anti-Ageism Taskforce described four types of ageism. First, “personal ageism” refers to a single person’s negative attitudes and beliefs about an older person. Second, “institutional ageism” applies to policies and procedures such as mandatory retirement that apply to a particular age group. Third, “intentional ageism” are practices which are deliberately and knowingly biased against older individuals. Finally, “unintentional ageism” occurs when the discriminator is unaware of his or her own bias.

The Anti-Ageism Taskforce also found that bias in hiring is the most common form of ageism in the workplace. Older workers with qualifications similar to younger applicants typically get fewer interviews, shorter interviews, and fewer job offers. (Bendick, Brown & Wall, 1999)

As stated above, one type of ageist phenomenon in the workplace is being left out of opportunities to remain current. A 2008 study conducted by Age Lessons, a Chicago-based consulting firm found the following:

Another key finding was defined senior shutout, where companies inadvertently close-off career paths and training opportunities for mature workers, assuming that they either are uninterested or unwilling to accept a new challenge. (Mature workers, 2008, para. 3)

Boomer think tank and consulting firm, Age Lessons, found that the 3 R’s of workplace concern for Baby Boomer employees are redundancy, relevance, and resentment from younger co-workers (Hastings, 2008). Their fears about redundancy (layoffs) may not be ill-advised. In a survey done by the Center for Retirement Research at Boston College, the majority of employers saw their older workers “as more expensive compared to younger workers.” In these times of economic turmoil, “more expensive” employees have a right to fear being laid off first (Dennis & Thomas, 2007). Under the concern of “relevancy,” Baby Boomers may fear being behind the times unless their companies offer them development opportunities. Finally, stories abound about younger employees lamenting that the “old guys” won’t get out of the way so that they can advance in the workplace.

Given the above evidence of ageism in the workplace, a proactive strategy for dealing with this problem is proposed.

WORKPLACE STRATEGIES: THE TEAM APPROACH

In recognition of the need for high performing work teams in all types of organizations, the authors propose the TEAM approach to combating ageism in the workplace. As can be seen from Table 2, TEAM stands for team composition, education and training, awareness, accountability, and accommodation and mentoring as key elements.

Team Composition

Team composition refers to the need to integrate Baby Boomer employees into intergenerational work teams. According to one study,

“In today’s complex organizational environment, leaders at all levels are faced with making an increasingly diverse workforce into high performing work teams. Aside from traditional diversity considerations like gender, ethnicity, religion, and race, age-related differences exist which make the influence process more challenging.” (Greenwood, Gibson, & Murphy, 2008, p. 57)

**Table 2
The TEAM Approach**

T	Team composition
E	Education and Training
A	Awareness/Accountability/Accommodation
M	Mentoring

One benefit of having an intergenerational team is to avoid a massive loss of knowledge as the Baby Boomers retire. The experience and knowledge possessed by the Baby Boomer generation needs to be transferred to the next generation of employees in order for the organization to remain successful and competitive in the future. In some cases, Baby Boomers will be the team leaders but whether leaders or not, they may need help in understanding and communicating with their younger colleagues.

Education and Training

Diversity training has become increasingly popular in organizations today. (Gibson & Kimis, 2005) To successfully deal with ageism in the workplace today, Gen X (born 1965-1979 per Strauss & Howe, 1997, and Egri & Ralston, 2004) and Gen Y employees (born 1980 to present per Eisner, 2005 and Murphy et. al., 2006) need to be sensitive to the legal and ethical issues of ageism and the Baby Boomers need help in understanding the values of those coming up behind them. In house diversity training can help sensitize all team members to the needs and values of those around them.

In addition to diversity training, Baby Boomers need to have the same access to corporate training programs as everyone else. In some cases, they may need additional training to complement their technical experience and to keep it current. The recent U.S. presidential election was notable for many things. One was the difference in how the two candidates accessed their constituencies. Obama’s campaign used text messages and email to reach wide audiences while McCain admitted he did not use email. To avoid the perception of obsolescence, Baby Boomers need opportunities to keep up-to-date on technological changes. While managers need to avoid denying training opportunities to Boomers who “may not be with us that much longer,” Boomers need to take personal responsibility for remaining current.

Finally, educational opportunities such tuition reimbursement needs to be equally available for everyone in the company. Many Boomers have come up through the ranks and may not have the college degrees that Gen X and Y employees have. Some now have the time and interest to augment their years of experience with formal education and should be given that opportunity.

Awareness/Accountability/Accommodation

Anti discrimination laws have been on the books for more than a generation, but it is still incumbent upon the company to be sure that everyone knows their legal and ethical responsibilities as related to equal opportunity. They need to be especially aware that equal opportunity does not just apply to race and gender, but to age groups as well. The responsibility for assuring this awareness often rests on the HR department. Accountability for human resources to train managers appropriately and to monitor follow-through is mandatory. As the ability to learn new skills, accept new technology and be flexible are traits consistently stated as highly valued by managers today, HR must be accountable for offering opportunities for such training and for keeping employees updated on technology, just as they must be accountable for unbiased initial job placement (Dennis & Thomas, 2007).

While managers are expected to know the legal aspects of age discrimination, HR must embrace strategies for changing attitudes so that the potential of the Baby Boomers' contributions can be realized. Positive perceptions mentioned in studies of older workers such as *...their experience, knowledge, work ethic, attitudes, attendance (non-absenteeism), commitment to quality, loyalty, punctuality, solid performance, getting along with others, and respect for authority*" (Dennis and Thomas, 2007) speak loudly that the Baby Boomer employee will respond to a promotion and reward system based on performance and productivity. Again, HR needs to be facilitate and be held ultimately accountable for such a system.

Finally, there may be need for some accommodations to assure the high levels of productivity expected from Baby Boomer employees. Flexible work arrangements such as job sharing, home-based work, and telecommuting may add the flexibility that keeps the Baby Boomer fully engaged. Others may need ergonomic accommodations such as back-friendly chairs and computer terminals. All will want the security of reliable health plans.

Mentoring

Mentoring, like training, is a two-way street when it comes to the Baby Boomers. Typically, mentoring has involved a senior level employee who passes along wisdom and advice to more junior level employees. Indeed, this is a successful way to transfer knowledge, assure continuity of key organizational functions, and to share the experience of the large cohort of Baby Boomers with the up-and-coming generations. Mentors exercise their leadership through coaching, advising, and nurturing their mentees in either a formal (organizationally directed) or informal (voluntary) relationship. (Gibson, Tesone, Buchalaski, 2000). While this type of mentoring is an excellent way to promote excellence in intergenerational work teams, it does at first glance seem to combat age discrimination. However, as younger and older workers interact together in the close relationship of mentor and mentee, understanding and trust develops and biased perceptions diminish.

Another application of mentoring is an upward mentoring system where Baby Boomer "mentees" could profit from coaching in new technology applications from their Gen X or Gen Y counterparts.

CONCLUSION

Ageism in the workforce toward the Baby Boomer generation can be seen in various ways such as through hiring practices, layoffs, or false stereotypes about older workers such as their lack of flexibility or willingness to learn. Legislation exists to combat overt age discrimination; however, the problem promises to accelerate as more Baby Boomers enter the pre-retirement phase of their employment. As with other types of discrimination, companies must be vigilant in assuring zero tolerance for ageism in the workplace. The Baby Boomer generation holds tremendous power not only in their positions within the corporation but because of their experience and sheer numbers. They are unlikely to suffer the effects of ageism quietly.

The TEAM approach has been suggested as a strategy to prevent ageism in the organization and to maximize the effectiveness of intergenerational work teams. Teams should be intentionally diversified not only in terms of background, culture, gender, and race, but also in terms of age. Education and training should be amply provided in the areas of diversity and skill development. Awareness and accountability are required and

accommodations should be provided whenever necessary to assure the maximum effectiveness of the Baby Boomer employees. Finally, mentoring by Baby Boomers and of Baby Boomers should be used whenever possible.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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NOTES