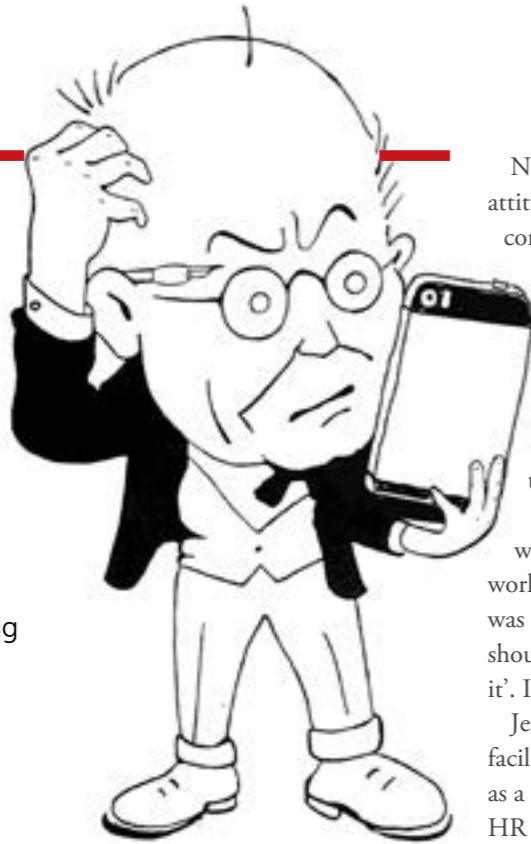


# Is ageism holding you back?

Age discrimination is a double-edged sword: we cut down the elderly for being too slow to respond, and the young for being too quick to act. But when it comes to your job, is there such a thing as too young or too old? **THEA O'CONNOR** dips into the cruel world of ageism.



Not to mention all the comments and attitudes that never result in a formal complaint but can still eat away at a person's sense of competence and dignity.

"At a recent team-building day, a young staff member wanted a group photo," says Walter Crown, 59, a mediator and former lawyer on the north coast of NSW.

"She gave the phone to me, since I was the tallest. It took me a moment to work out which button to push, and that was enough for her to say, jokingly, 'I should have got someone younger to take it'. It wasn't a big deal but it did sting."

Jenny Brice, 57, executive coach and facilitator, has an extensive background as a senior HR practitioner, including as HR director for Fuji Xerox and Bank of Queensland. She often has to take deep breaths in the face of comments from younger staff members.

"Last year, a 38-year-old head of HR asked me, 'In your day, did you have 360-degree feedback?' Now, that's a really basic tool and it's actually going out of date, but she thought I didn't know anything about it and kept asking about what I knew 'in my day'. I had to stare out the window so I didn't lose it!"

Brice also recalls a workshop she recently conducted for 40 senior executives. "When the CEO heard I covered the topic of big data, he looked surprised and said, 'Oh, you know that do you?' There are all these assumptions if you have a few wrinkles or don't look young."

As with any type of discrimination, dismantling stereotypes is the key to seeing people for who they really are.

But let's not fudge the facts in the process. Younger people do have faster mental processing speeds than older people. And yes, younger people tend to be all over technology in a way that baby boomers aren't.

consolidate the breadth and depth of all my past experience. An hour after reading the report, the phone rang. It was my 83-year-old mother wanting to tell me about an encounter she'd had at a ballroom dancing event the previous Saturday night.

"A woman came up to me and said, 'Gee, aren't you amazing, the way you keep coming to dances? At your age!' She intended it as a compliment, but it left me feeling so flat. She sees me in such a different light to how I see myself."

According to *Fact or Fiction? Stereotypes of Older Australians*, one-third of over-55s say they have experienced age discrimination of some kind. The report is the result of a 2013 AHRC research project, which asked 2,020 community members about their experience with discrimination. It found that the workplace was the most likely culprit, accounting for 39.8 per cent of age discrimination complaints.

While reading the Australian Human Rights Commission's (AHRC's) recently released report, *Willing to Work*, I discovered I am dangerously close to "unacceptable".

The research for the report investigated employment discrimination against older Australians. Citing the *2015 National Prevalence Survey of Age Discrimination in the Workplace*, it found that 10 per cent of business respondents were above the age of 50 – the age at which they themselves would not recruit a new employee.

I'm glad I wasn't aware of that statistic when I celebrated my 50th birthday a few months ago. I dubbed this event a "launch into my power decade". In my professional life particularly, I have never felt more able to bring real value to my clients as I

But that's a broad generalisation, and there are some more facts not to be fudged.

Research into productivity has found that older people are actually more productive than their younger colleagues.

Ernst & Young research suggests that personal productivity increases with age, and a review of published research carried out by Essex Business School found that older people were often faster at completing complex tasks that required them to draw on contextual knowledge and years of work experience. While bottom-line speed may deteriorate, the overall efficacy of older people offsets any reduction in pace.

**A**geism is a double-edged sword. While our culture reveres the wrinkle-free signs of youth, that doesn't stop us discriminating against young people.

Young adults are labelled as risk-taking, self-absorbed, immature slackers with an overinflated sense of entitlement. It's a tough stereotype to contend with, and one that has plagued young people for generations.

In fact, a UK government report *Attitudes to Age in Britain 2010/11* found that people have a more positive perception of those aged over 70 than they do of people in their 20s.

The report was based on research involving 2,172 respondents aged 16 and over, who generally viewed older people as being more friendly and competent than their younger counterparts, and as having higher moral standards.

The research also found it was common for younger people to have experienced age discrimination – compared with other age groups, under-25s were at least twice as likely to have encountered such discrimination.

When she was in her 30s, Fiona Morgan worked as an industrial designer and was often mistaken for being a 20-something.

"When people realised my age, they dropped the condescending attitude that implied I was not up to the job, and I was suddenly treated

**"Whenever old rock-and-rollers do world tours, people flock to see them, paying huge amounts. If Mick Jagger can be exciting in his 70s, why can't a 50-year-old be just as good value?"**

SUSAN RYAN, COMMISSIONER FOR AGE AND DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION

**29%**  
OF AUSTRALIAN LAWYERS ARE OLDER THAN 50\*

\* Law Society National Profile 2015

like a responsible, capable adult."

Higher retirement ages mean it's increasingly likely for three generations to be working together in the same team.

It's time, then, to call out the stereotypes that isolate and devalue people as well as undermine good business practices.

After all, aren't we all meant to be "innovating through diversity?"

"A productive workplace is one in which we respect each other," says Susan Ryan, Commissioner for Age and Disability Discrimination. "Stop making assumptions. Look at what a person is actually doing, and what they are capable of – which includes learning something new – and make your assessment based on that." **LSJ**

**Don't:**

- exclaim "Wow! And at your age!"
- call a staff member "dear", "miss", "mum", "dad", "granny" or "grandad" – unless they truly like it and have expressly invited you to do so
- ask someone what things were like "in their day"
- tell someone to act their age or to grow up
- start an unsolicited conversation about retirement when you find out that someone is in their late 50s
- fail to invite someone to an outing or team-based physical activity based on assumptions about their age
- exclude someone from a conversation because you think they're too young or old to know, or be interested in, what you're talking about
- assume an employee needs training because they are older or younger
- make age-related jokes.



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