

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation, Editor-in-Chief:

You are listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim. Editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators and decision makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Refusing to hire a person or promoting them based on age is absolutely against the law. Still, recent studies show that adults over the age of 50, including a vast majority of baby boomers, believe their age puts them at a disadvantage when it comes to getting a job or limits their career opportunities at a time when the workforce is aging. What does this mean for these workers and job seekers and the employers out there that are already saying they're having a hard time finding talent for certain jobs? And what can employers do to change the situation? Joining me on the podcast is Heather Tinsley-Fix, Senior Advisor, Employer Engagement for AARP. Heather, thank you so very much for joining me.

Heather Tinsley-Fix, AARP, Senior Advisor, Employer Engagement:

Thanks Ramona. I'm so glad to be here.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation, Editor-in-Chief:

I'd like to start out talking about the idea of ageism. When you talk to workers and you hear from workers or survey workers, are you getting that same response, that they feel like they are being left out of the workforce because of their age?

Heather Tinsley-Fix, AARP, Senior Advisor, Employer Engagement:

Yeah. So unfortunately that is true. We do hear that a lot and we do survey workers 40 plus every couple of years and ask this question about have you felt or experienced age discrimination or ageism at work? And well, we pretty much always get an answer that's between 61% and 65%, right? So at least two-thirds of the workforce is 40 plus is feeling ageism at work. Our latest stat is actually 64%. Historically, it's been as low as 61. It's been as high as 78%, but that was during the pandemic. But nevertheless, yeah, at least two-thirds of workers, 50 plus do experience it at work. It's there, they feel it.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation, Editor-in-Chief:

And how do they see it? It can be subtle. How are they experiencing it?

Heather Tinsley-Fix, AARP, Senior Advisor, Employer Engagement:

So you're right that it's subtle. It's largely subtle because it's unconscious. Most people have ideas about what old means. Anyone who is older than they are is old. So it shifts, right? So a 20-year-old thinks a 40-year-old is old and a 40-year-old thinks that a 60-year-old is old. But in terms of feeling it at work, it can be slight comments like, "That's before your time," or "I'm having a senior moment," or "You're too young to remember that." So it's important to note by the way, that ageism goes both ways in terms of older workers, it can be things like suddenly getting flat or even negative performance reviews when nothing in your performance has changed.

It can be being passed over for innovative or exciting or challenging opportunities. It can be not being included in workforce gatherings. It can be not being assuming that you're not interested in learning new skills. So companies might be really pushing up skilling to their younger parts of their workforce and not to the older parts of their workforce. So those are some examples. And then it can be, unfortunately, it can be quite overt. We know that sometimes when companies look at doing reductions

in force, even though they're in fact not supposed to do this, and it's, as you said, highly illegal, they still will target older workers, generally speaking, because they have slightly higher salaries. So that is absolutely overt and that is something that we fight against at AARP.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation, Editor-in-Chief:

And what about the job seekers? I think I read on your website, and I've seen other mentions of it, that there can be some subtle language in maybe the job posting itself.

Heather Tinsley-Fix, AARP, Senior Advisor, Employer Engagement:

Yeah. So we did a report last year with the Burning Glass Institute that shows that about 2% of job postings do include ageist language in them. And while that sounds really low, it's still a large percentage of job postings out there. So a couple of examples would be, and this again is overt. So if you put in your job description that you want digital natives, recent college grads, that kind of language is overtly ageist. You're looking for younger people. But then it can be more subtle. You can have things like saying, "We're looking for someone high energy, fast paced," using words like Marketing Ninja or words like that in a job posting can subtly signal to older workers if they're not welcome to apply.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation, Editor-in-Chief:

I've done stories on this for years now, a couple of years now, and I have always been amazed that the way it's communicated, that an older worker is afraid of technology. And I always use the example of myself. I'm an older worker. I've been working as a journalist since I was 19. I started on a manual typewriter. All through this. I've learned how to navigate all the changes in technology, and I'm doing the podcast with you now. We're doing it over our laptop. I don't have some 20-year-old or 30-year-old sitting behind me doing the technology. Neither do you. We're doing it ourselves. So the idea that you can embrace the new technology, to me, is such a false flag.

Heather Tinsley-Fix, AARP, Senior Advisor, Employer Engagement:

Yeah, we hear that all the time. It's one of the most entrenched myths about older people is that they're "not good with technology," which is just ridiculous because not only does AARP research show that 50 year olds and up are just as active and avid consumers of technology as younger folks, we know that at work, plenty of workers are able to adapt and move with the times and adopt to new platforms. It's frustrating that it's so entrenched and that it's still there, but it does persist and it's not true.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation, Editor-in-Chief:

When it comes to hiring and retaining these older workers, there is the value in having someone with experience and they've already done problem solving. They've probably been in situations where they've had to deal with whatever changes have come along just as I've said. We learn new technology. What's some of the other value of making sure you have an age-inclusive workforce?

Heather Tinsley-Fix, AARP, Senior Advisor, Employer Engagement:

So there's a lot of value in having an age-inclusive workforce. I'm going to speak about the value of older workers right now, but I want to make sure that I frame this and say that all ages bring something to their organizations. It's the mix of ages that's actually really exciting. And when it's leveraged well can be a real competitive advantage for companies. So moving on to the value of older workers specifically, the first thing I would say is the workforce is aging.

So we know that 34% of the workforce is 50 and over. And according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the only age group that's projected to grow in labor participation rate is the 65 plus. So we know that just like the rest of the demographics of the country, the workforce is aging. So that's part of it. You want your workforce to be representative of the labor market.

The second reason is that older workers bring a wealth of soft skills to their employers. And you talked a little bit about this in terms of problem solving and so on. So they have a wealth of experience and skills that are what we might call hard skills that are specific to their profession or their jobs that they've done, but they also have a great deal of soft skills that are the kinds that are most impervious to automation.

So those are things like making sense of complex systems, critical thinking, creativity, and older workers, well older brains I should say in particular, are able to take lessons learned or experience from one situation and apply it in another situation. So they're really good at moving between disparate disciplines and seeing the similarities between those, which is often a key driver of innovation is when you sort of take something and look at it from a different angle.

Older brains are really good at that. And so, that is something that's really valuable about the older part of your workforce. And lastly, I would say, that older workers have less unplanned turnover, less unplanned absences. So what I mean by that is if they're going to be out for family situations or for health reasons, usually they have a window that they can tell you this is happening. So it's planned. They take fewer sick days that are actually mental health days, and then their rate of turnover is lower.

AARP shows that, at any given time, about a little under half 49% of workers under 50 are either actively looking for new positions or are open to considering them. Whereas that number is only 29% for the fifty-plus. So it's good to have a mix of ages because you do have more stability with an older workforce, and that sort of balances out the more volatile younger portions of your workforce who are looking for new opportunities and trying to build their career.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation, Editor-in-Chief:

It made me also think that when you do take... As you say, when you take those two groups, or actually it's multiple generation, I think we've heard that there are four, maybe even five generations of people in the workforce right now. And so you may take some, it doesn't mean your brain doesn't stop innovating. You can be 50, 40, 60, 20, and you may have a good idea. And if you're allowed to put your voice into a workplace and you are valued for that, I think it can help an employer. And at this time when employers are saying we can't find enough talent, we are short people in cybersecurity, we're short nurses, we're... Name a industry, people are saying we are short. What can employers do themselves? How do they get that mindset themselves? I don't know if we have a solution to this, but I'd love to hear your thoughts on it.

Heather Tinsley-Fix, AARP, Senior Advisor, Employer Engagement:

Yeah, there's a lot of things employers can do. First of all, take a look at your recruiting practices end to end and see where you can be more age inclusive in your practices. So that includes things like looking at your job descriptions, but it also includes things like looking at your employer branding. Are your career websites reflecting a mix of ages? Can older workers see themselves at your organization when they look through your, why should I work your page or your careers page? So there's that piece of it. There's also sourcing. We know that proportionately to there are numbers in the workforce, there aren't as many older workers on LinkedIn as there are in the workforce. And that's something that AARP works

really hard to promote to 50 plus job seekers is to make sure that you get on LinkedIn and definitely keep that profile updated.

But expanding sources beyond the traditional ones, or I shouldn't say traditional, they're the new ones that recruiters look to is important. AARP has a job board, so employers are welcome to post their jobs there. If you go to [AARP.org/jobs](https://www.aarp.org/jobs). And finally, just making sure that you raise awareness of this topic within your organization.

Many recruiters we speak to get it, and they say that they struggle against hiring managers, line managers who say, "I don't think that person is a good fit, or I don't think they'll mesh well, or whatever," which is usually code for, they're too old to join our team. And I've heard recruiters say to me how frustrating they find that when they have a stellar candidate who's like 56 or something and they're pushing against the prejudices of a hiring manager. So raising awareness of the issue is also important throughout your workforce, throughout your employee base.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation, Editor-in-Chief:

And you oversee the AARP employer pledge program?

Heather Tinsley-Fix, AARP, Senior Advisor, Employer Engagement:

Yes.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation, Editor-in-Chief:

So tell me a little bit about that. What are you asking these employers to do, and how many organizations do you have taking part in it?

Heather Tinsley-Fix, AARP, Senior Advisor, Employer Engagement:

So the pledge has been around for a little over 10 years, and we've had over 3000 employers sign it in that time. We have currently about 2000 active members in our pledge program, which we're very proud of. When an employer signs the pledge, it's largely a public affirmation, that they value older workers and that they value age diversity as well, and that they're committed to building age diverse workforces.

In terms of what we ask them to do, we have an age inclusion checklist that you can find on [AARP.org/employers](https://www.aarp.org/employers), and we do ask employers to take two actions from that list in two years, but it's not a thing that we enforce. You don't have to do it or you're kicked out kind of a thing. It's just a roadmap for how to build more age inclusive organizations. And usually the companies who sign the pledge are interested in what kind of actions they can take. The checklist ranges from recruiting practices to learning and development to management practices, to offering flexibility and caregiving supports, which is another important aspect of a multi-generational workforce. We know that there are a lot of family caregivers in the workforce.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation, Editor-in-Chief:

While you don't have an enforcement arm that goes in and enforce people, how do you hold the employer accountable? Do you get feedback from them? Do you give them feedback? Because I think it's important that employers hear, if they're not doing it wrong, you just don't want a little checklist saying, "Oh yeah, I said I signed it."

Heather Tinsley-Fix, AARP, Senior Advisor, Employer Engagement:

Yeah. So periodically we do surveys and to track what kind of actions employers are taking. They're always anonymous because it's always helpful to someone taking a survey, telling us what they're doing in this realm that they're anonymous. But we have quarterly meetings that we hold every year. So we've got one coming up in June, and we feature different speakers on different topics that are of interest to our pledge signers.

But that's also a place where we tend to through chat and through, so the chat of the meeting, but also the physical chat when you're talking to each other, we learn what the actions they're taking. And then lastly, I get invited to speak to employers a lot. So usually they're ERGs, but sometimes they're recruiting department or they're learning and development folks. And so when I go and speak individually to employers, I get a better sense of what they're interested in and what they're doing. But again, it's not something that we... We don't hold their feet to the fire, as it were.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation, Editor-in-Chief:

So what is the advantage for a company if they have that multi-generational workforce?

Heather Tinsley-Fix, AARP, Senior Advisor, Employer Engagement:

One of the strongest arguments for having a multi-generational workforce is that research shows that mixed-age teams are more productive and have better outcomes than teams that are more age homogenous. Now, this is likely due to the fact that any sort of balance of difference in a team is going to produce better results. But particularly with age, we know that there's a knowledge spillover effect. So older workers are able to anticipate roadblocks and share those ideas with younger workers who may have ideas about how to do something differently, for example. But in the main, we know that the productivity of an organization rises when they have a mix of workers, and that includes older workers.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation, Editor-in-Chief:

If a company is doing it right, what does the employee makeup look like?

Heather Tinsley-Fix, AARP, Senior Advisor, Employer Engagement:

I would say that it does depend on industry and profession, but generally speaking, if a company's doing it right, then your labor force demographics are going to match your employee base. So roughly speaking, you're going to have about 14% Gen Z, 33% millennials, 34% Gen X, and so on. About 20% of baby boomers and about 1% still left of our traditionalists. So there are still five generations in the workforce. So that's one thing. You would have a group, a good mix of ages that represent the labor force demographics.

And then, I would say that a really robust learning and development attitude, a growth mindset in an organization is usually an indication that you're doing it right. And then inclusion in general. So many companies are working on this. How can we have inclusion and belonging in our organization? And if you're doing that right, all types of identities are going to be accommodated and feeling included. And age is one of those aspects. Age is a piece of our identity that does affect our attitudes and behaviors, and yet it's just one part of who we are.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation, Editor-in-Chief:

And I like that it is just one part of who we are, but it's an important part. I've heard people say ageism seems to be the last ism that is accepted, even if it's subtle sometimes.

Heather Tinsley-Fix, AARP, Senior Advisor, Employer Engagement:

Yeah. And it's often internalized as well, which is the indication that it's really deep underground. But you see it everywhere in our youth obsessed culture that age bad, youth good. And so it's hard to break away from.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation, Editor-in-Chief:

So let's turn to the worker as we wind down this conversation. What can a worker and job seeker do if they feel like they're facing ageism and age discrimination in the workplace?

Heather Tinsley-Fix, AARP, Senior Advisor, Employer Engagement:

So that's a good question. I think if you are experiencing ageism and age discrimination and it's affecting your career and it's affecting your work, you need to document as much as possible what's happening and when it happens. So documentation is the key. And then you need to speak to your HR folks. If you're not comfortable with that, you can reach out to the EEOC, but it's really important, whoever you talk to, that you have ample documentation of how it's shown up for you and what impact it's had on you. So that's the sort of negative side of things.

I think on the positive side, if you are a job seeker or in your career, and you want to make sure that you stay ahead of this, you want to make sure that your skills are current. It's really important to not only stay current with your skills, but what trends are affecting your profession and your company and what your company's strategic direction is to always signal that you're interested in learning new skills, being challenged, joining those innovative projects.

Lastly, paying attention to your online footprint, if you will. So it's not only just the LinkedIn profile, but it's do you join any online associations? Do you comment? Do you network? And that sort of online presence, because that contributes to being able to be found by recruiters.

And also, it's sort of a legitimacy test when people are looking at your resume online. So the online piece is important, the networking piece is important, the skills piece is important. And then, make friends with your coworkers. Learning goes both ways. And I often will go to my younger coworkers if there's something that I don't know how to do on a platform, and I just say, "I don't know how to do this. Show me how to do it." And that's great. I have friends up and down the age spectrum, and I learn different things from them at different times. So make friends with your younger coworkers, too.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation, Editor-in-Chief:

Heather, thank you very much for joining the Work in Progress podcast.

Heather Tinsley-Fix, AARP, Senior Advisor, Employer Engagement:

You're welcome. Thank you so much for having me.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation, Editor-in-Chief:

I've been speaking with Heather Tinsley-Fix, Senior Advisor, Employer Engagement for AARP. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.