

# Defining Ageism

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## Executive summary

There have been countless surveys about the prevalence of age discrimination in the workplace. To date however, very little attempt has been made to define or understand the different forms ageism can take, or to explore people's attitudes to ageist behaviour. While most employers concentrate on tangible areas such as recruitment and retirement policy, it is clear that ageism is not just present in these areas.

Re-writing all policies and procedures to remove age discrimination is necessary to comply with forthcoming legislation; but this alone won't safeguard employers from challenges of ageism. There also needs to be a fundamental shift in everyone's perception of age and where the boundaries of acceptable behaviour are.

In our view this is where the real challenge lies; affecting culture change. If people don't understand what age discrimination is and isn't, it will be impossible for them to recognise when they are being ageist or when they are a victim of ageism. This presents significant difficulties for employers charged with training employees and managers in avoiding discriminatory behaviour.

In this study we set out to understand what ageism is, how it manifests itself in the workplace and what employees perceive to be age discrimination. The main findings demonstrate just how difficult it is to tackle ageism. We gave employees of all ages and at all levels examples of ageist behaviour and asked them if they considered specific practices or attitudes to be discriminatory. This generated very different feedback and clearly shows that a consensus has yet to be reached on what constitutes ageism.

What also becomes obvious is that where an individual is at an advantage because of their age, they do not view certain practices or behaviours as discriminatory. This applies particularly to older respondents where there is a sense of older people having earned advantages through time served in the workplace. This degree of self interest will make it difficult for employers to keep everyone happy as they implement changes to policies and behaviours to comply with age legislation.

We found that people of different ages are affected by discrimination in different ways; younger people are particularly sensitive to different pay scales at different ages, while older people are less likely to consider this discrimination. We also found some entrenched ideas about age and seniority among middle-aged people which may be very difficult to shift.

## For employers, two clear messages come out of this research

- Employees don't really understand that new age laws require a complete re-think on attitudes toward age.
- Young people may well challenge policies, particularly pay, that have traditionally favoured older people.

Age is a difficult strand in equality. In many cases it is quite rightly used as a measure of someone's experience (you can't acquire experience without ageing), but it is also often used to measure ability, maturity and potential, a far less exact science. And unlike other strands of discrimination, there are sometimes good reasons for using age as a discriminator – for example, nobody is advocating letting a 10 year old drive a fire engine. But in reality there are very few occasions when it is necessary to use age, and not another factor such as competence or ability to make an employment decision.

This raises a fundamental question, do all assumptions based on someone's age need to be re-evaluated? Is it fair and reasonable, or simply ageist?

## Main findings

- A third of people think that it is not discriminatory to pay someone based on their age.
- 36% think that people should be managed differently because of their age.
- 39% believe that if someone's perceived age doesn't match the company's image they should not be employed.
- 39% think that it is reasonable to assume that the oldest person in the room is the most senior.
- 40% think that employing people of similar ages to ensure 'team fit' is fair.
- 62% are aware of age discrimination legislation.

All of the scenarios\* we presented in our survey are examples of ageism and, once the Age Regulations, come into force, could put employers at risk of a tribunal claim. However they are also common behaviours which have been accepted practice for many years. For many people ageist attitudes are inbuilt and discrimination is institutionalised.

The biggest challenge for employers is the fact that people can't agree on what is, and isn't ageist. Of the 40% of people who think it is fair to employ people of similar ages to ensure team fit, 60% know that this is unfair. What is obvious discrimination to one person, is fair and reasonable to another.

The legal definition of age discrimination is very broad. Anyone of any age can be both a victim and a perpetrator of age discrimination. The responses to our questions also show that ageism is a very personal thing, people will tolerate different levels and amounts of ageist banter. This creates a problem for employers in determining where to draw the line.

## \*Ageist scenarios

- Not giving someone a job because they have too little/much experience.
- Paying an older person more than a younger irrespective of experience.
- Managing people differently depending on their age (targets enforced less or more aggressively).
- Not employing or keeping someone on because their appearance doesn't match the company's image.
- Employing someone of a similar age to you and your colleagues, to ensure a good team 'fit'.
- Assuming the oldest person you meet in a meeting is the most 'senior'.

## Does age make a difference to perception of age discrimination?

Older respondents tend to have a greater awareness of the forthcoming legislation, which reflects the media's focus on how the legislation will affect older people.

### Older people are more aware of the age laws

- 75% of 55-64 year olds are aware of the age discrimination legislation compared with 43% of 16-24 year-olds (See Chart 1).

However, this awareness of the law doesn't reflect an increased understanding of what will and won't be lawful once it comes into force:

- 42% of 55-64 year olds do not believe that it is discriminatory to pay an older person more because of their age compared with 70% of 16-24 year olds who do think it is discriminatory (See Chart 1).

This highlights that employers need to take care not to focus simply on the over 50s. Equal pay claims on age are more likely to come from young people who are paid less for what they perceive as equal work. This suggests employers may need to do some work on separating age from experience, and determining pay more appropriately.

### Equally we need to challenge middle-aged managers' assumptions:

- 35-44 years olds are most likely (62%) to assume the oldest person in a meeting is the most senior; yet:
- 35-44 years olds are the most likely (61%) to believe that employing someone to ensure team fit is ageist.

This underlines the confusion around what is and isn't ageist. Arguably if this group had been presented with a scenario based on gender or race the statistics would tell a different story. Given that this age bracket is often the group that manages, promotes and recruits employees, it is vital that such key influencers are given the arguments and the training to change their potentially ageist mindset.

Chart 1

Awareness of age discrimination legislation by age

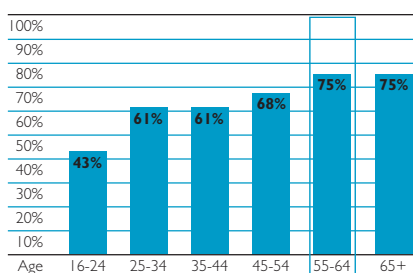
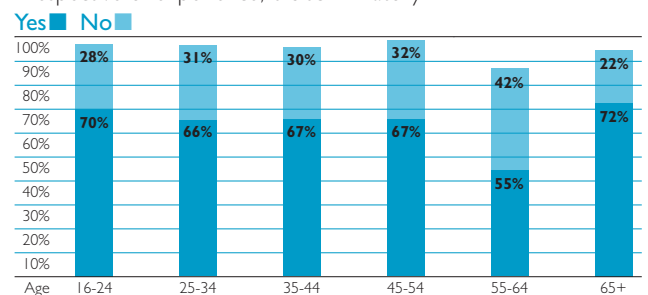


Chart 2

Do you think paying an older person more than a younger person, irrespective of experience, is discriminatory?



### Which industry is most age aware?

Public sector employees are most aware of age issues, which reflects this sector's greater understanding of discrimination generally.

- 73% of employees in Government think it is wrong to pay older people more than their younger colleagues.
- The majority of Government employees (70%) also think it is wrong to keep on or recruit people on the grounds of their perceived age.

### Meanwhile traditional sectors are clinging to old hierarchies:

- 48% of people in Service Industry believe the oldest person in a meeting is the most senior compared with 31% of people in the education sector (See Chart 3).

Employees in the retail sector (a sector renowned for gaining business advantages from age diverse policies), are lagging in their knowledge of the new laws:

- The retail industry is the least aware of the new laws, with 47% of employees still in the dark (See Chart 4).

Chart 3

Assumption that the oldest person in a meeting is most senior (by industry)

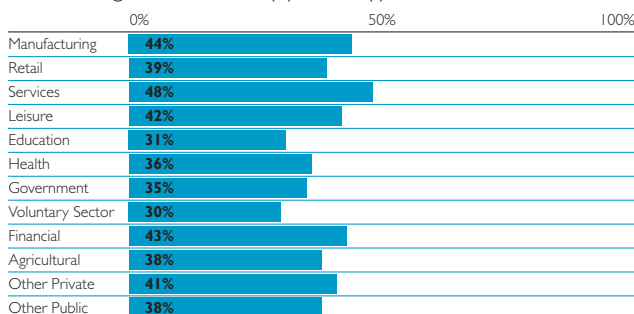
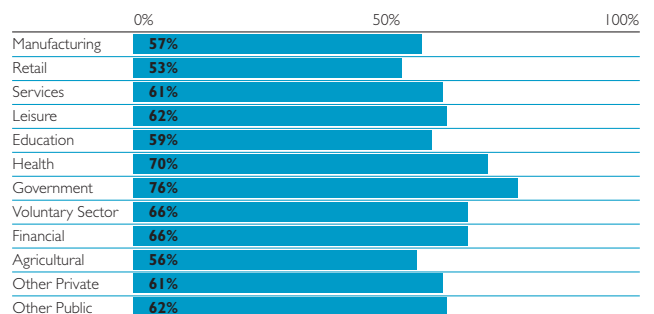


Chart 4

Which industry is most age aware?



## Checklist

Some examples of questions that EFA believes need to be answered to fully comply with the age laws (for more examples ref the EFA Insider Guide to Age Laws):

Have you removed age linked language and images from job adverts?

Have you reviewed and removed unjustified age bias from job descriptions and person specifications?

Can you show that promotions or development opportunities are not age linked?

Have managers and employees been made aware of the risks of discriminatory behaviour?

Have you agreed a retirement age?

If your flexible working (retirement) options aren't open to everyone, can you justify this?

Can you analyse and age profile all the different phases of your recruitment process?

## The employers' challenge

The results show that ageism is a much trickier prejudice to deal with than racism or sexism. The working population is sensitive to ageist behaviours, but how ageist or not they perceive behaviours to be depends on gender, age, sector and personal perceptions.

The challenge therefore remains for employers to:

- Take responsibility for educating all employees about ageism and the benefits of stamping it out.
- Understand the need to affect culture change; for this to happen everyone has to be involved.
- Encourage everyone to understand that we should all be treated equally, irrespective of age.

## Advice for employers on understanding and defining ageism

- Be prepared for 1 October and ensure that everyone in your organisation is aware of the forthcoming legislation.
- Debate ageism with your employees. Help people understand why certain practices that have always been acceptable suddenly aren't.
- Play it safe. Opt for zero tolerance on ageist behaviours, everyone has a different threshold.
- Survey your employees. How do they define ageism?
- Hold an age aware workshop for all employees to highlight the implications of being ageist on business and society.
- Focus on communication. Not only how you will inform employees of the implications of the legislation, but also how they will communicate with colleagues and clients.
- Train your managers. They have direct contact with employees and will have to deal with the majority of ageism queries.

To find out more about the age discrimination legislation and what it means for organisations now and post 1 October 2006, please contact the EFA on **0845 456 2495**, visit our website **[www.efa.org.uk](http://www.efa.org.uk)**. Or contact our press office, Lizzie Barrett or Sarah Williams at CHA on **020 7622 8252 / [lizzie.barrett@chapr.co.uk](mailto:lizzie.barrett@chapr.co.uk)**.

The Employers Forum on Age (EFA) is the first ever employer-led initiative to promote the business benefits of an age diverse workforce. The EFA is the leading authority on age issues in the workplace and offers expert advice and support to employers on managing the skills and age-mix of their organisation. The EFA provides an external voice for employers, while promoting this crucial business issue. The EFA is supported by forward thinking employers.

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