Talent Strategy

The Dinosaur Fallacy
6 Stereotypes of Older Executives (And Why They're Wrong)

Amrop

Leaders For What's Next

"You think I respect your opinion when your hairline looks that disrespectful?" This is the battle cry of 'OK boomer'—a movement by Generation Zers and young millennials against the older generation. It attacks perceived boomer resistance to tech, boomer climate change denial, boomer marginalization of minority groups, and general boomer cynicism about the values of Gen Z and young millennials.

The first OK boomer video hit YouTube in 2019 and quickly accumulated over 12 million views. The term even entered parliamentary debating chambers when in November 2019, 25-year-old New Zealand Green Party MP Chloe Swarbrick responded to older MPs who heckled her climate speech with a swift: "OK boomer'.

In January 2020 it was cited in a US supreme court session as an example of ageism during a litigation case. Chief Justice Roberts wondered whether a young hiring employee saying "OK boomer" to an older candidate could be a legitimate factor in a discrimination claim. Lawyer Roman Martinez thought it could: "You know, using ethnic slurs or calling people 'boomer' or saying unflattering things about them in age when considering them for a position then yes, of course." [1]

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The problem is that the phrase is intended as a put-down that is based, at least partly, on age. If you say it at work, you're essentially saying, "You're old and therefore irrelevant." Lumping Gen Xers into a category with even older workers doesn't make it better. Either way, you are commenting on their age."

Beyond boomers

Was the OK boomer message restricted to baby boomers? Some argued that it addressed any member of a pre-Gen Z cohort. People who could not only be stereotyped as digitally-illiterate climate deniers with outmoded values, but too old to learn or change. This also put Generations X and Y in the firing line. It would be easy to dismiss OK boomer as a mindless meme (despite its fifteen minutes of fame in court and parliament). This would be an error. Because its spirit runs deeper than social media or merchandising, and wider than baby boomers.

Elizabeth Tippet is an Associate Professor at the University of Oregon's School of Law. She takes the OK boomer movement very seriously: "It doesn't matter if the target isn't even a boomer. Gen Xers were born around 1965 to 1979. That makes them older than 40 and covered by federal age discrimination law. Yes, I get that the comment is a retort to "unwoke" elders who cannot be reasoned with. The problem is that the phrase is intended as a put-down that is based, at least partly, on age. If you say it at work, you're essentially saying, "You're old and therefore irrelevant." Lumping Gen Xers into a category with even older workers doesn't make it better. Either way, you are commenting on their age." [2]

1
They lack motivation

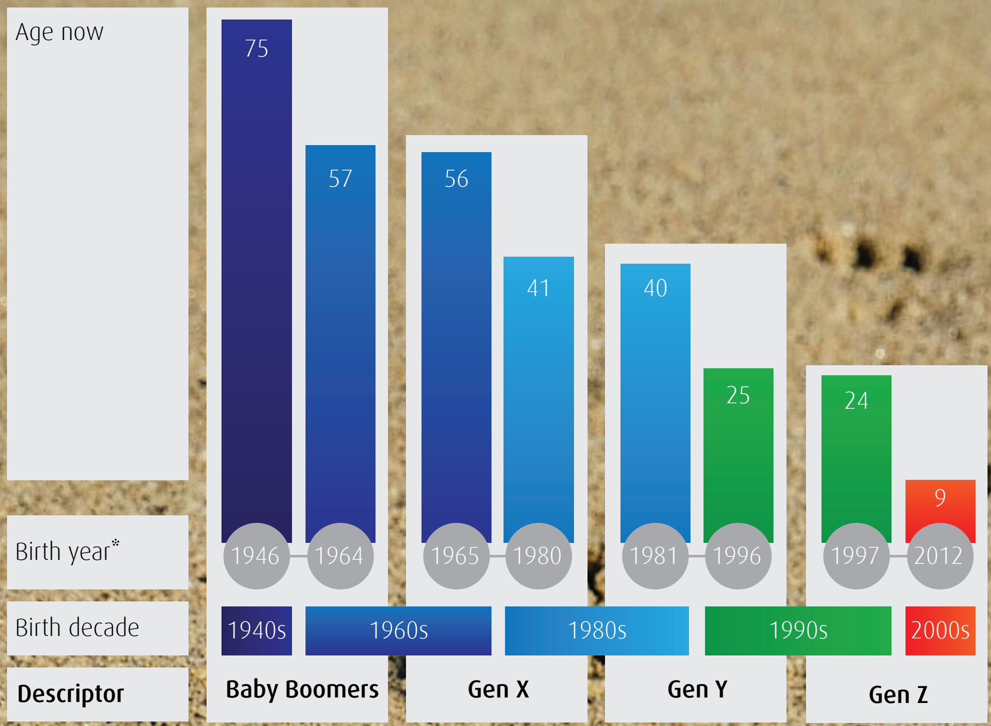
2
They're unable or unwilling to learn

3
They're closed to diversity

4
They're tech-resistant

5
They're loyal traditionalists

6
They don't really care about sustainability or ethics



What's in a generation?

A generation, or cohort, is "an identifiable group that shares birth years, age location, and significant life events at critical developmental stages." This includes "shared historical or social life experiences whose effects are relatively stable over the course of their lives... A cohort develops a personality that influences a person's feelings toward authority and organizations, what they desire from work, and how they plan to satisfy those desires." [3]

One of the difficulties of discussing things in generation terms lies in defining boundaries, and the span of years covered by a generation. For example, if CFO Barbara was born on 31st December 1964, she falls into Generation X. Do her attitudes really differ from those of CEO Jane born the day before? What of executives born on the border of Generation X and Y (Millennials)? Enter the Xennials, a micro- or cross-over generation born between the late 1970s and early to mid-1980s. Now aged 40 to 50, they make up a large proportion of the senior executive population. They also account for 70% of the respondents to a recent Amrop Study whose findings we'll consider later.

*Note: generational birth date ranges differ slightly between authors.

What is a stereotype?

Stereotypes are "overgeneralized expectations and beliefs about the characteristics and traits of social outgroup members (Fiske 1998). Stereotypes represent negative, distorted, and usually inaccurate perceptions of individuals... and the inference that all members of that group hold or display these same characteristics." Significantly, this can lead to bias in selection, promotion decisions and training. [4]

Nearly 1 in 4 workers aged 45 and over had received negative age-based comments from supervisors or colleagues. About 3 in 5 older employees had witnessed or experienced age-based discrimination at work, with three quarters considering it as a barrier to finding a new job and over half prematurely dismissed from long term posts. (AARP)

Legal risks

Elizabeth Tippet warns that Gen Xers born around 1965 to 1979 are older than 40 and therefore covered by federal age discrimination law. A former employment lawyer, she encountered multiple workplace 'jokes'. She cautions that these carry a legal risk and that packaging the statement as a harmless quip is no legal defence. She cites a famous age discrimination case that rose to the Supreme Court, involving a manager who described one employee as "so old he must have come over on the Mayflower." She also notes that the oldest millennials are now entering the 40 year-age bracket and that millennial jokes, too, may start to become a legal problem for businesses.

Michael North is Assistant Professor of Management and Organizations at the New York University Stern School of Business. In an article for The Conversation he argues that ageism differs from other forms of discrimination because it is not supported by any 'historic, visible civil rights movement.' Age-based attitudes and decisions have become somehow normalised, he suggests, merging into a socially-acceptable feature of the workplace. [5]

Of course, many countries have legislated against workplace age discrimination. Hiring organizations in those countries cannot legally limit positions to particular ages without an objective justification, and applicants are entitled to omit their age from their resumés (Age Discrimination and Employment Act, 1967; Equality Act, 2010). However, prospective employers can quite easily identify a candidate's age from his or her bio-data, and this could "consciously or unconsciously lead to discrimination." [6]

Silent stereotyping

In 2018 a US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission report concluded that ageism continued to be a significant, costly and often hidden problem, 50 years after being outlawed by Congress. Meanwhile a survey by AARP, a US-based interest group focussing on issues affecting people over 50, revealed that nearly 1 in 4 workers aged 45 and over had received negative age-based comments from supervisors or colleagues. About 3 in 5 older employees had witnessed or experienced age-based discrimination at work, with three quarters considering it as a barrier to finding a new job and over half prematurely dismissed from long term posts. [7]

In 2017, Michael North also highlighted some concerning figures. Firstly, US age discrimination charges had risen by 47% since 1999. Secondly, a 2011 report had uncovered a 44% increase in complaints over the previous year. "Tellingly, surveys find that organisations are largely unprepared to accommodate the ageing workforce," he commented. Other researchers have also sounded an alarm bell. Echoing Michael North's distinction between ageism and other forms of discrimination (such as racial and gender stereotyping), they signal that, as long as it is possible to demonstrate that age had featured in a managerial decision, courts will "entertain claims of age discrimination, even without direct proof of intent to discriminate," as they recognize that age stereotypes can operate at a subtle or subconscious level. Again, this exposes employers to legal risk. The authors also point out that certain sectors are more inclined towards age stereotyping: namely finance, insurance, retail, and ICT. [8]

Researchers from the University of Kent in the UK also highlight evidence that age-based stereotypes not only influence hiring decisions but also harm the performance of older workers. [9] A vicious circle is in play.

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Every week I see discrimination against candidates aged between 55 and 60; they fail to make shortlists."

An executive problem

Fredy Hausammann is a member of Amrop's Board Services Practice and Chair of Amrop's Global Nomination and Governance Committee. He welcomes the focus on senior level diversity, and particularly gender diversity. However he argues that diversity of age and background is just as important — and an ongoing challenge.

"Every week I see discrimination against candidates aged between 55 and 60; they fail to make shortlists. I cannot understand why a 50 year-old is preferred over a peer aged 55, 56 or 57. If some firms oblige you to retire at 62, many others encourage you to work up to 65. Most candidates in these age brackets are as fit as people five to ten years younger." [10]

A demographic matter

For AARP Senior Research Advisor Rebecca Perron, US research findings confirm an ongoing bias against a demographic that makes up a rising proportion of the workplace [11]. All around the world, the workforce is graying. By 2055, an estimated 17.3% of the Australian workforce will be over 65, whilst in the US, older segments of the labor force will be the only ones to grow substantially in the near future. Highly industrialised nations around the world are posting similar trends, with up to five generations co-existing in the workplace. [5]

Overall, the WHO projected in 2014 that the percentage of the world's population aged over 60 years will double from 11% to 22% between 2000 and 2050. [12]

The ageing workforce has not only demographic, but economic weight. Fredy Hausammann notes that society's outmoded view of age risks harming organizations going forward. "The reality of demographic change, the expansion of the older generation relative to the younger, is not yet recognized. We will very soon need older professionals to fill all our positions. Yet companies are neglecting this talent pool; neither building the best possible human capital, nor deploying its brain power. The two most misjudged and neglected age groups are from 55 to 60 years old for operational roles, and from 63 years old for board roles. We cannot let this continue, especially once the demographic reality hits."

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Stereotypes — what the researchers found

In our daily interactions with clients and candidates, we encounter stereotyping on an all-too-frequent basis. To check whether our anecdotal evidence was backed up by serious investigators, we dived into several research papers that examined common age-related stereotypes. The authors either drew on their own studies, on academic literature, or conducted meta-analyses.

Some stereotypes were identified by more than one author and there was some cross referencing between the papers. So you can find all our sources in the Appendix.

1. Older executives lack motivation
2. Older executives are unwilling or unable to learn
3. Older executives are closed to diversity
4. Older executives are tech resistant
5. Older executives are loyal traditionalists

We'd also like to propose a 6th stereotype:

Older executives don't (really) care about sustainability or ethics

Stereotypes — what our own study found

Several of the research papers presented evidence that undermined one or more stereotypes. In other words, they are indeed distorted perceptions.

We found more evidence. A recent Amrop study [13] set out to understand the deeper career needs and motivations of senior executives (including their attitudes to digital tools and AI). Based on the confidential answers of 443 respondents from all world regions, 70% of whom had been in work for over 20 years, our findings give serious food for thought.

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Stereotype 1

Older executives lack motivation

Fredy Hausammann understands that hiring organizations worry about how long older executives will be able to sustain their motivation and drive. However he advises a re-think: “Perhaps the drivers for a 57-year old differ from a 47-year old in terms of career, money and general ambition. But that doesn't impact overall motivational or energy levels. They are simply in a different life phase.

We need to understand individual motivational drivers, never assuming that older people are less motivated. Those taking on senior roles are, by definition, ready for the challenge. Usually they have less family responsibility and financial pressure and are less prone to burnout. Companies are also shy of adding another mature executive in case they all retire at once. But different people want to retire at different moments. Again, these blanket assumptions are unhelpful.”

Our research paints a picture of a senior executive population who know exactly what they want. Over 90% say that it is very important for them to be able to influence change in their organization, one with whose purpose they are aligned and that offers them appealing role content. 80% strongly seek professional growth and freedom. Indeed, a dissatisfaction with their career prospects contributed to the departure of 55%.

The assumption that senior businesspeople are content to sit back and contemplate the golf course is not supported by our research.

Stereotype 2

Older executives are unwilling or unable to learn

A Senior Advisor to IMD Business School, Lars Häggström is a passionate advocate of lifelong learning and has held corporate positions in several leading multinationals. In an open discussion with Amrop, he put his cards on the table [14]: “From a personal perspective I have twice failed to read the context properly when changing jobs, between companies and industries. I continued to lead as I’d always done. I neglected external changes and unique internal dynamics. I led on the basis of past successes. In both of those jobs it led to a performance rating below my expectations. In one case I managed to bounce back, while in the other I resigned and left for another job, blaming the organization. But I was the main reason for my mediocre performance.”

These experiences led Häggström to fundamentally shift his focus: “It taught me to be an active student of context, external and internal. While I can look back and gain energy from past successes, I now know that I always have to study and learn and adjust to the new, continuously reinventing myself. It also taught me to never just say, “The world is changing, the organization needs to change, but that doesn’t apply to me.” Rather, it starts with me, giving priority to learning. I know now, that as an executive, learning is a prerequisite for continued impact.”

Our research also confirmed that senior executives demand lifelong learning and that a lack of provision is a clear defection factor for many.

72% want their learning to be financed and controlled by their organization and even more are attracted to organizations that hand the budget over to them. Almost all would actively avoid any organization that neglects their ongoing learning and indeed 44% cited a mismatch with learning needs as a reason to leave their past organization.

So to assume that senior executives are resistant to learning would be another harmful error.

Stereotype 3

Older executives are closed to diversity

This stereotype falls under the *'traditional vs. progressive'* item identified by researchers Michael J. Urick and colleagues in their 2016 study of two generationally-diverse samples. ('Understanding and Managing Intergenerational Conflict: An Examination of Influences and Strategies').

The item covers a number of perceptions that younger employees may hold about their older colleagues. For example, valuing historically accepted ideals, versus being more open-minded about political values, religious beliefs, diversity, patriotism, formality, appearance, and the manner of presentation. Or maintaining the status quo/complying with organizational policy and thinking, versus resisting old ways of doing business and attempting to innovate.

Regarding *'open-mindedness'*, our research revealed 'diversity of thought' as highly important for senior executives. 79% said they would actively seek to work for organizations that emphasize diversity of thought over unity of thought (only 5% would actively *avoid* a diverse decision-making culture). Indeed, of several decision-making characteristics of organizations that we asked our research population about, diversity of thought was the most clearly sought-after.

79%

The percentage of senior executives who told us that they would actively seek to work for organizations that emphasize diversity of thought over unity of thought.

Stereotype 4

Older executives are tech-resistant

Ulrick and his research colleagues identified another stereotype: *'high tech vs. low tech'*. They describe it as 'leveraging technology in the workforce, versus more traditional means of doing work'. The stereotype also includes tensions related to the ability to utilize technology and the lack of recognition for technology development.

Fredy Hausammann warns against the risk of over-generalizing. "One concern of Chairs is that a 63 year-old CEO or CFO will struggle to keep up with the tech. Again this assumes that the post-60's are digital dinosaurs, or unwilling or unable to invest in developing. The logic is flawed. I think a key leadership trait is the ability to self-reflect and learn. Age matters little in this regard, as the ability comes from a person's personality, more than anything else."

Our research backs this up. Some older executives may well be tech-resistant. However, the overall assumption that an older colleague is *likely* a digital dinosaur is inappropriate to say the least, even if other Amrop research does show that many CIO's think their boards, in particular, could use some digital education. [15]

We asked senior executives how a selection of underlying global trends was affecting their confidence in changing organizations. One of these was digitization and AI. Only 10% admitted that the trend was reducing their confidence in making a move. A good test question is the extent to which people would trust a digital intervention in their own hiring process — a high-stakes personal matter if ever there was one. And yet 49% would trust an AI to assess their technical skills and knowledge and 41%, to scan their CV.

Admittedly, when it comes to more interactive and complex processes, such as interviewing them, 48% of senior executives would mistrust an AI to conduct this crucial dialogue.

Does this mean that senior executives are digital dinosaurs after all? Hardly. In order to conduct a process of this complexity to the same degree as a competent professional would require not just an AI, but an AGI (Artificial General Intelligence). And most eminent robotics and computer scientists believe that true AGI is unlikely to emerge any time soon. [16, 17]

10%

The percentage of senior executives who told us that digitization and AI was reducing their confidence in changing organizations at the present time.

Stereotype 5

Older executives are loyal traditionalists

Are older executives trapped in the old ‘career for life’ paradigm, expecting to faithfully stick with a single organization until that golden handshake?

Not so. We found that many no longer want (or expect) to have a ‘monogamous’ relationship with their employer. Whilst the traditional ‘locked in’ contract is still the most attractive option (51% seek this), it only wins by a margin. Almost as many senior executives want the freedom to work for more than one organization at once (45%). What’s more, 52% would be interested in owning or co-owning a company — almost as many as would seek to work for a listed organization (an organization which would probably be more equipped to offer them a predictable career path).

The idea, too, that older executives stick to tradition rather than evolution is a further stereotype that our research leads us to question.

Whilst disruptive business models are not the most attractive to the senior executives we surveyed, 78% are actively seeking organizations that wisely mix stability with predictability and offer a degree of exploration and experimentation. And this ‘controlled innovation’ needs to be powerful enough to drive organizations forward: 86% of senior executives want to join an organization that is posting fast and dynamic, organic growth. Only 46% would be happy with the slow and steady progress that we might expect from a contented brontosaurus. Furthermore, 93% want to work for market transformers. Falling behind the market will deter 77% of this senior population.

Stereotype 6

Older executives don’t really care about sustainability or ethics

We’d like to propose a further stereotype: older executives are uninterested in sustainability. In January 2020, Greta Thunberg delivered a passionate (and sobering) message to government and business leaders [18].

“You say children shouldn’t worry. You say, just leave this to us, we will fix this, we promise we won’t let you down. Don’t be so pessimistic. And then nothing, silence or something worse than silence, empty words and promises which give the impression that sufficient action is being taken.”

Few could argue with the sentiment behind this passionate call to action. But is this *generally* true? Are the ESG, CSR and ethical initiatives of today’s business leaders simply a cynical window-dressing exercise? Is their main aim to pacify consumers, the press, shareholders and Gen Z with ‘empty words and promises’?

Consider the energy sector; a prime target for criticism given the contribution of CO_2 emissions to global warming. In 2018, Amrop Partner Roland Theuws sat down with eleven industry leaders to unpack their attitudes towards the energy transition, strategies and hurdles. His report [19] not only reveals the multi-factor complexity of the energy transition but the will of leaders to solve it. *"The why is no longer in doubt, the questions are now 'how' and 'how fast'.*

Marjan van Loon, President-Directeur of Shell Nederland summarized the mindset of several of the C-suite leaders interviewed. "People think: you don't want to develop sustainable energy. Of course we do! That is why we are so busy with our sustainable agenda, provided we can find business models. We would really like to develop those as soon as possible. However, it cannot happen by snapping your fingers."

Our research also suggested that sustainable leadership is a must-have for a large proportion of today's senior leaders. Organizations who fail to deliver will face a fight for talent. A company's ESG strategy is of prime importance to 70%.

And if 63% of senior executives want to closely associate their own remuneration with the organization's performance, 49% would be strongly attracted to organizations that emphasize societal and environmental values over financial value, and only 10% would actively avoid organizations that put caring before profit. This shows that the picture is shifting from the traditional, financially-led 'shareholder primacy' paradigm.

Put together, these last two figures are revealing. The fact that six out of ten senior executives actively want to expose their personal finances to an organization's performance, and that almost half want that organization to put socio-environmental factors before financial, suggest that many are prepared to put skin in the ESG game.

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Senior executives are seeking out other 'wise decision-making' values, too, our research found. They want organizations to emphasize compassion more than competitiveness. They believe that stakeholder involvement is more important than speed.

In fact, wise decision-making (ethical, responsible and sustainable) is so important to senior executives that 32% even said that their previous organization's neglect of it had been a reason for them to quit. Moreover, 59% want to influence change not only within the confines of their organization, but in the world.

80% were also keenly interested in an organization's ethics — as many people as those who were interested in its financial performance. Indeed, 94% said it was very important to be aligned with those ethics and principles and 84% would not join an organization that had suffered a serious reputational fallout.

70%

The percentage of senior executives who say that ESG strategy is of prime importance.

CONCLUSION

Age stereotyping is a widespread and sticky problem. It ranges from popular culture to workplace discrimination that can expose companies to legal risk, undermine talent management, and damage the prospects of senior executives.

We've questioned six stereotypes (five identified by robust academic research). And we find that older executives are not, as the stereotyping suggests, unmotivated members of the organizational community who are no longer willing or able to learn. They are not all technically-illiterate. Nor are they largely loyal traditionalists who seek comfort in the single organization career model. And the assumption that they are generally uninterested in socio-environmental concerns is simply unfounded.

Diversity of thought (and age) is like a catalyst: it creates thriving and innovative organizational cultures that benefit all generations — with a positive impact on performance. Manfred Kets de Vries recently warned that many of today's most famous companies work in the opposite way: recruiting and functioning on the basis of 'fit' and tending towards group-think [20]. According to our research, senior executives are first in line to demand diversity of thought, and rightly so.

The statistics don't lie: the ageing demographic is set to occupy a growing proportion of the executive population. Furthermore, many of today's seniors bring health and wealth to the table (in terms of experience and wisdom). These are precious resources indeed. Today's organizations (and the next generation of leaders) will need to draw heavily on this well in the VUCA times ahead.

If older executives are anything but dinosaurs, how can we make the best of what they have to offer?

FROM STEREOTYPES TO SOLUTIONS

1

Activate senior executive mentoring potential

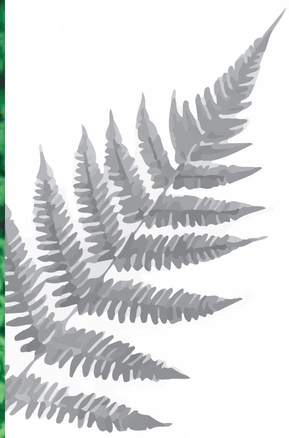
A positive force in succession planning.

Fredy Hausammann points out that succession planning is a major problem for many organizations. Not only is much younger talent unready for senior leadership, but organizations lack senior leaders. Organizations that embrace the older talent pool are well positioned to tackle the problem. Rather than viewing senior executives as rivals for younger executives, older colleagues should be cultivated as mentors who can support and build up successors. Michael North told The Conversation that studies have found that older male allies were seen as particularly likeable. Those viewed as helping younger generations were rated more positively than middle-aged or younger partners who were doing the same thing. (He notes the case for older women is still being studied).

2

Design clear and pragmatic hiring criteria

And keep them on the radar.



Eelco van Eijck, Managing Partner of Amrop in the Netherlands, is troubled by the fact that board members regularly put forward people they personally know for leadership positions. This also happens during advanced search processes conducted by the executive search firm that they have appointed. One solution is to design scorecards with the client, he says. Containing ten selection criteria, scorecards make a candidate shortlist fully transparent. At a glance, it becomes clear which of the three remaining candidates best qualifies. Peer pressure in companies shouldn't be underestimated, van Eijck emphasizes. Only a competent headhunter can turn things round using evidence, discretion and diplomacy. [21]

In their study of age stereotypes in the workplace [22] Eileen Toomey and Cort Rudolph confirm that it's possible to reduce bias of age stereotypes if specific information is used during selection processes that is relevant to the role or qualities of the applicant and position. They also warn that perceptions of a 'correct age' of an applicant for a given role increases the effects of age stereotyping. If you are a hiring professional, you may systematically apply this kind of objective precision to hiring. However, the evidence suggests that too many organizations are not keeping their eye on the ball: age discrimination is, as we have seen, a proven and widespread problem.

3

Keep an open mind

Never assume a colleague is stereotyping you

In their study, Toomey and Rudolf also raise the idea of metastereotyping. This means that members of one group (such as senior executives) automatically assume that members of another group (such as younger executives) are stereotyping them. When we do this we are actually projecting a stereotype on members of another group, (younger colleagues think that seniors like me are tech dinosaurs) – one that may well be misplaced.

4

Foster a culture of abundance

And improve collaboration between generations

In a 2013 study [23], Prof. Michael North raises "the potential for hostile ageism to brew among younger generations, if elders do not step aside and cede resources in the traditional manner (e.g., if they postpone retirement or reap disproportionate government benefits)." But in his 2017 article in The Conversation, he reports that other studies have found answers to the problem. Firstly, tensions can be reduced by portraying an abundance of resources between generations. Secondly, de-emphasizing broad generational competition can improve face-to-face interactions. "With hope, older generations can be seen positively in the eyes of the young, so long as they come off as not getting in the way."

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