



Combating Age Discrimination in the Workplace

Individuals are living longer than previous generations, and, as a result, they're delaying retirement and continuing to work to support themselves. This change in workforce demographics is leading to increased reported instances of age discrimination in the workplace. Age discrimination occurs when older applicants or employees are treated less favorably because of their age. This can include older workers being terminated or denied employment opportunities, such as job offers or promotions, due to their age.

The Age Discrimination in Employment Act is a federal law that protects workers over the age of 40 from discrimination based on their age. However, many state laws provide older applicants and employees greater workplace protections. Despite these legal protections, many older workers report experiencing age discrimination or bias in the workplace. Data from the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) revealed that in 2021, 78% of workers aged 50 or older reported seeing or experiencing age discrimination in the workplace. This was the highest level reported since AARP began tracking the information in 2003. While older workers are typically more knowledgeable and remain in a job longer than younger employees, employers often overlook them.

Age discrimination impacts both employees and employers, resulting in reduced morale and productivity among workers and heightened legal risks, and missed opportunities to tap into a talented segment of the workforce for employers. This article outlines considerations to help employers combat age discrimination in the workplace.

TRAIN EMPLOYEES ON AGE DISCRIMINATION

Older employees are often some of the most knowledgeable and experienced workers; however, many of these employees report being subjected to age biases and fewer career opportunities. These biases are often rooted in stereotypes that can be disguised as legitimate business concerns, including older workers being:

- + Less productive
- + Resistant to change
- + Reluctant to learn new skills
- + Difficult to work with
- + Incapable of learning new technologies

Training managers and employees to understand and recognize age biases and stereotypes at work can help reduce and, in some cases, prevent age discrimination from occurring. Managers are often on the frontlines for issues such as age discrimination; therefore, enabling managers to quickly recognize age discrimination and address it can go a long way in helping organizations combat age discrimination. Employers can also teach their workers about the benefits age diversity can bring, leading to a more inclusive workplace.

ESTABLISH WORKPLACE POLICIES

Creating and instituting clearly defined workplace policies surrounding age discrimination can aid employers in setting expectations that age biases will not be tolerated. In addition to creating policies, employers must consistently enforce them to be effective. This can reduce instances of age-based jokes and older employees being excluded from career opportunities and progression.

EVALUATE HIRING PRACTICES

An organization's hiring practices can unintentionally discriminate against older candidates in favor of younger ones. Regularly reviewing hiring practices to ensure that they're inclusive of applicants regardless of age can help employers avoid age discrimination and biases when recruiting. This may include removing requirements that applicants disclose their age on applications, asking age-related questions during interviews, or including biased language in job descriptions (e.g., desiring "energetic" or "hungry" candidates). Additionally, sourcing candidates from social media may disproportionately target younger individuals while discouraging older candidates from applying.

AVOID AGE-BASED LAYOFFS

When employers are forced to reduce headcount, they should ensure they're not selecting employees for termination based on their age. For example, some employers may decide that an older employee is closer to retirement, so letting them go would be less harmful than terminating a younger employee. Additionally, many senior-level employees tend to be older and more highly compensated. Therefore, targeting employees for layoffs based on compensation could increase an employer's risk of age discrimination lawsuits.

EMBRACE A MULTIGENERATIONAL WORKPLACE

Establishing a workplace where all employees, regardless of age, can thrive helps increase employee morale and productivity and, in turn, boost an employer's bottom line. Organizations can do this by creating a multigenerational workforce. A successful multigenerational workforce allows all employees opportunities to grow and advance their careers. Leadership can foster age diversity by hiring, retaining, and engaging employees of all generations. Additionally, employers can make age part of their diversity, inclusion, and belonging initiatives, easing intergenerational tension that may exist due to the gap between the oldest and youngest employees.

EMPLOYER TAKEAWAY

Age discrimination is a serious workplace issue and will likely continue to be a pressing concern for most employers as more individuals put off retirement to work. By recognizing age discrimination's prevalence in the workplace, employers can take steps to ensure all employees, regardless of age, are treated fairly and equitably.

Employers have an opportunity to create a multi-generational workforce and leverage the experience and capabilities of older workers to increase productivity.

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