



Opinion: Ageism in the workplace is robbing millennials of valuable life skills

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Companies benefit when their 'Modern Elders' and younger workers learn from each other



New Line Cinema/Courtesy Everett Collection

By **CHIPCONLEY**

Do you wish people saw you as 20 years younger? A 69-year old Dutch man tested this proposition a few months ago when he filed suit to change his legal age much like people change their legal name or gender. A Dutch court turned down Emile Ratelband's request

stating, "Mr Ratelband is at liberty to feel 20 years younger than his real age and to act accordingly, but amending his date of birth would cause 20 years of records to vanish from the register of births, deaths, marriages and registered partnerships."

"Facial discrimination" may be quickly catching up with racial discrimination as a well-known societal ill. Last year, the Communication Workers of America union expanded the scope of the class action suit they filed against some of the country's largest employers — a diverse list of companies that included Amazon.com AMZN, +0.03% , T-Mobile TMUS, +0.04% , Capital One Financial COF, +0.04% and Enterprise Rent-a-Car — accused of deliberately targeting their Facebook FB, +0.53% ads to exclude older workers. Coming on the heels of ProPublica's investigation that IBM IBM, +0.02% has quietly pushed out upwards of 20,000 aging workers over the past five years, the lesson is clear: **age discrimination remains the last socially acceptable bias in our society.**

Although the Age Discrimination Employment Act of 1967 prohibits discrimination against people 40 and older, a recent survey by AARP showed that two-thirds of workers between the ages of 45 to 74 said **they have seen or experienced ageism.** And, for all that has been written about the woeful lack of diversity and "bro culture" that prevails in the tech industry, Silicon Valley's 150-biggest tech companies have actually faced more **accusations of age bias** over the past decade than racial or gender bias. So, while **class action lawsuits** and tough journalistic scrutiny are steps in the right direction, efforts to merely enforce the law are not sufficient. Let's remember that equal rights for women, blacks, the disabled, gays and lesbians, and others weren't achieved solely through change in laws, but instead by a change in attitudes that usually predated legislation. Not surprisingly, our culture evolves faster than our senators in Washington.

<https://www.marketwatch.com/story/why-facial-discrimination-against-older-workers-is-robbing-millennials-of-valuable-life-skills-2019-03-25>

Yet our culture, in this particular arena, is lagging behind. The brisk march of progress from the industrial to the tech era has created a strong bias toward digital natives who understand gadgets and gigabytes better than those of us who didn't grow up "byting" from the Apple in childhood. One paradox of our time is that baby boomers enjoy better health than ever, remain vibrant and stay in the workplace longer, but feel less and less relevant. They worry, justifiably, that bosses or potential employers may see their experience and the clocked years that come with it **as more of a liability than an asset**. They fear becoming increasingly invisible, being cast aside.

A new period of life is materializing before our eyes. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, middle age is between 45 and 65, but in many industries, especially in technology, you may feel "old" at 35 — even though you might continue to work full time until you hit 75. Forty years of midlife — 35 to 75 — may feel like a run-on sentence that could use some punctuation — especially in a world where more of us are living to 100. We're growing older, but power is moving younger.

While the median age of employees in the United States is 42, that number is more than a decade younger among the tech titans. A Harvard Business Review study showed that the average age of founders of unicorns (private companies with more than \$1 billion in valuation) is 31, and the average age of their CEOs is 41 (as compared to the average age of an S&P 500 **SPX, -2.59%** company CEO, which is 52).

The problem is that many of these young leaders are being thrust into positions of power long before they are ready — often tasked with running companies or departments that are scaling quickly with little experience or guidance. As a young tech leader asked me the other day, "How can I microwave my leadership skills?"

The answer: there is a generation of older workers with wisdom and experience, specialized knowledge, and unparalleled ability to teach, coach, and counsel, who could pair with these ambitious millennials to create businesses that are built to endure.

In early 2013, I returned to the workforce in my mid-50s **as a senior executive with tech start-up Airbnb**. I was twice the age of the average employee and was reporting to co-founder and CEO Brian Chesky who was 21 years my junior. What I lacked in DQ (Digital Intelligence), I made up for in accumulated EQ (Emotional Intelligence). The mutual mentoring I offered and received turned me into what I call a "Modern Elder:" someone who marries wisdom and experience with curiosity, a beginner's mind, and a willingness to learn from those younger. With five generations in the workplace for the first time, it's essential that we embrace and develop more means for such intergenerational collaboration.

The attitudinal change necessary for Modern Elders to flourish needs to start with our language. It's time to liberate the word "elder" from the word "elder-ly." The elderly are older and often dependent upon society and, yet, often separated from the young. On the other hand, society has historically been dependent upon on our elders, who have been of service to the young. Given that the average age of someone moving into a

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retirement home has moved from 65-years-old 60 years ago to 81 today, we have so many productive elders in our midst who are growing whole, not just old.

Ageism is one of the few “isms” that ultimately affects us all. As deeply divided as we are politically and culturally today, the eventual arrival of elderhood is a condition that unites us. It’s time we embraced age like any other type of diversity. Wisdom precedes us and will succeed us. The Modern Age needs Modern Elders.

*Chip Conley is a strategic adviser to Airbnb after being its head of global hospitality and strategy. He wrote about his experience in the book, **“Wisdom@Work: The Making of a Modern Elder,”** and has founded the Modern Elder Academy, a midlife wisdom school in Mexico.*