

4/14/2016 Baby boomers are taking on sexism and sexism The Washington Post
legacy pensions, for younger ones who expect neither.

(And this isn't just an American thing: Faster-aging societies with low birthrates in Asia and Europe face an even larger demographic "bulge" of older citizens who will have to be supported by fewer wage earners, feeding into an image of the elderly as a drain on society. A 2013 meta-analysis found East Asian countries had even more negative attitudes toward their older populations than some Western ones — grimly punctuated by climbing suicide rates in China, South Korea and Taiwan.)

All of that underpins tensions in the workplace and has spawned a cottage industry of consultants who specialize in intergenerational relations.

In a 2015 survey by the Harris Poll, for example, 65 percent of boomers rated themselves as being the "best problem-solvers/troubleshooters," and only 5 percent of millennials agreed. Fifty-four percent of millennials thought boomers were the "biggest roadblocks." Sometimes these perceptions come straight from the top: Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg once said "young people are just smarter."

Those attitudes apply not just to perceptions of "old" people, but also to expectations: A 2013 experiment found that young people looked more favorably upon older adults who "act their age" by listening to Frank Sinatra over the Black Eyed Peas, or by being more generous with their money. One of the researchers, Michael North, an assistant professor at New York University's Stern School of Business, says younger people tend to resent it when older workers don't "get out of the way" and retire.

Yet human resource consultants and the media have often placed the onus on older workers to overcome these biases, which surface in job postings for "recent college graduates," applicants who "enjoy the pressures of the job" and those who can "fit in with a young team." Over-50 job seekers are advised to update their wardrobes and hairstyles, purge their résumés of positions held during the Reagan administration and, above all, "show enthusiasm." Projecting "energy" is another common tip, as if lethargy kicks in only after 40.

And what of the legal protections for older workers? Federal anti-age-discrimination laws haven't proved to be an effective deterrent, says University of Houston professor emeritus Andrew Achenbaum. Proving you were passed over because of your age is devilishly difficult, and the EEOC has a large backlog of complaints that it hasn't had the resources to deal with.

"I wouldn't mess around with [gender bias] if I were a university," Achenbaum says. "But I'm willing to take my chances on age discrimination, because there are so many [cases] that are unsolved."

Efforts to battle ageism have cropped up now and then, but they can be stymied by the sheer force and fluidity of culture.

Margery Leveen Sher, 68, a former corporate consultant and nonprofit executive in the District, says she internalized the unspoken code of ageism long ago and was for many years a "closeted old person." "I thought, Nobody is going to want to work with me to start up a nonprofit because they will think I will want to retire shortly," she says. She never lied about her age; she

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just didn't mention it. And "thanks to good genes, good health and a wad of money thrown regularly at my hair salon," she could easily pass for a decade younger. Sher says only since she retired and started her own business, the Did Ya Notice? Project, writing and speaking about the importance of mindfulness, has she felt ready to "come out." "I am not a trailblazing anti-ageism fighter. I have been a closeted coward," she says. "But here goes: I am 68. I am full of energy and ideas, and I ain't done yet."

Multiply that sentiment by 74.9 million and maybe something will finally give. Ashton Applewhite, creator of the blog [Yo, Is This Ageist?](#), says the size of the boomer generation should be an advantage when shifting the discourse around aging.

"Silicon Valley is finally getting some attention, and you know why? Educated, skilled, non-disabled white guys faced discrimination for the first time in their lives," Applewhite says. "Baby boomers are starting to realize that we are actually going to have to get old. So there is this sudden awareness — we have an unusual sense of demographic weight."

Nobody knows this better than AARP, which has appropriated the language of Silicon Valley in its "Disrupt Aging" campaign. It takes aim at common stereotypes and features stories about older people living unconventional lives, like a 55-year-old YouTube entrepreneur and a 64-year-old record-breaking long-distance swimmer.

But Applewhite thinks it's more important to examine the source of ageist attitudes. "They come from corporate interests that want to medicalize aging so they can sell you s--- to cure it, or they want to treat it as a problem so they can sell you s--- to fix it," she says. "Capitalism is a problem."

Capitalism has to be part of the solution too, says North, of the Stern School of Business. He contends successful companies will find ways to accommodate the needs of people nearing the end of their working lives, such as part-time schedules to help them transition rather than drop out. "Companies really should be taking stock of these demographic trends," North says. "There's tremendous value to be had there, and most companies aren't doing that."

For his part, Dale Kleber thinks he's a better hire than he was 20 years ago, when he was in the middle of raising kids and climbing the corporate ladder. He's had time to keep up on professional reading and stay in better shape. "I think the stereotypes [about older workers] are a little misleading, because the reverse might be true," Kleber says. "I've got a good 15 years in me at least."

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