

## Baby boomers are taking on ageism – and losing

By Lydia DePillis August 4, 2016

**By and large, Dale Kleber had a pretty straightforward trip up the economic ladder**. He went to law school and worked his way up to general counsel of a major food distributor in Chicago and then chief executive of a dairy trade organization. He is putting his third and fourth kids through private college.

"Our generation was pretty spoiled," says Kleber, 60. "We had it good. The economy was in a huge growth spurt. Some dips here and there, but nothing severe."

But a couple of years ago, Kleber hit a roadblock. He'd left the dairy group and started looking for another job; he and his wife didn't have quite enough saved to retire comfortably. He didn't think he'd have trouble finding work.

Scores of applications later, with few callbacks and no offers, Kleber is close to admitting defeat — and admitting that age discrimination might be one of the biggest challenges his generation has faced.

One job posting, from a medical device company called CareFusion , seemed to suggest Kleber's lack of success wasn't just due to a tough job market: The ad called for a maximum of seven years of legal experience. He applied anyway and, after being passed over, filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission alleging age discrimination. The case is in the discovery phase in federal court in Illinois.

"They expressed concerns with an older person being less likely to take supervision from someone that's younger than they are," Kleber says, paraphrasing the company's response to his suit. "If I felt like I was going to be dissatisfied in the position, I wouldn't be pursuing it."

That disagreement goes to the heart of the awkwardness that baby boomers are now feeling as they enter the last years of their working lives. Often needing to stay in jobs longer than they anticipated to shore up savings depleted during the Great Recession, or simply wanting to remain active further into their lengthening life spans, they're coming up against a strong preference in America for youthful "energy" and "innovation."

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That bias is so common we frequently don't recognize it. Todd Nelson, a psychology professor at California State University at Stanislaus, has singled out birthday cards for portraying advancing age as something to be ashamed of, with a tone that would never be used with race or religion. (" 'Ha-ha-ha, too bad you're Jewish' ... wouldn't go over so well," he noted.)

Internet memes like the "Scumbag Baby Boomer" and "Old Economy Steve," which lambast boomers for transgressions from failing to adopt technology to causing the wars and recessions that millennials have weathered, channel resentment against an entire category of people in ways that might not be tolerated if they were members of another protected class.

The whiteness and maleness of Silicon Valley and the tech industry have been the subject of numerous magazine cover stories, but with rare exceptions such as Dan Lyons's <u>hilarious 2016 memoir about being a 50-something at a Cambridge, Mass., start-</u>up, its youth passes without comment.

This cultural backdrop has horrifyingly real consequences for many on the wrong side of 40. Formal age discrimination cases like Kleber's spiked during the most recent recession and haven't fully subsided. Long-term unemployment, defined as being jobless for 27 weeks or longer , is markedly worse for workers over age 55 than for the general population.

In contrast to the respect often accorded to the generation that fought World War II, their progeny are facing relative hostility in their senescence.

At a time when conditions have vastly improved for women, gay people, disabled people and minorities in the workplace, prejudice against older workers remains among the most acceptable and pervasive "isms." And it's not clear that the next generations — ascendant Gen Xers and millennials — will be treated any better.

**Ageism, of course, is as old as age itself.** Even while venerating elders for their wisdom, cultures across the world have disparaged the weakness and unattractiveness of those past the bloom of youth. "Senectus morbidus est," wrote Roman philosopher Seneca in the 1st century A.D.: "Old age is a disease."

In modern times, there are more formal protections: The advent of Social Security in the 1930s ensured older people wouldn't be entirely penniless when they could no longer work. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 ended some of the most egregious forms of prejudice, such as age limits for flight attendants and mandatory retirement ages for factory and mine workers.

At the same time, structural, economic and demographic changes have created new types of ageism that are more subtle and widespread.

One change is the presence of two large, culturally distinct generations - millennials and boomers, both about 75 million strong - that have found themselves in the workforce with less and less formal authority.

Older workers have the misfortune of wanting to work longer just as a new generation is trying to get an economic foothold. In a weak economy, companies are sometimes all too happy to dump veteran employees, with their higher health-care costs and

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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 problemsolvers/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 <u>Yo, Is</u> 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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