

Op-Ed: Myths of the Older Worker

Unlike other pieces of legislation enacted to fight discrimination, the Age Discrimination Employment Act of 1967 (ADEA) has a built-in failsafe for companies who find equality too inconvenient. The “reasonable factor other than age” or RFOA defense. Essentially, if any other justification can be made for laying off a worker then there is no means for that worker to fight the ruling.

We’ve all heard the justifications behind age-based discrimination, or even thought them ourselves. Older workers are stubborn and slower to adjust to technology. Older workers have more health problems and are out of the office more. Older workers are just holding down their chairs, waiting to cash in on big money pensions. Heck, maybe companies are doing a favor to older workers they push out—shouldn’t people in their 60s and 70s be relaxing in Florida instead of taking up space in the corner offices?

Well, if older people would rather be retired it’s news to them. Whether it’s by choice or by necessity, workers over the age of 65 have actually doubled between 1977 and 2007 according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. As Baby Boomers began to reach their 60s, this figure has doubled again. Today, approximately 6% of the labor force is over 65, a sharp increase from 3.6% in 2006. The avalanche of articles you find online are evidence enough that not only are older people working, but that they want to work... if only they were given the chance.

As multiple studies from AARP and the Department of Labor show, workers over 55 are at an enormous disadvantage and are unemployed twice as long as their younger peers. When the Agency on Aging of South Central Connecticut held focus groups to hear real-world examples of ageism in 2016, unemployment was one of the top concerns alongside health equity.

Once it’s established that older people would like to remain employed, the question we return to is why they aren’t being hired or valued by workplaces. Let’s address some of the more common and persistent myths one-by one:

One fear that persists when thinking about hiring older workers is how long they are going to stay. Even if old workers can learn new tricks, why would you invest the time and money training someone who will only be around for a few years when you could instead invest in someone with 30 or 40+ years of working life left? The bad news for employers is you can no longer rely on young age or innate company loyalty as your retention strategy. In a 2012 Future Work study reported by Forbes, 91% of Millennials – workers born between 1977 and 1997 – expect to stay at a job less than 3 years.

So maybe older workers will stay just as long, but they are pricing themselves out of the market. It’s easy to assume that it just doesn’t make good business sense to pay someone the \$20-plus an hour when you can get a young person for half that. In fact, on average older workers make almost \$100 below the overall median weekly wage in this country and almost one in four of the 3.2 million minimum-wage workers in 2014 were over 40. Clearly it is something other than the high cost of paying older workers that is stopping businesses from hiring them on.

“A-ha,” some might say, “but salary is not the only cost to an employer! Surely, older adults costs more in health and other benefits!” It turns out that while older workers do generally have increased health costs, those costs are offset by the fact that older adults have fewer dependents. Furthermore when it comes to hiring women, older workers who are more likely past the age of becoming pregnant are a

much lower risk than their younger peers. At the end of the day healthcare is so variable from person-to-person, regardless of age, that it is just not a reasonable factor when making hiring decisions.

Older workers have been shown to bring enormous benefits to their workplaces. Studies have shown them to have stronger work ethics, greater experience, and are more reliable. Frankly the only way to find out if that's true is to give older applicants a chance. If someone who graduated in the 1960s applies to an open position at your company, imagine their 50 years of experience and not that they may walk a little slower. Bill Gates and the other pioneers of the computer revolution are now in their 60s—we think their peers can figure out spreadsheets if given the chance. The purpose of our Stop Ageism Now campaign is to not give every older adult a job, but rather to give them the same chance to prove themselves as anyone younger. It is not only good for our workplaces and economy, it is what's right. Join us and find out more at StopAgeismNow.org.