

## Employee Voices: Ageism & Work

*Uncovering the impact of age on job search and workplace experiences.*

### Introduction

Ageism is the discrimination or prejudice against a particular age group, particularly the elderly. It is a gender-neutral issue that continues to impact individuals in their work. In regard to instances of ageism in the lives of professionals, individuals tend to experience this discrimination either (a) within their workplace or (b) in their job search process. It can be difficult for professionals to confirm that what they experience as ageism is in fact such, as, in most cases, ageism is covert and there are often many factors other than age at play. The often covert nature of ageism results in much frustration from professionals and an overwhelming sense of feeling unprotected by their organization and the systems in place aimed to safeguard against such practices.

### Our Process

We interviewed professionals ages 40+ using an open-ended semi-structured approach, meaning that while the interviews covered intended topic areas, the conversations were intentionally broad so that individuals could discuss what matters most to them. Interviews were conducted until clear themes began to repeat across interviewees (a point of saturation).

### Our Findings

From our 1:1 interviews, we hear professionals having experienced ageism in their professional lives in two distinct ways: during the job search and in the workplace. In their job search, interviewed professionals speak to having felt ageism when applying and interviewing for jobs and ultimately when being passed over on positions. In the workplace, ageism manifests primarily as being pushed out or passed up on career advancement, with little to no support in reporting these discriminatory practices.

# Job Applications

## Screening Practices that Parse out Age

Tenured professionals feel as though their age provides them with a unique advantage of having accumulated a range of diverse experiences, making them adaptable, critical thinkers. Nonetheless, during the initial phase of their job search, many note being hesitant to detail such experiences or provide date ranges, with the fear that recruiters and application systems will be able to deduce age from such information. In applying for jobs the overall feeling is that employers prefer younger candidates, that they assume will work longer hours for less pay.

### ATS Systems

Interviewed professionals who have been job searching report discomfort in that they cannot bypass disclosing their age in application systems. Many applications require the disclosure of graduation dates as well as start/stop dates for prior work experiences. Other's note that ATS systems cannot accurately assess or value professional experience, asking applicants to indicate years of experience, but aggregating experience into answer choices like "7+ years."

### Job Responsibilities & Requirements

Professionals express confusion and frustration from the conflicting messaging in some job postings. Many have come across postings that stack requirements and bigger responsibilities, but seek candidates with less tenure. Other job opportunities are clearly geared towards Jr. professionals.

### Compensation

Many note that they feel as though compensation level is used as a way to deter more senior-level candidates from applying to roles that they may be otherwise qualified for or interested in. Despite job descriptions wanting experienced professionals, the disconnect between years of experience and compensation has left some thinking that experience is not nearly as valued as outward messaging by organizations may indicate.

### Common Actions to Overcome Ageism in the Job Search

1. Truncating Resume
2. Hiring Career Coaches
3. Enrolling in Online BootCamps

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### Quotes from Interviewed Professionals

*"I consciously don't put year of graduation [on resume]. But, it doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure it out based on years of experience. I've been told [by a career coach] that some algorithms can automatically kick you out. There are ways to do ageism without you knowing."*

*"There are softwares out there that are subtle. They [the application] say they want ten years of experience, but then you click buttons on the application to say how many years of experience you have. You get into the systems, they have 1-3, 3-5, 7 and up... but they say they want 10+ years."*

## Interviews

### Perceived Biases in Line of Questioning

Many of those interviewed acknowledge having experienced what they felt was covert forms of ageism in their interviews with employers. More specifically, they mention how momentum in their job search halted when (1) interviewers saw their physical appearance (2) hiring managers appeared significantly younger than interviewees, and (3) candidates could not answer seemingly unrelated technology based questions.

### Physical Appearance

In job interviews, several note that they feel as though their physical appearance, showing visible signs of aging, hindered their advancement in the job search process. Several mention how they were deemed a top candidate, until face-to-face interactions with hiring managers and potential team members. Overall, there exists a level of uneasiness regarding face-to-face interactions, with some emphasizing how video calls seem to accentuate age, as opposed to in-person interviews.

### Hiring Managers

Many report experiencing success when it comes to initial screens and first-round interviews with recruiters. However, upon advancing to the point of interviewing with hiring managers, several note a change in the tone of interviews. Often times, the hiring manager is younger in age than the interviewee, a factor that many professionals feel deter managers from hiring older aged individuals, especially when recruiters express not understanding why they have been passed up.

### Tech-based Questions

Several professionals express frustration over being asked unrelated technology-oriented questions by younger-aged interviewees. To the interviewees, these questions feel biased and like they are intended to weed out older candidates, who are less likely to possess such specific technology skill sets. Frustrations are further exacerbated by that fact that these tech skills are not mentioned in job descriptions and seldom relate to the responsibilities required of the position. Despite not knowing the specific tech-based applications, older candidates make their case for how their cumulative experience and ability to learn would more than compensate. However, they feel as though they are perceived as less able to learn new tech due to their age.

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## Quotes from Interviewed Professionals

*“It seems to be when we have the visual interaction, that’s when all of sudden you go from being the best person in pool, the one they want, the one with experience to get it done...to, ‘we’re going in a different direction.’”*

*“I’ve been in so many final rounds. The interesting part, I get through the screenings and process...Everyone is raving, you’re the guy we want... but you get to the point where you expose who you are, they see who you are. I have very little hair and it’s gray. I may not look 62, but I’m definitely not 30. Interesting part, then recruiter came back and said: They choose someone else and I don’t know why.”*

# Hiring Decisions

## Age as Justification for not Advancing

Professionals feel as though age is the basis upon which presumptions are made that ultimately influence final hiring decisions. They express frustration over these generalizations and feel as though despite they are not being heard by recruiters and hiring managers when they try to debunk or invalidate such presumptions.

## Anticipated Job Satisfaction

Many job seekers, recognizing other more important priorities in their life, are wanting to pursue lower level position. However, they don't feel they are given a fair chance even if they approach employers with genuine interest and thoughtful consideration of their needs, including salary requirements. Employers assume that older professionals will be unsatisfied and bored in what they view to be an unchallenging role for someone in the late stages of their career. Candidates hear that they are 'overqualified' for a role and struggle to understand why such a factor is viewed as a negative in the eyes of employers. If they are interested in the role fully knowing compensation and responsibilities may be less than what they could receive, being overqualified should be a positive consideration factor.

## Niche Skillsets

Having amassed decades of experience, older professionals feel as though one of their greatest skills is their ability to adapt in light of unique situations. They feel as though over the course of their careers they have come to see it all, resulting in a vast toolbox that they can call on. However, many express that employers seem to value specific niche/industry skill sets over an expansive knowledge base. The consensus is that organizations might be leaning towards specialists over generalists, despite job descriptions calling out the need to wear multiple hats and an ability to adapt.

## Culture Fit

Several report making it to final rounds of interviews and ultimately being told they are not "a fit." To many, this verbiage feels synonymous with ageism. Everything seems to align perfectly—prior experience, skillsets, job responsibility—except the 'fit.' This feeling that fit is being used as a basis for ageism is felt more prominently by older professionals in industries like tech, where young energy feels prioritized over other relevant factors. Frustrations related to ageism are made worse when recruiters relay positive interview feedback and express their own confusion as to why the organization may have opted for another candidate. To gain clarity, many follow-up by asking the organization for additional feedback as to why they were not a fit, at which point they receive radio silence.

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## Quotes from Interviewed Professionals

*"As I'm applying, I'm struggling conveying my message, I am OK with a demotion. The jobs I'm applying to are not at current pay level, not at current bonus, not managing others, like I've done in the past."*

*"I went in in-person [to interview] and was told it was down to me and one other. I interviewed with four people. It never came up that I didn't know how to use a certain technology until at the end of the day when I wasn't hired. Maybe at some point down the road they didn't like me and that was the excuse- that I don't know the new technology?"*

# Career Advancement

## Favoritism towards younger employees

In the workplace, ageism is most frequently felt in reference to career advancement practices/policies and opportunities. Interviewed professionals feel as though age is a primary factor when organizations consider (1) employee development tracks and (2) filling vacant positions.

## The Industry

During interviews a key theme arose, that the industry of work seems to be a key factor to which the extent of ageism occurs. Primarily, professionals resoundingly feel as though the tech industry as a whole is the most discriminatory against older-aged professionals. Several note and express confusion regarding tech being notably one of the most progressive and diverse industries, yet seeming to lag behind acknowledging the value of having employees of diverse ages.

## Being ‘Pushed Out’

Hiring practices, both internal and external, seem to favor younger talent when organizations take advantage of low cost, eager ‘young kids’ and accept employee burn out and churn. Several note the favorability of young employees as being more teachable/moldable. Two interviewees spoke of direct, overt discrimination that they experienced in the workplace. In one instance, a boss threatened that a job could more effectively be done, for less money, by a new college grad/intern. In the other case, younger outsiders were favored for advancement opportunities over an existing employee with a successful track record.

## People Development

Others describe covert ageism in people development practices. Employee development tracks that assume employees seek advancement and greater responsibility can fail to support and value seasoned employees with different goals or motivations. Seasoned employees wanting to limit travel time and long hours feel unsupported by a lack of ability to stay in current roles. Some note how they feel forced to stretch themselves or risk losing job security.

## Insufficient Protection

Internal attempts to report discrimination or lack of support based on age did not lead to successful outcomes for any of the interviewees. Interviewees experiences end in termination or voluntary departures from organizations. Only one pursued legal recourse external to the organization and ultimately determined the personal cost of the battle did not justify the fight.

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## Quotes from Interviewed Professionals

*“I’m speaking only to high tech. When you reach 60, bridging 50-60, you’re going to get laid off. That’s just the way the industry works. They want younger, they don’t care if it’s discrimination, they just pay you out. When you think about the protections we have...they don’t work.”*

*“You realize your age may suggest that you should be at a Director level, manager...but what if I just want to be a worker bee...I don’t want to step out [of the workforce], but I don’t want to travel like crazy, work crazy hours. I do want to challenge myself, but I don’t want to be stressed out.”*