



WerkLabs

# Experience Matters: Ageism & Work

# WELCOME

We are pleased to present the results of our research report, *Experience Matters: Ageism & Work*. This research focuses on how ageism runs rampant starting with job interview processes through to hiring decisions and day to day work opportunities. Our goal is to provide corporations with actionable solutions to prevent and overcome ageist practices.

We surveyed more than 700 working professionals over the age of 40 from diverse backgrounds, and asked them to rate their experiences with ageism, where applicable. We combined a qualitative interview and survey instrument and qualitative interviews to surface themes that might otherwise go undetected.

At WerkLabs & The Mom Project, we believe that revealing hidden, often unconscious, biases is key to making workplaces more inclusive and diverse. Ageism is quite arguably the most socially accepted form of discrimination in work. It is illegal, but it is also extremely difficult to prove. Compounding that, people who participate in ageist practices are often unaware that they are doing so, as will be addressed in study examples. Currently, we face an uphill battle in addressing the role that ageism plays in day-to-day work. Few workplace training seminars exist to educate and safeguard against ageism, including hiring practices, career development, and day-to-day collaboration. Very limited HR policies exist to safeguard individuals who report instances of ageism.

This report aims to be a starting point for driving meaningful conversations on this topic, highlighting (1) the prevalence of ageism (2) common practices of ageism and (3) action-items organizations can take to combat ageism.

It is our goal at WerkLabs and The Mom Project that every employee, regardless of all the wonderful differences that make up a workplace, not only have the opportunity to contribute their unique perspective to their work, but feel empowered to do so.

Sincerely,

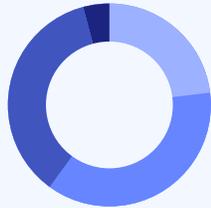
**Pam Cohen, PhD**

*Chief Research & Analytics Officer*

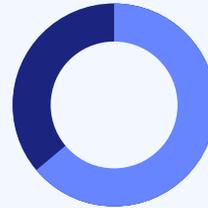
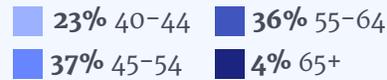
*WerkLabs & The Mom Project*

# DEMOGRAPHICS

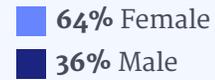
Our sample included ~700 professionals over the age of 40 from across the United States. These professionals come from diverse backgrounds with professional experiences spanning a variety of industries and geographical locations.



## Ages



## Gender



## Top 5 Industries of professionals surveyed:

- Tech, Telecommunication, Internet, & Electronics
- Healthcare & Pharmaceuticals
- Retail & Consumer Durables
- Manufacturing
- Advertising & Marketing

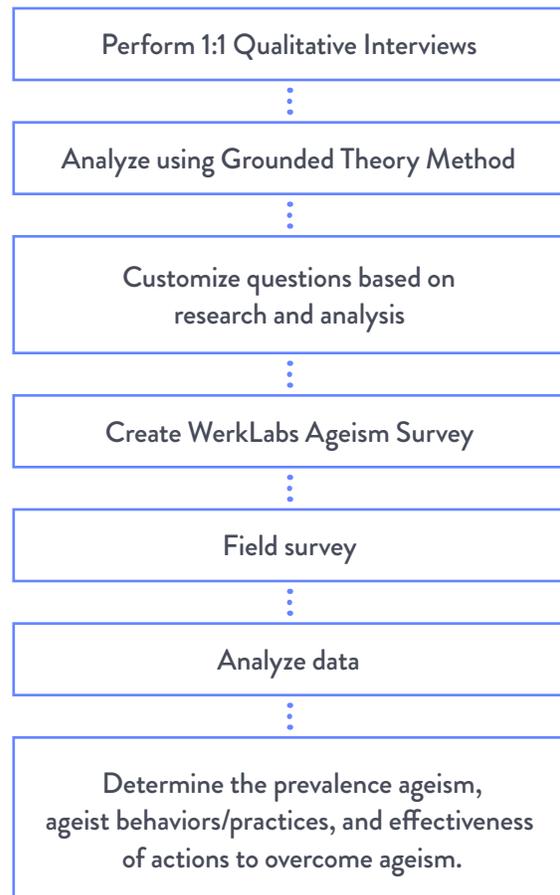
## Methodology

WerkLabs' Ageism Survey instrument combined quantitative survey collection and qualitative interviews. One-on-one interviews with a variety of professionals over the age of 40 employed a semi-structured approach, asking respondents to respond to broad open-ended questions regarding work experiences, without unnecessarily restricting the conversation.

An analysis based on Grounded Theory was performed to evaluate the measurement model and assess which questionnaire items best “fit together” to define key themes on ageism. There were no preconceived notions of what characteristics were likely to emerge given the topic. Instead, the data came together to clearly tell a story of how ageism manifests in work and is significantly impacting the lives of professionals, today.

The findings from WerkLabs 1:1 interviews can be found in the [supplementary report](#).

## Timeline



# KEY INSIGHTS

## Ageism & Work

*Overall, 60% of survey respondents indicate that they have encountered ageism in their professional lives.*

In the context of work, *ageism tends to occur in one of two areas, the job search or the workplace.*

*Ageism is most prevalent in the job search process.* Surveyed professionals indicate that ageism occurs in their job search, but many express having experienced ageism in both the job search and workplace. Of those who indicated experiencing ageism in their professional lives, 75% experienced ageism in their job search, and 53% experienced ageism in their workplace.

*Ageism impacts women to a greater extent than men.* Significantly more women indicate that they've experienced ageism in their professional lives. Of survey participants choosing to disclose their gender, we see that nearly 62% of women and 52% of men indicate having experienced ageism.

Ageism impacts professionals at higher career levels more frequently. Instances of ageism most frequently occur for professionals at the following levels:

**Director:** *93% of director-level employees surveyed report having experienced ageism*

**Senior Manager:** *78% of those surveyed report having experienced ageism*

**Manager:** *64% report having experienced ageism*

The lowest instances of ageism occur at the administrative and team lead level.

*Ageism varies by industry*, with ageism occurring more frequently within certain industries. Instances of ageism most often occur for professionals in the following industries:

**Financial Services:** *85% of professionals in this industry report experiencing ageism*

**Advertising & Marketing:** *84% of professionals in this industry report experiencing ageism*

**Tech:** *81% of professionals in this industry report experiencing ageism*

The lowest instances of ageism occurred within Healthcare & Pharmaceuticals and Education.



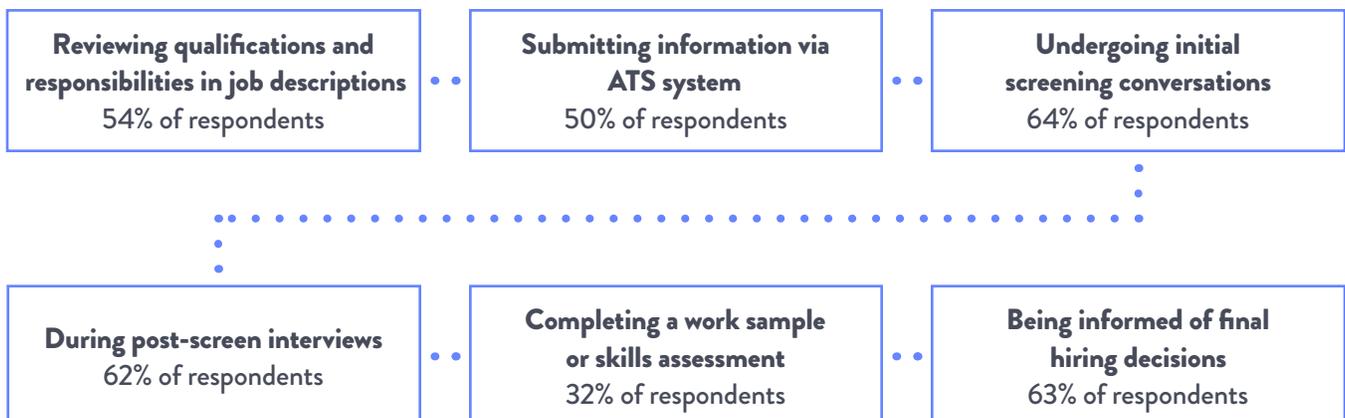
# Ageism and the job search

## *Determining when ageism most frequently occurs over the course of professionals job search.*

From qualitative 1:1 interviews, WerkLabs researchers determined six distinct periods within the job search that ageism tends to occur.

Survey participants were asked to rate the extent to which they have experienced ageism at the following stages. These ratings were aggregated in order to determine what percentage of surveyed professionals, who note having experienced ageism in their job search, experienced ageism during each phase.

### *A Timeline of Ageism in the Job Search*



# DRILLING DOWN

## Ageism in job applications

**Specific actions and practices that organizations take in recruiting new applicants often unknowingly foster, and even encourage, age-based discrimination.**

In job applications, professionals express having experienced ageism when:

*The language of job descriptions and recruiting materials used by organizations to attract new candidates seems to be targeted towards attracting and appealing to younger professionals.*

**67% of surveyed professionals note they feel as though they experienced ageism due to the language and jargon in job descriptions**

*Compensation for more tenured roles are at a more junior level, despite the role having a senior level job title and responsibilities. Professionals feel as though ultimately organizations are weeding out more “expensive” senior talent.*

**58% experienced ageism as noncompetitive compensation for roles they’re interested and qualified for**

*Applications require candidates to submit non-pertinent age-related information, such as year of college graduation.*

**Just over 50% of respondents note that they have come across this perceived hurdle when applying for jobs**

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### Quotes from Surveyed Professionals

*“Primarily I have experienced ageism when being screened for roles and/or in salary negotiations. Too often companies don’t know how to scope marketing work, and they try to get everything but the kitchen sink for starting marketing coordinator pay.”*

*“ANY ATS system that requires dates on your educational degrees sets an applicant up for discrimination.”*

*“Comments such as “we are an extremely young company”; “we move really fast around here”; “we use technology”; “you have more experience than the person you would report to”, those are all forms of ageism.”*

# DRILLING DOWN

## Ageism in interviews

**Specific commentary and actions on the part of recruiters and interviewers can constitute ageist practices.**

While interviewing, professionals experience ageism when:

*Interviewers seem to undervalue cumulative work experience*, often times focusing on most recent employment or directly transferable skills rather than looking at the applicant's cumulative work experience and industry tenure.

**Just over 75% of respondents express that they feel as though their age is a factor when interviewers don't value experiences**

*Interviewers make assumptions about how satisfied they think the professional would be in the role.* Frequently, interviewers express concern about older candidates being "bored or not a culture fit."

**69% of surveyed professionals have encountered ageism in this way in their job search**

*Face-to-face interactions first occur.* Professionals note that often times interviewers act surprised at their age and soon after begin to use more age-related jargon in conversations.

**57% say that they feel as though interviewers have acted surprised and been taken aback by their age**

*Interviewers ask unrelated tech-based questions.* Professionals express frustration that interviewers seem to use tech as a basis to weed out older candidates, even when the candidate is fully capable of the technology requirements or the technology is unrelated to the job.

**44% of respondents have experienced this "weed out" practice**

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### Quotes from Surveyed Professionals

*"I always get the term 'overqualified.' I have been told by recruiters to remove some of my history to 'seem younger.'"*

*"There's an assumption that I wouldn't want the roles. The statement that I would be 'bored' (which is code word for too old), and lack of giving me a chance despite many years of future availability and a willingness to learn."*

69% report that momentum in their job search has been **derailed by face-to-face conversations** with hiring teams.



# Overcoming ageism in the job search

In 1:1 interviews, professionals talked about taking specific actions in their job search to overcome the ageist practices they encountered. These actions tended to fall into one of two categories:

1. Concealing their age
2. Growing their skill sets

Survey participants were asked to rate the perceived effectiveness of specific actions in overcoming ageism for those who had taken such action.

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## Quotes from Surveyed Professionals

*“I limit my work experience to the last 20 years or so. That gets me more interviews but once they see me they can guess my age and I do not get hired or even called respectfully to tell me I did not get the job.”*

*“I put a lot of energy into knowing “young adult” culture; I try to dress ‘hip’; I definitely try to make my appearance ‘seem’ younger.”*

*“I have had to dye my hair after growing out my gray, which I did not want to do, but I could not get hired. I do not show jobs older than the year 2000. I do not show my graduation date.”*

## DRILLING DOWN

# Concealing age to overcome ageism

**To combat ageist hiring practices, professionals take action to conceal their age in how they present themselves on applications/resumes.**

To conceal their age, participants most frequently adapted how they communicated past work experience by:

**Formatting resume by most relevant skill sets**, rather than by chronological order. This is the most helpful action to overcome ageist practices with **69% of professionals** feeling as though this action is at least somewhat effective. More specifically, this action seems to counteract recruiting practices that may tend to under value cumulative work experience.

**Omitting graduation dates from resumes and applications.** However, since doing so is widespread, professionals feel as though interviewers and applications find other ways to parse out estimated graduation dates and age. All in all, **61% of professionals** found this action to be somewhat effective in overcoming ageism.

**Omitting work experiences from resumes and applications.** Frequently professionals express that they've been told by recruiters and career coaches to "cut" experience, with the presumption being too much experience implies and older age, which can hurt job prospects. **64% of those surveyed** feel as though this action is effective.

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### Quotes from Surveyed Professionals

*"I'm maintaining and improving skill set (building currency) by volunteering/doing work without compensation."*

*"I hired a career coach which was helpful in that I was able to talk about myself and get a clearer understanding of my skills however it has not helped in getting hired. It's a luxury that I was able to afford but sadly most people can't afford it and in the end is probably not beneficial. I am taking online courses which has been a good way to spend time but again not sure that it will help as most hiring managers are still seeking for specific experience."*

## DRILLING DOWN

# Expanding skillsets to overcome ageism

**To seem “relevant” despite age, professionals indicate seeking opportunities to grow their skills in order to overcome ageism.**

To counter the concerns of recruiters and hiring teams, older professionals take action to intentionally grow and develop skill sets relevant to jobs they are interested in pursuing.



**Pursuing additional certifications** to indicate credibility is an action taken to overcome ageist biases held by interviewers and hiring teams. Of those who have pursued certifications, 60% indicate that they found doing so helpful in their job search.



**Similarly, completing camps/workshops** to highlight proficiency with in-demand skills and technologies is an action taken, albeit perceived as being less effective with 48% of surveyed professionals finding this effective.



**Turning to a career coach** to understand how to improve their applications is also a common practice. Often when frustrations mount, regarding a lack of job prospects seek guidance from outside experts. Interestingly, however, this effort is the least helpful with 37% indicating perceived effectiveness in combating ageism.

95% have consciously tried  
to **physically conceal or mask**  
the appearance of their age  
in interviews



# Ageism and the workplace

## Understanding how ageism manifests in day-to-day work and interactions between colleagues

From qualitative 1:1 interviews, WerkLabs researchers determined five clear instances within the workplace where ageism is most frequently at play. Survey participants were asked to rate the extent to which they felt ageism was a factor in certain elements of their workplace experiences. These ratings were aggregated in order to determine what percentage of surveyed professionals, who note having experienced ageism in their workplace, experienced ageism in the following ways:



Having the ability to advance career:  
**66% of surveyed professionals**



Feeling secure in their job:  
**65% of surveyed professionals**



Receiving respect from coworkers for my work expertise/experiences:  
**56% of surveyed professionals**



Having the ability to be heard by leaders:  
**54% of surveyed professionals**



Receiving organizational support to expand skill sets:  
**50% of surveyed professionals**

# DRILLING DOWN

## Ageism in the workplace

**To understand how ageist practices permeate the workplace, all professionals, those indicating having experienced ageism and those who didn't, were asked to rank the extent to which they agree that ageism occurs through certain organizational practices.**

In the workplace (whether in person or remote), professionals express having experienced ageism when:

Organizations overlook older employees for advancement opportunities.

*This is a practice that **65% of professionals agree** is often times ageist.*

Older employees are pushed out by organizations

***61% agree** that this is due to ageism*

A lack of development opportunities or career mapping for older employees

*This lack of investment in older employees is viewed as ageist to **57% of respondents***

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### Quotes from Surveyed Professionals

*“I was told to retire early at half benefits so the company could hire younger workers.”*

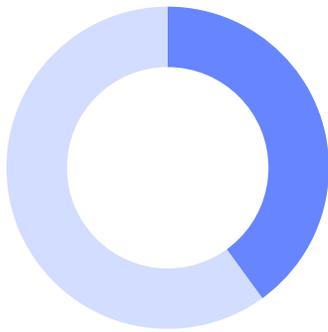
*“I’ve personally seen people being pushed out of a job because of their age.”*

*“The employer is super excited to meet me then less excited when they see that I am not younger. They seem to go for looks over experience.”*

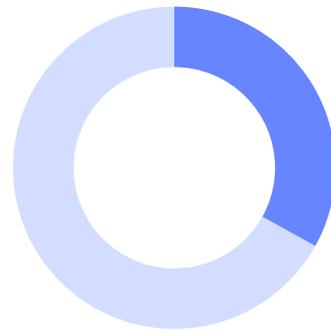
# Overcoming ageism in the workplace

**Ageism is hard to prove, which makes addressing instances of ageism in the workplace difficult. Overall, professionals do not feel protected looking internally to report ageist practices.**

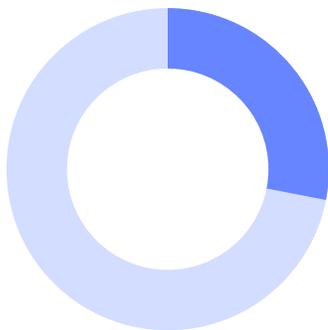
Oftentimes, those experiencing ageism are already fearful about being pushed out of the organization in favor of younger, more inexpensive talent. So, rather than reporting such discrimination, these employees choose to bite their tongue and bide their time until a new opportunity presents itself or retirement becomes attainable. When individuals do take action to overcome ageism, there are four main avenues of doing so:



Externally to an employment attorney:  
**40% effective**



Internally to HR:  
**33% effective**



Internally to legal team:  
**28% effective**



Internally to manager:  
**26% effective**

# CALL TO ACTION

When it comes to creating inclusive, diverse workplaces, addressing ageism needs to be a top priority for organizations. Older aged, more tenured employees have unique experiences, skillsets and perspectives to bring to work. Just as any other employee, these professionals deserve a platform upon which they can make a meaningful contribution to an organization that values their background. In a marketplace desperate to attract and retain diverse talent, ageism directly counteracts progress that is being made.

## ***Audit recruitment materials:***

Organizations and HR professionals need to critically analyze recruiting materials with an eye towards identifying ageism. This audit includes assessing verbiage, tone, and visual elements such as photography that are included in both external and internal communication materials used for recruitment.

## ***Conduct interviewer training sessions:***

Anyone within an organization who interviews prospective employees needs to undergo an unconscious bias training that explicitly addresses ageism. These trainings educate and bring awareness to identifying ageist practices that tend to occur in the hiring process.

## ***Audit development programs:***

HR leaders should critically analyze employee development programs, ensuring that older aged professionals have access and feel encouraged to leverage resources to the same extent as their colleagues.

## ***Make a commitment:***

Combating ageism needs to start from the top. Organizational leaders need to come forward and take a clear stance against ageism in their workplace.



# WerkLabs

Led by Dr. Pam Cohen, WerkLabs is comprised of a team of experienced researchers with backgrounds in social psychology, behavioral economics, and human behavior. Integrating qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, WerkLabs advises on topics such as Flexible Work Structures, DE&I, Policy Optimization, and Team Effectiveness.

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