

E. J. Law
TOP NEWS

AGEISM IN THE WORKPLACE: SECOND IN A SERIES

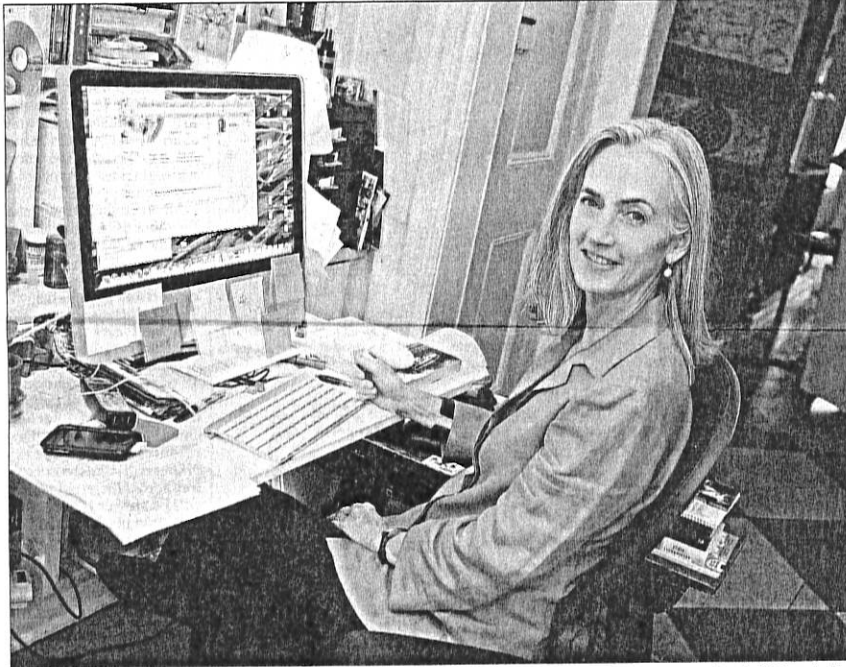
Older workers must adapt if they hope to survive

Grey employees valued, poll says

ROBERT HILTZ
 FOR POSTMEDIA NEWS
 OTTAWA

Workplace changes seen as a challenge

MISTY HARRIS
 POSTMEDIA NEWS



New York Times Archive

Author Anne Kreamer says too many mature workers are seen by junior staff as reticent to learn new technology.

When she was employed at one of the most youth-oriented companies on the planet, Anne Kreamer says there was always an unspoken notion that older workers couldn't possibly tap the zeitgeist of consumers decades their junior. But if talent was turned away, it was never due to age — at least, not officially.

Instead, Kreamer says, mature applicants were typically snubbed at the organization because they didn't "get it" or weren't "a good fit for the culture." The age bias was so subtle, and so nearly impossible to prove, that she doubts the company itself was even conscious of it.

"It masks itself in a lot of different ways," says Kreamer, now a noted author on workplace and aging issues.

Unveiling that ageism has suddenly become important. For the first time, population data show there are now more Canadians aged 55 to 64 — the age when people customarily leave the workforce — than there are aged 15 to 24, which is when people normally enter the workforce. Experts think the looming labour shortage puts the focus squarely on resolving age-based prejudices within organizations.

The dilemma, however, is that what looks like prejudice may just be practical judgment about the ability of a worker to do a job, or adapt to change. For instance, Kreamer, author of *It's Always Personal: Emotion in the New Workplace*, says far too many mature workers are seen by junior staff as reticent to learn new technology, strangers to popular culture, and wary of contemporary methods.

A Hollywood production assistant, for example, blogged last year that older workers are "standing in the way of the future," calling to mind their "inabilities to deal with technology" and dependence on fax machines. "We live in the digital age but work in the stone age," the anonymous PA complained.

On video game site IGN, a forum-user wrote: "I get the whole thing where their body stops working... but I'm a pretty good athlete and sometimes I think they're embellishing just because they want to get some advantages out of being old."

"When I was interviewing for my book, a lot of younger people couldn't believe how 'clueless' some of the older people in the organization were about technology," says

Kreamer. "I do feel like the older individual has a deep responsibility not to be the outsider Luddite: set up a Pinterest page, figure out Tumblr, try Instagram. Maybe it fits into your work life and maybe it doesn't, but at least you're not the stereotype of someone grumbling. That's a waste of my time."

According to Kreamer, who recently unpacked ageism for Harvard Business Review's blog, a huge swath of industries are now skewing toward youth — many as a result of notions about fast-paced, technology-driven environments being best-suited to workers in their 20s and early 30s.

Y Combinator, a major name in startup funding, reports that the average age of tech founders in which it invests is 26. The National Academy of Sciences shows older workers in the tech sector are three times likelier than younger workers to be downsized. And in a survey by Network World, only about one in eight tech managers aged 30 or younger had hired someone older than 40 the previous year.

Other youth-centric fields include communications, marketing, entertainment, physical labour, sales and certain segments of medicine, which Kreamer notes has a mid-50s "sweet spot" wherein surgeons are thought to peak.

In a new Ipsos Reid poll for Postmedia News, half of the respondents agreed with the statement "Older workers are harder to train on new processes and technologies." Among those aged 18 to 34,



Rebecca Blisssett for Postmedia News

Andrew Wister says as a person ages, there is a tendency to perform tasks more meticulously.

more than 70 per cent thought this.

Andrew Wister, chair of gerontology at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, says cognitive changes associated with aging typically include slower reaction time, decreased capacity for problem-solving, and diminished ability to recover or learn new information. But he notes that there are also increases in experiential intelligence and a tendency to perform tasks more meticulously.

On the physical side, degeneration often occurs in muscle and bone density, eyesight and hearing. Outside of labour-intensive jobs, however, Wister, a member of the National Seniors Council of Canada, believes none of these "mild,

notes another downside: the expectations older employees sometime carry.

"Most workers will resist any attempt to cut their pay or vacation time, even if there's a proportionate cut in the hours worked. The fact is, sometimes the cut in pay has to be even greater than the proportional reduction in hours because responsibilities might have to be reduced at the same time," says Vettese.

"Companies aren't willing to start the discussion because it might be deemed constructive dismissal — and even if it weren't, they aren't optimistic about their chances of getting the pay level, the benefits and the hours worked down to the level they would find acceptable."

Older employees belong to what Linda Duxbury, a Canadian pioneer in organizational health, describes as "the workhorse generation": They value benefits, a good pension and want to be left in peace to get things accomplished. They've also done more than their share for most of their careers — and Duxbury's data suggest Gen X and Y either aren't willing or aren't able to take on the same load once those positions open.

"It's not going to be a one-to-one exchange. The reality is that it will take three people to replace two boomers," says Duxbury, professor at the Sprott School of Business at Carleton University in Ottawa. "For organizations to survive, they really have to start managing their people a lot differently."

Fred Vettese, chief actuary at human resources consulting firm Morneau Shepell,

The saying goes: "You can't teach an old dog new tricks" — and it seems half of Canadians agree.

In a new poll from Ipsos Reid, exclusively for Postmedia News, 51 per cent of those asked said they thought older workers were more difficult to train on new processes and technology than younger ones.

The figures show a generational divide.

Seventy-one per cent of people 18 to 34 agreed the mature worker is a training challenge, but only 43 per cent of those over that age felt this way.

Ipsos Reid asked a series of value-laden questions about older workers to gauge how they are currently viewed.

One question asked if people agreed with the statement: "Older workers are a burden to employers because they generally cost more and get more vacation time and benefits." Three-quarters of respondents disagreed. Even among the 18-to-34 age group, two-thirds disagreed with the statement.

An overwhelming majority of those polled — 93 per cent — agreed with the statement, "Older workers bring experience and insight to the workforce." While it might not be surprising that those over 35 years of age agreed strongly, 86 per cent of those in the 18-to-34 age bracket did too.

Nonetheless, 40 per cent of those asked agreed with that statement that "older workers get less respect than their younger counterparts."

Ipsos also offered this statement: "Older workers are less productive, costing their way to retirement." There was strong disagreement across age categories with this view. Even in the under-35 set, only 28 per cent of those asked agreed with the statement; 72 per cent of the younger folks disagreed.

As for that 28 per cent, "you've got young people trying to get jobs and trying to move up into more senior levels of management and they may view that these senior managers are kicking around and they're ready for them to move on," Simpson said.

People participating in the survey were asked whether they felt older workers were more loyal to their employer and young people less reliable. Among those over 55, 90 per cent agreed. Only 83 per cent of middle-aged Canadians agreed and 58 per cent of young workers concurred.

The online poll was conducted between July 10 and 13 and surveyed 1,005 people.

The data was weighted against census information to ensure a balanced demographic picture. An unweighted poll of this size has a margin of error of 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.