

Unconscious Bias: What's Age Got to Do with It?

Age is a real conundrum in the workplace. Are workers age 50-plus assets or liabilities? It is possible to have an unconscious bias about age depending on your pre-existing attitudes about age in the workplace.

BY JANN FREED, PH.D.



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In the movie, *The Intern*, Robert De Niro plays Ben Whittaker, a 70-year-old retired widower who needs something to do with his time that utilizes his experience. He becomes an intern at a Web start-up in Brooklyn, NY. The movie reflects how initially Ben is a "fish out of water," an older man in a workplace of hip young people. Ben comes to work every day in a suit and tie and makes people uncomfortable with his professionalism and politeness. His boss is Jules Ostin (Anne Hathaway), the founder of an online clothing site that has taken off like wildfire. Initially, Jules does not know what to do with Ben because she does not understand how he could add value at his age, especially in a high-tech company.

The movie reflects many aspects of "unconscious bias," which has become a common phrase in the workplace these days. Unconscious biases are deeply held attitudes and beliefs that could include race, gender, appearance, social class, and so much more. Based on what you believe and perceive, unconscious bias can influence and undermine recruiting efforts, talent development, and promotability. But age is a real conundrum in the workplace. Are workers age 50-plus assets or liabilities? It is possible to have an unconscious bias about age depending on your pre-existing attitudes about age in the workplace. According to the Pew Research Center, every day for the next 19 years, approximately 10,000 Baby Boomers will turn 65. And research indicates many of those Boomers could be a real asset, even in today's changing workplace.

In my work as a leadership development and change management consultant, I coach retirement-age people who often are looking to get from where they are to where they want to be. Often, my clients express how they don't have trouble getting interviews, but they don't seem to get offered the job. Could this be a result of unconscious bias?

THE ENGAGEMENT FACTOR

Gallup's surveys on employee engagement in the workplace found that only 30 percent of U.S. workers are engaged in their work. The definition of an engaged worker is one who is enthusiastic about his or her work and contributes to his or her organization in a "positive manner." Engaged employees are emotionally connected to their organization and its goals. At the other end of the spectrum, "16 percent of employees are actively disengaged—they are miserable in the workplace and destroy what the most engaged employees build. The remaining 51 percent of employees are not engaged—they're just there."

An interesting fact found by Gallup is that Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) are just as engaged in their jobs as Gen Xers (born between 1965 and 1979) and are more likely to be engaged than Millennials (born between 1980 and 1996). Gallup concluded that high engagement for those who stay in the workforce beyond age 60 may indicate that they choose to continue working because they find their work fulfilling. Gallup also found that nearly half of the Baby Boomers still working say they don't expect to retire until they are 66 or older, including 1 in 10 who predict they will *never* retire. Boomers tend to fall into two groups: those who need to work to support their lifestyle and those who want to work because they find their work fulfilling. Clearly, those who *want* to work are more engaged than those who *need* to work.

EXPIRED CARTON OF MILKS VS. FINE BOTTLE OF WINE

Chip Conley joined Airbnb at 52 and shared what he learned about age and wisdom in the technology industry in the *Harvard Business Review*. Conley says too many "people feel like an old carton of milk, with an expiration date stamped on their wrinkled foreheads." He said, "One paradox of our time is that Baby Boomers

enjoy better health than ever, remain young, and stay in the workplace longer, but feel less and less relevant... And yet we workers 'of a certain age' are less like a carton of milk and more like a bottle of fine wine—especially now, in the digital era. The tech sector, which has become as famous for toxic company cultures as for innovation, and as well-known for Human Resource headaches as for hoodie-wearing CEOs, could use a little of the mellowness and wisdom that comes with age” (as De Niro depicts in Ben Whittaker).

Angela Duckworth, author of “GRIT: Why Passion and Resilience Are the Secrets to Success,” discovered that grit increases with age. She defines grit as a combination of passion and perseverance. This might be explained as most people mature over time. Duckworth says: “Grit grows as we figure out our life philosophy, learn to dust ourselves off after rejection and disappointment, and learn to tell the difference between low-level goals that should be abandoned quickly and higher-level goals that demand more tenacity. The maturation story is that we develop the capacity for long-term passion and perseverance as we get older.” Research supports the conclusion that “most of us become more conscientious, confident, caring, and calm with life experience.” These are all characteristics that help leaders create places where people want to work.

In fact, what Conley learned from Airbnb and what Ben learned from working for Jules in *The Intern* was to watch and listen with as “little judgment or ego as possible.” Conley said what he learned could be summarized in one sentence: “I’ll offer you some emotional intelligence for your digital intelligence.” He continues to emphasize how Facebook is not the same as face time. Younger people are obsessed with emojis, and we expect “young digital-era leaders to miraculously embody relationship wisdom, with very little training, that we elders had twice as long to learn.”

A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* reported how an accounting firm in the Top 100, PKF O’Connor Davies LLP, has turned the hiring practice upside down, seeking out and hiring senior accountants who have “aged out” at other firms. “We think being flexible is a goal,” says Christopher Petermann, a partner who is on PKF’s management team and Human Resources committee. “There are a lot of people at other organizations who ‘time out’ based on age who still have tremendous value.” Petermann says these older employees have improved training and mentoring, and they bring with them a lifetime of contacts and expertise.

These stories also are supported by the research findings of Sherry Turkle in her book, “Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other,” and her more recent book, “Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age.” Turkle warns us that “we have sacrificed conversation for mere connection... But to empathize, to grow, to love and be loved...to fully understand and engage with the world around us, we must be in conversation.”

The key is to identify older workers’ strengths and position them to leverage those strengths, while paying attention and listening to their opinions and insights.

The bottom line is that feelings and emotions drive human behavior. But we have to know each other in order to trust one another. That starts with having personal conversations, which take time, maturity, and emotional intelligence.

AWARENESS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The first step in overcoming unconscious bias is to become aware and to acknowledge it. In other words, to become conscious of the bias. Regardless of age, all workers should be engaged, productive, and add value. The research demonstrates how important it is for managers to engage Boomers, which improves the performance of their organizations. It can be a competitive advantage if the experience of older workers is utilized wisely. The key is to identify their strengths and position them to leverage those strengths, while simultaneously paying attention and listening to their opinions and insights.

By the end of *The Intern*, Jules has recognized Ben’s value as an ally in the workplace. Not only has Ben become a critical mentor to Jules and her team, she has witnessed how Ben has been a real driver of employee engagement in the workplace. He has won the hearts and minds of those around him by sharing the wisdom from his life and work experience. Since trust is a reciprocal relationship, they trust him because he trusts them. Once they all get over their “unconscious bias” of Ben’s age, it is as if they say: What’s age got to do with it? **1**