

Strategies for Age Inclusion in Honor of the ADEA's 50th Birthday

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In honor of the golden anniversary of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA), the EEOC issued a report entitled “*The State of Age Discrimination & Older Workers in the U.S. 50 Years After the ADEA*.” At a time when sex and race issues are at the forefront of the news, the EEOC reminds us that older workers face struggles of their own obtaining and retaining employment.

The report points out that years ago, places of employment were heavily male, with those male employees traditionally working for one company or in one profession and then retiring, often with a pension. Average life expectancies for those men was but 67 years old, with women (who made up about a third of the workforce then), averaging just 74.

Today is very different. We are more diverse, more educated and working longer than those who came before us. The EEOC notes that “the most dramatic changes in the age of the labor force occurred in the last 25 years, as the share of workers age 55 and older in the workforce doubled.” In fact, the BLS estimates that the oldest segments of employees—those over 65—will increase the most by 2024, with projections reflecting that this segment will grow by 74% by 2050, while the segment under will grow only 2% over that period. As the EEOC reports, we work longer for a variety of reasons. We are typically healthier, with longer life expectancies, have a longer wait for social security benefits, and no longer have the benefit of employer-funded pensions.

Just outside your doorstep, then, is a labor pool of educated, trained, skilled, and experienced personnel; yet why do they face hurdles in employment? The EEOC believes it is due to the persistent misperception that older workers are slower, less likely to catch on to new ideas, and, to use a nasty cliché—past their prime. These engrained stereotypes led to the creation of the ADEA in the first place. To quote the report, “discrimination today, whether based on age, race, sex or other protected characteristics, frequently derives from stereotypes and unconscious bias, although blatant or explicit discriminatory practices still exist.” The ADEA seeks to eliminate conscious and unconscious bias and give older workers an equal footing in all terms and conditions of employment.

The EEOC identifies several strategies to make the workplace more “age diverse.” They are good ones, and they start at the top:

1. **Workplace culture:** “First and foremost, workplace culture determines whether workers are valued without regard to age ... The leadership in an organization is obviously critical to creating and fostering a culture that is committed to a multi-generational workplace where all workers can grow and thrive. Workplace cultures that extol ability and reject ... stereotypes ... result in more diverse, productive and engaged workforces.” Those are lofty words yet provide attainable goals that serve not just the older workforce, but one that is diverse no matter the human characteristic.
2. **Recognize & Reject Ageist Stereotypes & Remarks.** Take your EEO & anti-harassment policies seriously and rid the workplace of derogatory attitudes and commentary about older workers.
3. **Include Age in Diversity/Inclusion Programs.** We all want to have or work in a diverse workplace, but many companies don’t take the time to understand, let alone make the commitment. This ties into the corporate culture described in strategy 1. “Research demonstrates that age diversity can improve organizational performance and lower employee turnover. Studies also find that mixed-age work teams result in higher productivity for both older and younger workers. Older workers who report their companies have a high “Workplace Diversity Focus” have the highest levels of employee satisfaction.” This is all the more reason to attract and retain the more experienced employee who does not require extensive training, whose work ethic is already developed, and who will not cost the company more to employ, putting to rest yet another misperception about the older worker.
4. **Recruitment & Hiring Strategies:** Adopt recruitment and hiring practices that seek a diverse age range of candidates. Develop websites and social media accounts using age-diverse pictures and content to attract multi-generational candidates. Use employment applications that do not ferret out age, such as dropping requests for dates of college attendance. Add older employees to hiring panels and train interviewers to frame questions that are not designed to elicit questions about age.
5. **Retention Strategies:** Provide career counseling, training and development opportunities for workers at all ages and at all stages of their careers. Implement multi-generational mentor groups so that the young and less experienced can learn from the wise and experienced and vice versa. This is shown to increase worker productivity *and* satisfaction. The happy employee is often the happy employer!

The EEOC’s recommendations are well worth consideration and not just for those over forty. Corporate cultures of tolerance, inclusion and respect go a long way toward meeting the goals set forth in laws like the ADEA, Title VII and the ADA.

Topics

ADEA, Age Discrimination, Age-Based Harassment, Diversity, Diversity Policy, Inclusion, Training