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DISCRIMINATING AGAINST OLDER WORKERS HAS ITS RISKS

When age matters

YVONNE ARIVALAGAN



Ageism in the workforce continues to be a major obstacle for many Singaporeans. Older workers are typically perceived to be slower, less productive and more resistant to change than their younger counterparts.

In an effort to reduce discrimination in the workplace, government leaders have recently promoted the idea of an "ageless" or "age-blind" Singapore, where employers will hire based on an applicant's skills and experience rather than his or her age.

This is an appropriate response to the problem of workplace ageism. It is expected that by 2030, almost one in four residents in Singapore could be aged 65 or older. This trend is already underway in other industrialised nations such as Japan and Germany.

We will have to make the most of our labour capacity in order to continue thriving economically. The Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) has been calling on employers to see the value in mature workers, in preparation for an older workforce.

In our efforts to prevent discrimination, however, we must be careful not to completely disregard age. Doing so has its risks.

EMBRACE AGEING

First, we risk overlooking the unique perspectives and identities of older people. For instance, older workers have a different outlook, priorities and capabilities than younger workers.



Workplace practices that acknowledge the needs and capabilities of workers of different age groups should become norms. PHOTO: REUTERS

World-renowned researcher on ageing Dr Ursula Staudinger said at a recent symposium on longevity in Singapore that as people age, they are increasingly motivated by intangible rewards, such as respect and flexible work arrangements, compared with financial remuneration. Awareness of such age-related characteristics can help employers create a workplace conducive to both younger and older workers.

In 2015, a study on the energy, finance, healthcare and retail industries in the United States by AARP Inc, an organisation for retired persons, revealed that older workers tend to be more engaged and productive, and make fewer mistakes than their younger colleagues.

The study also showed that workers aged 50 and above do not cost significantly more than younger workers, partly because of lower turnover rates among older staff. Additionally, potential revenue growth brought about by higher levels of employee engagement among older workers could more than offset rises in labour costs. These findings contest dominant perceptions about older workers being less productive and taking more time to learn the ropes at a job.

Second, as ageism is not experienced equally by everyone, being age-blind could potentially preclude policymakers from designing targeted interventions to address such discrimination. For instance, studies have shown that older women face more discrimination when applying for jobs and seeking promotion than men.

Third, age-blindness could also impede the tracking of age-related disparities in society. Data disaggregated by age is often used to determine the rates of education, employment, poverty, disease and so on across different age groups in a population. However, many of these reports also tend to place older persons in a generalised "65+" age-group, which obscures the diversity of older people. Finer age-disaggregated data can better shape the direction and scope of policy responses, and serve as a key informational resource for the public.

Fourth, the focus on "agelessness" may suggest that age is negative and that being old is a problematic marker of identity that should be dispensed with. Already, media and marketing circles use the term "ageless" to advertise products that promise to reverse the signs of ageing.

In policymaking and public communications, different labels have been used to describe ageing and the elderly in Singapore, from seniors and mature workers, to baby boomers, pioneers, the silver generation and even the more ominous "silver tsunami". The word "old" is usually avoided like the plague.

We should begin to embrace ageing and through open conversations, acknowledge the attendant challenges and opportunities that old age brings to people's lives. Using phrases in communications materials, such as age-friendly, age-aware and age-inclusive, can help to set an entirely different tone for thinking about ageing.

Workplace practices that acknowledge the needs and capabilities of workers of different age groups should become norms. These could include training, counselling and wellness programmes catered to employees of different ages, fair hiring practices and flexible work arrangements.

Different agencies, whether from the public or people sector, can help disseminate these best practices to the private sector. The corporate world can also customise talent retention strategies for different age groups. While no one should have to face discrimination based on his or her age, we should also avoid seeing age as irrelevant. After all, our age is a celebration of life.

● Yvonne Arivalagan is a research assistant at the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore. She researches issues related to demography and the family.