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## It's Time to Retire Ageism against Older Workers

**ABSTRACT:** Ageism in the workplace can have significant implications for older adults. While every individual should feel equal and have the right to employment free from discrimination due to age, many practices and policies do not appear to uphold this right in the labour market. Institutional practices and policies seem to perpetuate stereotypes about older people. A “pro-aging” campaign to raise awareness about ageism in the workplace was run in the City of Toronto in 2019. The campaign included posters and pop-up advertising of a fake aging cream and research on attitudes toward aging and understanding the “too old” narrative as part of inclusive workplace policies. Workplace diversity policies often do not include age considerations, and understanding the factors that lead to ageism may allow for the development of strategies to help combat it. Age-diverse workplaces may gain competitive advantage by learning to harness the power of intergenerational relationships.

**KEYWORDS:** ageism, age discrimination, workplace, labour market, older workers

There are many ways to positively spin the aging experience – perhaps by calling it an “achievement” or referring to later life years as “golden” – but in reality, the very practice of actively painting *getting older* as positive highlights the deeply rooted negative views around aging. It is these same negative views, often held by younger age groups toward older ones, that underpin the prejudice and othering of the “older person” and are one dimension of ageism (Butler). Other important dimensions of ageism include “a deep seated uneasiness on the part of the young and the middle-aged – a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability; and fear of powerlessness, uselessness, and death” (Butler 243). Ironically, as the current members of the “younger” age groups grow older – the same individuals who are knowingly or unknowingly ageist and feel uneasy about older adults today – by achieving the status of “older person” in the future, may face the same vulnerability for which their acts of ageism had put others at risk. That being said, collectively addressing ageism within our social intuitions, generally understood as “the mechanisms or patterns of social order that focus on meeting social needs” (Lumen Learning), for example the need for income, may very well safeguard both the current old and the future old.

One economic social institution where an older person may be especially vulnerable is in the labour market, where traditionally the perceived “high value” contributions that workers are able to make as part of their “career arc,” as McGowan suggests, are assumed to decline after the age of 55. The aim of this article is to explore ageism in the context of a growing population of older adults in Canada who may need to or want to continue working or who wish to return to work after retirement, and the implications of ageism in the labour market that might undermine their ability to do so. To better understand how individuals of all ages view and appraise old age, a fictitious “pro-aging cream” campaign, in direct contrast to the anti-aging movement, was launched to bring attention to ageism in the workplace. From this work, we highlight a number of misguided views and negative assessments about “older workers” and suggest that strategies for addressing ageism in society and more specifically in the workplace need to be intergenerational in nature.

Today, most Canadians work in five-generation workplaces (Biggs and Lowenstein; Cheuk and Reedy). As such, it is time to reflect critically on what dramatic demographic change really means for societal institutions built around the social contract that the young will support the old – in Canada, life expectancy has increased, and the fastest growing cohort of older adults is the 85+ group (Government of Canada, “A Portrait of the Population”). Arguably, the forces that previously united the young and old to participate in the contract (e.g., tradition and culture) have eroded and evolved, and may lead to generational tension over who should have rights and access to scarce social and political resources. In a recent poll, younger workers viewed older workers as “holding back economic momentum” (Soergel), and the workplace is one example of a societal institution where the young/old dichotomy leaves little room for exchange. A singular focus on planning for and accommodating one generation at a time, within society or as in the example of the workplace, ignores the complexity of the context in which aging occurs and may not mirror the lived experiences of Canadians, which are now extraordinarily complicated. Organizations need to be forward thinking in the way that workplace policies and programmes are developed to promote intergenerational exchange grounded in collaborative work that helps members of all age groups stay engaged, enjoy positive social connections with others, and find purpose in their work (Meister and Willyerd).

In an age-graded society, in most settings (housing, education, workplace), there are limited opportunities for the “young” (the future old) and the “elderly” (the current old) to interact. As a form of social organization based on age, age-grading is a fixed way to differentiate periods or phases of life through which an individual is expected to move; for example, toddler, adolescence, young adulthood, adulthood, and older adult (Whyte). Alternatively, an age cohort is a group of similarly aged individuals who would go through the phases, progressively moving together from one phase to the next

(Markert). Age-grading in the context of the workplace is problematic, as made clear by William Foote Whyte's definition:

it is a system of differential distribution of rights and obligations, of prohibited, permissible, and required activities, according to different (socially recognized) periods of life and according to the social distinctions established. (68)

Beyond these settings, contact with others not in one's age group is a personal choice. This may be based on implicit (unconscious) bias or even "gerontophobia," a form of ageism that is based on "fear and devaluation of older adults because they remind people of their vulnerability and mortality" (Nelson, "Ageism: Stereotyping" 103). As such, even if organizations were able to provide platforms for intergenerational exchange, it is not clear if this would lead to the ability to harness opportunities to build a sustainable and cohesive workplace for all. While it may be easier to separate age groups by generation, there is no consensus on what older age actually is, although the chronological age of 65 has been adopted by most countries to signify status as an older person (WHO, "Proposed Working Definition"). Interestingly enough, age as a social construct holds differing meanings for different people, and when placed in the context of one's own life – where they themselves may have to identify as an older person – the meaning of age may take on an entirely new understanding (Chrisler et al.). As Kooij and Zacher suggest, the concepts of "young" and "old" too are limited in their explanatory capacity, as is attaching a number to an age, which strips the individual of their diversity, context, and unique experience of aging.

To create awareness about ageism requires an understanding of the problem and gaining insight into what ageism looks like. Without gaining an initial understanding and acknowledgement of one's biases and ageist views, policies and programs aimed at addressing ageism against older workers may have limited utility. To address this, the Toronto Seniors Strategy ("the Strategy"), a social movement in the City of Toronto ("the City"), forwarded a recommendation that the City create a public awareness campaign to address ageism.<sup>1</sup> The Strategy's aim entails building a sustainable, accessible, and equitable City for individuals of all ages; their recommendations are part of a larger focus on respect and social inclusion, in alignment with the World Health Organization's Age-Friendly Cities and Communities themes (WHO, "Global Age-Friendly Cities").

The Strategy's recommendations on how to design a campaign to address ageism also aligned with the City's "Toronto For All" public education initiative. Toronto For All campaigns are built on collaborations between community-based agencies and residents to ensure that issues of intolerance, bias, and

1 The Toronto Seniors Strategy is championed and co-chaired by Councillor Joshua Matlow and geriatrician Dr. Samir Sinha, Director of Sinai Geriatrics, and led by Andrea Austen, Manager, Seniors Services and Long Term Care, City of Toronto.

hate are addressed so that Toronto is welcoming to all. The City invited the National Initiative for the Care of the Elderly (NICE), one of the world's largest knowledge-transfer networks in the field of aging, housed at the University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, to serve as the community partner responsible for co-designing, developing, and implementing a Toronto For All Campaign on ageism in the summer of 2019.<sup>2</sup> A twenty-member advisory committee composed of advocates, people with lived experience, researchers, policy-makers, clinicians, and students was struck and met five times over the course of June through August 2019 to share knowledge and provide advice and guidance for the campaign. The team worked with Public Inc., a social impact marketing agency, to address the impact of ageism through a lens that took into account increased life expectancy, higher costs of living, and outdated notions of retirement. At the first meeting, the very notion of retirement and how it is based on the idea that there is a "normal age" for leaving employment was a dominant point of discussion. The age of 65 is still largely considered to be when one ceases work, and after this age one is not expected to return to the labour market (McDonald and Donahue).

At the same time as the Toronto For All anti-ageism campaign was being developed, a social media #AgeChallenge was taking place. Tens of thousands of users, including celebrities, athletes, and dignitaries from across the world, were downloading FaceApp, a smartphone app that would allow one to take a photo of oneself and augment one's face to look older (Zhang and Zhou). The "old person" filter allows faces to be edited using the app to include stereotypical age effects such as greying hair, droopy wrinkled faces, lines, and bags under the eyes. Not surprisingly, the trend to age oneself using the app went viral, and social media was flooded with aged pictures of individuals with accompanying comments such as "OMG aging is not for the faint of heart" and "if that's me as an old person, I need to work on that anti-aging skin routine now."

The advisory committee agreed that the negative attention to aging that the #AgeChallenge was bringing provided a unique opportunity to have an important conversation about the alternative to anti-aging. The alternative entails a shift from actively "fighting aging" and an assumed homogeneous state of old age (Wiles et al.) to that of becoming "pro-aging," a stance that allows people to embrace growing older and openly share their unique aging experience (Frischman). Based on the insights gained from NICE and the advisory committee, Public Inc. provided the group with a pitch for three different ageism awareness campaigns. The first campaign was based on highlighting the contributions to Canadian society by famous older Canadians, including

<sup>2</sup> NICE is led by the authors: Founder and Scientific Director of NICE, Dr. Lynn McDonald, an international leader in the field of gerontology and geriatrics; Network Manager Dr. Raza M. Mirza, with expertise in the factors influencing late-life social, mental, and physical well-being; and Laura Tamblyn-Watts, an international advocate for seniors' issues and founding board member of NICE, and President and CEO of CanAge, Canada's national seniors' advocacy organization.

scientist David Suzuki and astronaut Roberta Bondar. The aim of the first campaign pitch was to start a dialogue about age and what it means; even members of the advisory committee were shocked to learn that David Suzuki was 83 years old in 2019 and Roberta Bondar was 73. The second campaign, based on a spoof pop-up booth, featured advertising for a cream that would make one look older, the premise being that viewers would question whether looking older in the workplace had advantages, creating an opportunity for dialogue around why one would want to look older (or not) and what that meant in society. The third campaign focused on negative language associated with older age and the linguistic facets of age-based discrimination. The aim of the final campaign pitch was to get Torontonians to recognize ageism as an ism, similar to racism or sexism, and to highlight that ageism remains tolerated and ignored in many ways, despite the severe implications of ageism for both individuals and societies.

The committee chose the second campaign, which promoted the fake aging cream, for a number of reasons. This campaign was best positioned to have an impact on individuals of all age groups and emphasized another dimension of ageism in that not only can younger workers discriminate against older workers, but older workers may discriminate against younger workers. The campaign also leveraged the opportunity and interest that FaceApp had generated with regard to aging, and it was well suited to target those holding an implicit bias concerning aging and therefore would not be conscious of their ageist views and practices. In October 2019, over 150 bus shelter ads across the City of Toronto celebrated the launch of a new “pro-aging” product, *Imagés*,<sup>3</sup> the world’s first aging cream, which could change how one would look and be perceived in the workplace. The focus on the workplace accounted for a number of intersecting issues that made ageism particularly problematic in the labour market, and not surprisingly represented a setting where older adults often reported the need to hide their age (Hymowitz) – job recruiters are sometimes specifically asked to look for “young pretty people” (Shields). As a powerful “demoisturizer,” the cream was marketed to highlight that confidence, reliability, respect, wisdom, and experience are qualities often associated with older workers. As part of the launch of the fictitious product, a number of Torontonians were asked to try the cream and, not surprisingly, the overwhelming response was that people did not want it. In this scenario, it was possible to say no to the *Imagés* cream, but the underlying message was that “looking older” in the workplace is not always a choice, and ageism in the workplace remains a hidden problem and one that is difficult to address.

The campaign’s message playfully challenges the beauty industry’s pernicious messaging that encourages individuals to mask their age in society and at work. It also undercuts the promotion of plastic surgery, hair dye, and anti-aging products that, taken together, send the reminder that it is not okay to look older, and one should make efforts to “fight” the natural effects of the aging process. In the context of the labour market, when viewed through an

3 The name *Imagés* is an anagram for “ageism.”

age-graded lens, the worker is not seen simply for his or her skills, abilities, or knowledge, but rather is viewed with the qualifier of “younger worker” or “older worker.” Although younger workers are often reminded of their lack of experience, the older worker, while potentially more confident, reliable, and respected, is sometimes deemed overqualified as a result of *too much* experience (Hymowitz). By contrast, the older worker may be perceived as a liability due to supposed inability to learn new work practices and adapt to new technology. Stereotypes of older workers blame them for declining productivity and view them at increased risk of health problems and caregiving responsibilities that adversely impact their ability to work (Ng and Feldman; Dordoni and Argentero; Ventrell-Monsees). The aging cream campaign itself was met with much media interest, with over thirty news stories covering the launch of the *Imagés* cream and a number of organizations requesting members of NICE to present workshops on ageism in the workplace.

As the committee and NICE assessed the impact of the campaign, it became clear that age-inclusive policies had not been considered by many workplaces. As there is much more to learn about the experiences of older workers, who have also been overlooked in research, the campaign is supported by a mixed-methods research study with the aim of understanding the perspectives of older workers through surveys ( $N = 1,000$ ) and focus groups with individuals who have lost their jobs due to perceived ageism, older adults who remain in the workforce, and older workers who are looking for employment. A review of the research instruments currently used to measure ageism highlighted a problematic trend: negative appraisals of aging are often built directly into the tools we use to understand ageism (Levy and Macdonald; Ayalon et al.). As an international knowledge transfer network, the next steps for NICE are to use the evidence from the campaign to continue the much-needed discourse and to develop tools, educational modules, and resources to help eradicate ageism in the workplace in Canada and beyond.

A starting point is to emphasize that stereotypes of the “older worker” and the “younger worker” entrench intergenerational tension that contributes to ageism. Another important dimension of ageism is that it entails discriminating against individuals or groups based on age stereotypes (Butler). Ageism, as it relates to older workers, can be considered to have at least three dimensions: (1) succession ageism, (2) institutional ageism, and (3) self-ageism. Succession ageism can take the guise of younger workers erroneously assuming that older workers, by delaying retirement, hinder their employability and stall their chances for advancement (North and Fiske). This form of ageism often results in older workers being passed over for promotion, additional training, and general support to further their skills and development (North and Fiske; Weber et al.). Although human rights legislation outlaws age discrimination in the workplace, it remains difficult to detect, since ageism is rarely overt (Government of Canada, “Canadian Human Rights Act”). While mandatory retirement programs for those 65 and over were deemed illegal in 2006 in Canada, subtle and covert beliefs and behaviours continue to support the ageist notion

of the age of 65 as indicative of reaching retirement age in Canada and beyond, even if the older person constitutes an asset in the workplace (Kadefors et al.).

Some older workers – who, like older adults in general, are far from a homogenous group – continue to work for financial reasons; others simply want to keep working because they find their work meaningful and their career gives them purpose. Some people who retire decide to return to the workforce for myriad reasons (Government of Canada, “Employment Transitions”). When coworkers ask older workers questions such as “Have you started to think about retiring?” or “How long do you plan on working?” it becomes clear that the age of 65 as the end of one’s career arc is firmly ingrained in many workplaces and tied to an outdated social construct of aging and old age. Studies highlight that older workers report being excluded from decision-making and emphasize that supervisors and colleagues ignore older workers’ contributions and speak to them in a condescending fashion (Blackstone; Lagacé et al.).

Institutional ageism, barely concealed in the idea of retirement, constitutes discrimination on the basis of policies and rules in government and the workplace (Dennis and Thomas). Expectations tied to retirement often frame ageism in the workplace and may anchor the more widespread and contemporary age-related discrimination. Still, Statistics Canada data from 2015 suggests that our understanding or expectation of aging in general and what is “normal” in the workforce may be problematic (Government of Canada, “Employment Transitions”). Currently, the number of older adults who reported working is at its highest level since 1981 and is the highest on record (Government of Canada, “Census in Brief: Working Seniors”). Furthermore, in the twenty years between 1995 and 2015, the number of older adults who reported working past the age of 65 has doubled. In other words, in 2017, there were four people in the labour force for every person not in the labour force aged 65 and over (Government of Canada, “Census in Brief: Working Seniors”). By 2036, this ratio could be less than three to one nationally, and could be less than two to one in some regions such as Ontario (Government of Canada, “The Labour Force”).

The issue of gender adds an additional layer to workplace challenges because of the attenuated labour history of women due to child-rearing and caregiving. The intersection of ageism and the associated “grey ceiling” of the age of 65 is linked with other isms, including sexism, racism, classism, and ableism, and as a result presents more trials to be endured throughout one’s career.

In the same way that it is not socially acceptable for one’s workplace value or suitability to be judged through the lenses of race, sex, class, or disability, the ability of older workers to function within the labour market should not be evaluated through an ageist lens. Rather, employers should shift their focus to skills, knowledge, and how long-tenured workers provide organizational intelligence, leadership, flexibility, and continuity. That being said, in workplaces where age diversity is not a priority, it may be difficult for older workers to perform “optimally” when they are worried about being judged

and stereotyped on the basis of their age. The damaging stereotypes and associated discrimination may be internalized by older workers, with serious implications for their health, and intra- and interpersonal relations. Research suggests that older adults who have faced age-based discrimination at work can expect a reduction in lifespan by 7.5 years, increased cardiovascular stress and predisposition to heart attacks, isolation, and loneliness due to loss of social networks connected to the workplace and lower levels of self-efficacy and productivity (Levy et al.; Garstka et al.; UNECE). Older adults also face financial uncertainty and monetary concerns, with approximately 60% carrying some form of debt (credit card, line of credit, or mortgage), especially when employment is precarious (Marshall). With their worth degraded and options for finding employment limited, older adults looking for work may also internalize ageist views (self-ageism), and as a result are not only willing to accept a lower-paying position than they previously held, but also to adopt the view that their job prospects would improve not if they had better credentials but if they were younger (Nelson, "Ageism: Prejudice"; Jones et al.).

Although there is no consensus with regard to what constitutes an "older worker," this notion may also be industry-specific. The occupational profile of older women in Canada, for example, highlights an area of concern: 20% of registered nurses and registered psychiatric nurses were over the age of 55 in 2016. Furthermore, a number of occupations where a university degree is required have a high proportion of older workers (age 55+): managers in agriculture (52%), college and university professors (25%–30%), financial officers, auditors, and accountants (20%), and family physicians and GPs (20%) (Government of Canada, "Results from the 2016 Census"). If not supported to continue working past the age of 65, the loss of this talent pool would have serious implications for Canadian health and social institutions and also for the training of future cohorts of practitioners in these fields.

In the 2015 film *The Intern*, Robert De Niro's character, a 70-year-old intern working for an online fashion agency, points to the fact that older workers in certain industries (technology, start-ups, fashion) are anomalous and "mismatched" – so mismatched that an entire feature-length film was made about the issue (Jermyn; Swan). However, the movie's tagline, "Experience Never Gets Old," suggests that older workers, as tied to their experiential capital, bring irreplaceable relational and intellectual capital to workplaces, and that opportunities to capitalize on that value would be a win-win-win for employers, employees, and a changing client base that increasingly includes older adults. As outlined in the *Harvard Business Review*, successful companies were three times more likely to be led by older entrepreneurs – in this case, those who were over the age of 40 and closer to age 45 (Azoulay et al., "Research"). This example again highlights the extreme variability in what it means to be old – white-collar business people may not view a 40-year-old as "old," and in one study, CEO age in a number of industries ranged from 48.8 to 56.6 years old (Belenzon et al.). In the context of entrepreneurship, a field filled with those between the ages of 20 and 30, someone who is 40 may



be perceived as “old” (Azoulay et al. “Age and High-Growth Entrepreneurship”). With this in mind, the myths and unfounded stereotypes associated with the “older worker” undermine the significant contributions that older adults make to workplaces, and they need to be abandoned. Workplaces that are not age-diverse or age-inclusive may not be as competitive, yet under 10% of organizations actively prioritize age as a criterion as part of their diversity and inclusion strategy (AARP).

The workforce ethos of the future will be founded on learning, navigating uncertainty, and as mentioned, adapting to the reality of up to five generations working together (Cheuk and Reedy). As with De Niro’s character in *The Intern*, intergenerational engagement and the opportunity for “young” and “old” to work together will allow generational differences to be reconciled and valued, rather than serve as a source of tension. If managed and understood well, the insights of multiple generations can help strengthen teams and create opportunities for reciprocal mentorship, collaboration, and knowledge exchange. Concurrent with national demographic changes, with 25% of the population of major Canadian cities home to a growing population of those 55+, an age-diverse workplace that includes older adults will allow the labour market to remain agile and responsive to the customer and client bases of the future (Government of Canada, “Seniors”).

By the year 2030, the millennial generation will be approaching the age of 50 and may already have been categorized as “older workers” or be moving ever closer to that label (Sofer). Today’s older worker, as well as future cohorts of older workers, can easily benefit from five strategies to make workplaces more inclusive: (1) education and awareness about the unfounded stereotypes, attitudes, and behaviours that marginalize older adults; (2) a review of organizational policies to ensure that the retention and hiring of older workers remains or becomes a priority; (3) the promotion of collaborative work that is meaningful and gives individuals purpose and opportunity, regardless of age; (4) the development of platforms/forums to support opportunities for intergenerational exchange in the labour market; and (5) an active reconsideration of the career arc that is built on the erroneous assumption that the end of productivity occurs around the age of 65 and, as a corollary, that 65 is the “normal” time for individuals to retire.

These strategies should be implemented immediately. Those of us who participated in the aging cream campaign were shocked when we discovered that one of the responses to the campaign was a simple comment: “OK Boomer,” an ageist meme on the internet that dismisses the concerns and ideals of older adults. Perhaps this ties back to romanticized versions of the aging experience, where old age takes on a new meaning when applied to ourselves and how we see others (Chopik et al.). The problem is that it is assumed that the idealized “older version” of oneself will not experience the same outdated systems of disadvantage that have created the problems of today. An important part of the conversation has been to remind individuals that if they are lucky enough to live to be “old,” ageism could someday impact them. If they look around their workplace and

do not see “older workers,” this should serve as a caution that ageism expressed and left unaddressed today will have consequences for their future older selves. Those future older selves, after accumulating “experience” and “expertise,” may be considered “unwelcome,” “overqualified,” and aged out of their workplace.

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