



Old news

IS AGEISM ONE OF THOSE “ISMS” THAT RUN RAMPANT IN THE WORKPLACE? NOT IN CANADA, ACCORDING TO OUR REPORTER

Forty-six-year-old Sheryl Campbell was talking with a colleague in his twenties one sunny afternoon when it hit her with the force of a late labour contraction: I could be his mother!

The Edmonton communications consultant just smiled to herself and kept chatting about the project at hand. “It doesn’t do any good to think that way,” she explains. “That’s feeling uncomfortable about your age and I feel pretty comfortable about mine.”

Campbell’s age did become an issue on another occasion, and it wasn’t nearly as amusing. She was passed over for a job in favour of someone 15 years younger — and \$20,000 cheaper. “The ageism thing in my own experience translates into an economic thing,” says Campbell. “They can get somebody younger for cheaper because they don’t have the experience and they don’t have the skill set.”

But despite that one episode, she thinks the wealth of experience that comes with age has helped her win jobs. “My colleagues recognize that I have really strong and valuable insights, so I am actually treated with more respect.”

Pat Schneider also gets her fair share of respect. The 56-year-old partner in a thriving management consulting and e-learning firm in Calgary has spent 25 years helping companies get the best from their employees. In the past couple of years, however, she’s been startled to bump into the occasional bout of age discrimination.

“I am a person with enormous confidence and experience, and I have never felt I was hitting a glass ceiling or any of those clichés that women sometimes rely on to mask their disappointments,” Schneider says. “But recently I have really noticed, particularly in men, ageism against middle-aged women.”

BY JENNIFER ALLFORD

PAUL BLOW



Schneider recalls a meeting with the CEO of a major Canadian organization where they were discussing whether a vibrant 52-year-old woman they both knew would be suitable for a senior VP position. "He said, 'She looks so tired these days and she's let herself go; I think she's ready to retire, not to take on the next big opportunity.' I just sort of looked at him. I was gobsommed that this enlightened guy, not yet 50, the head of a major company, would say something like that."

"There's always been ageism and sexism and any number of other 'isms,'" says executive search consultant Anne Fawcett. "There are individuals who still exercise these attitudes and have authority for hiring people and making career decisions. We'll never be rid of it entirely because we'll never be rid of people."

But Fawcett, a partner at Caldwell Partners International in Toronto, says ageism has largely disappeared from organizations over the past couple of decades (see "Experience Counts").

If you happen to run up against one of the rare cases, Fawcett suggests you just move on. "There are many others out there who will appreciate you. The people who have individual prejudices

are in the minority and you are not going to change deeply embedded feelings or views."

And, Fawcett cautions, you may be wrong in your interpretation. "From time to time, I've heard people refer to ageism and I say to myself, 'I am not entirely sure that's what the problem is.' It may be another issue, such as the perception of a person's fit or ability to do the job effectively."

Or it may be short-sighted economics in hiring someone less qualified and less expensive, as in Sheryl Campbell's case. But Campbell moved on to a better job where she doesn't worry about getting older (or working with people who could be her kids). "I really believe it's how you feel about your age that is going to determine how people treat you. If you feel that your age is going to be a hindrance to your success, then guess what? It's going to be."

Likewise, Pat Schneider has never let aging impede her success. Sure, there are days she pines for a more youthful self. "I long to be able to go those 14-hour days and pull those all-nighters," she admits. Still, she wouldn't trade the confidence and knowledge that come with decades of working: "I am at the very top of my game." **M**

Experience counts

EXPERTS REPORT THAT demographic shifts and recent economic history have combined to pretty much wipe out systemic ageism in the workplace.

There's been talk about a labour shortage for years and many warnings that the dearth of workers will worsen as baby boomers continue to retire. The Conference Board of Canada announced a year ago that the Canadian "labour market crunch has arrived."

While it's true some retirees are heading back to work, others are quitting altogether (many long before they reach 65) and the fact is, there are fewer people with as much experience as their predecessors coming up behind to take over the jobs.

The recession of the early '90s also had a role in wiping out ageism, says Toronto executive search consultant Anne Fawcett. "What always happens in recessions is the average age of the people being hired goes up because everybody's looking for experience. Everybody is looking for someone who has been there and done it. And that's true whether it's men or women." In a recession, Fawcett says, merit trumps the cost of a higher salary.

As the Canadian economy improved after the recession, there was a period of incredible growth across every sector, with employers scrambling just to find bodies. Says Fawcett: "There was such a shortage of people to do just about everything — from senior executive roles to serving coffee behind the counter at Tim's — that there wasn't much room for prejudice."

"While we didn't wipe out individual prejudice, we wiped out a lot of the systemic variety and it has just never come back," Fawcett says. "It's a very neutral, accepting world out there today."

ON THE HUNT

SOME OF US worry about moving into a new position before we're "too old," while others fret about looking frumpy in a job interview or remove their university graduation date before sending off their resumé.

Anne Fawcett, an executive search consultant in Toronto, often sees no grad dates on resumé and says it's a complete waste of time, anyway. "If I wanted to figure out somebody's age, all I need to do is take a look at their career chronology and add it up, three years here, 10 years there, assume they graduated the year before they started working and Bob's your uncle!"

Instead of sweating the dates on your CV, focus instead on being well groomed, healthy and demonstrating that you have the stamina to go to work every day. "This isn't about age," Fawcett says. "It's about asking: Is this a person who takes care of themselves, who has the discipline to ensure they're physically in shape to expend energy and have stamina in a challenging situation?"

