

You're How Old? We'll Be in Touch

By Ashton Applewhite

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In 2016, almost 20 percent of Americans 65 and older are working. Some of them want to; many need to. The demise of traditional pensions means that many people have to keep earning in their 60s and 70s to maintain a decent standard of living.

These older people represent a vast well of productive and creative potential. Veteran workers can bring deep knowledge to the table, as well as well-honed interpersonal skills, better judgment than the less experienced and a more balanced perspective. They embody a natural resource that's increasing: the social capital of millions of healthy, educated adults.

Why, then, are well over a million and a half Americans over 50, people with decades of life ahead of them, unable to find work? The underlying reason isn't personal, it's structural. It's the result of a network of attitudes and institutional practices that we can no longer ignore.

The problem is ageism — discrimination on the basis of age. A dumb and destructive obsession with youth so extreme that experience has become a liability. In Silicon Valley, engineers are getting Botox and hair transplants before interviews — and these are skilled, educated, white guys in their 20s, so imagine the effect further down the food chain.

Age discrimination in employment is illegal, but two-thirds of older job seekers report encountering it. At 64, I'm fortunate not to have been one of them, as I work at the American Museum of Natural History, a truly all-age-friendly employer.

I write about ageism, though, so I hear stories all the time. The 51-year-old Uber driver taking me to Los Angeles International Airport at dawn a few weeks ago told me about a marketing position he thought he was eminently qualified for. He did his homework and nailed the interview. On his way out of the building he overheard, "Yeah, he's perfect, but he's too old."

Recruiters say people with more than three years of work experience need not apply. Ads call for "digital natives," as if playing video games as a kid is proof of competence. Résumés go unread, as Christina Economos, a science educator with more than 40 years of experience developing curriculum, has learned. "I don't even get a reply — or they just say, 'We've found someone more suited,' " she said. "I feel that my experience, skill set, work ethic, are being dismissed just because of my age. It's really a blow, since I still feel like a vital human being."

Not one negative stereotype about older workers holds up under scrutiny. Abundant data show that they're reliable, handle stress well, master new skills and are the most engaged of all workers when offered the chance to grow and advance on the job. Older people might take longer to accomplish a given task, but they make fewer mistakes. They take longer to recover from injury but hurt themselves less often. It's a wash. Motivation and effort affect output far more than age does.

Age prejudice — assuming that someone is too old or too young to handle a task or take on a responsibility — cramps prospects for everyone, old or young. Millennials, who are criticized for having “no work ethic” and “needing to have their hands held,” have trouble getting a foothold in the job market. Unless we tackle age bias, they too are likely to become less employable through no fault of their own, and sooner than they might think. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act kicks in at 40.

Progressive companies know the benefits of workplace diversity. A friend in work force policy calls this the “shoe test”: look under the table, and if everyone’s wearing the same kind of shoes, whether wingtips or flip-flops, you’ve got a problem. It’s blindingly obvious that age belongs alongside race, gender, ability and sexual orientation as a criterion for diversity — not only because it’s the ethical path but also because age discrimination hurts productivity and profits.

“Culture fit” gets bandied about in this context — the idea that people in an organization should share attitudes, backgrounds and working styles. That can mean rejecting people who “aren’t like us.” Age, however, is a far less reliable indicator of shared values or interests than class, gender, race or income level. Discomfort at reaching across an age gap is one of the sorry consequences of living in a profoundly age-segregated society. The Cornell gerontologist Karl Pillemer says that Americans are more likely to have a friend of a different race than one who is 10 years older or younger than they are.

Age segregation impoverishes us, because it cuts us off from most of humanity and because the exchange of skills and stories across generations is the natural order of things. In the United States, ageism has subverted it.

What is achieving age diversity going to take? Nothing less than a mass movement like the women’s movement, which made people aware that “personal problems” — like being perceived as incompetent, or being paid less, or getting passed over for promotion — were actually widely shared political problems that required collective action.

The critical starting point is to acknowledge our own prejudice: internalized bias like “I’m too old for that job,” and that directed at others, like “It’s going to take me forever to bring that old guy up to speed.” Confronting ageism means making friends of all ages. It means pointing out bias when you encounter it (when everyone at a meeting is the same age, for example).

Confronting ageism means joining forces. It means seeing older people not as alien and “other,” but as us — future us, that is.

Ashton Applewhite is the author of “This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism.”