

WOMEN OF INFLUENCE+

New Survey Reveals that Almost 80 per cent of Women Face Ageism in the Workplace

Women of Influence+ Unveils Groundbreaking Survey on Ageism in the Workplace: A Call for Immediate Action

TORONTO, ON, February 26, 2024 — [Women of Influence+](#), a leading global organization committed to advancing gender equity in the workplace, released its groundbreaking findings from its survey, "Exploring the Impact of Ageism on Women in the Workplace."

Ageism is overwhelmingly present in workplaces across the globe. According to the findings, nearly 80 per cent (77.8 per cent) of women surveyed have encountered age-related discrimination in their careers, underscoring ageism as a critical yet often overlooked barrier to professional growth. Ageism is a form of discrimination and prejudice that is directed towards individuals or groups based on their age. This social construct often leads to stereotyping and generalizing people based on their chronological age, regardless of their individual capabilities, experiences, or personal attributes. It can negatively impact individuals at all stages of their careers, leading to unfair treatment, limited opportunities, and marginalization.

"Nearly 80 per cent of women encountering ageism in the workplace is not just a statistic; it's a clear indication that we are facing a pervasive and systemic issue," said Dr. Rumeet Billan, CEO, Women of Influence+. "Our survey sheds light on the hidden barriers many self-identifying women face, that not only hinder their career progression but also impact their confidence and well-being."

Conducted between January and February 2024, the survey received responses from more than 1,250 women across 46 countries, spanning various industries. The survey explores the nuances of ageism and its impact on women in the workplace.

A Complex Challenge Impacting Professional Growth, Wellbeing, and Organizational Culture

Not only does ageism exist, but it is also more visible than we may want to believe.

- More than 80 per cent (80.7 per cent) have witnessed women in the workplace being treated differently because of their age.
- Almost half (46.2 per cent) report it to be an ongoing issue.

"I have never heard comments about male colleagues being too young or too old for their work," said one respondent. "Women are either too young, too old, or may be in the age range of having children. All are viewed as negative."

While we often think of ageism as something that impacts people in the latter years of their careers, the reality is ageism can have negative implications at all ages and stages. The data revealed notable peaks in the initial decade of work and later years.

- 40.7 per cent of respondents experienced age-based discrimination within the first decade of their professional journey.
- More than half (55.9 per cent) encountered ageism after surpassing 21 years in their career.

Why Does Ageism Exist?

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Survey participants expressed the belief that age is often inappropriately correlated with perceived performance and success, a bias that disproportionately affects women. Highlighting this gender disparity, one respondent observed, “Women are never the right age. We are either ‘going to get pregnant’ or ‘too old’.” This reflects a societal tendency to place undue expectations on women.

According to feedback from respondents, the disparity is further emphasized in contrast to older men, who respondents say are often viewed as ‘distinguished’ or ‘very experienced’. In comparison, older women may be unfairly seen as being ‘past their prime’ or occupying opportunities ‘better suited to others’. This observation feeds into the broader narrative that workplaces perpetuate ageism, especially against women. “Workplaces were built for men,” said one respondent. Another shared, “The old boys’ network still exists.” And a third added, “It is a carryover from the age-old belief [that] women should not be in the workplace.”

Furthermore, the survey reveals that the perpetrators of ageism span all levels of seniority, implicating the HR department, co-workers, clients, managers, and executives. Respondents highlighted recruiters as another group frequently engaging in age-based discrimination.

How is Ageism Shaping Women's Experiences in the Workplace?

Ageism in the workplace manifests in various forms.

- Almost 80 per cent (74.8 per cent) reported experiencing age-based stereotypes and/or assumptions.
- Just more than half of respondents (50.1 per cent) said they were shown a lack of respect from colleagues.
- Almost half of respondents (49 per cent) reported unfair treatment in promotion processes.

“I have white hair and I have been advised to colour my hair to make me look younger as it may help me secure employment,” said one respondent. “This comment came from an HR Professional.”

Women also face stereotypical assumptions about their capabilities with technology and adaptability. Beyond these tangible impacts, ageism can be detrimental to a woman’s overall sense of self and well-being and can have significant personal repercussions. Whether it’s taking steps to appear younger or older, women are often forced to make changes to themselves to look like they’re the “right age” for a job. This is often referred to as the “pink tax” — the money and time women spend on physical enhancements to meet societal expectations.

Personally, women experienced the following:

- Increased stress as a result of experiencing ageism was reported by 62.2 per cent of respondents.
- Second-guessing capabilities was reported by 61.8 per cent of respondents.
- Almost 60 per cent (59.3 per cent) shared they overcompensated or worked harder to prove their worth.
- More than half (55 per cent) said they experienced lower self-confidence as a result of age-based discrimination.

Professionally, women also report significant impacts when it comes to ageism.

- Almost 60 per cent (57.7 per cent) reported impaired career progression.
- More than half (52.1 per cent) reported a lack of sense of belonging at work.
- More than 50 per cent (50.9 per cent) reported experiencing dissatisfaction with their employer.

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Ageism and Intersectionality

The impact of age intersects with other facets of a person's identity, such as race, ability, and gender. Intersectionality can compound the negative effects of ageism, and respondents are noticing this in their workplaces. Almost 70 per cent (69.2 per cent) of respondents believe ageism disproportionately affects women. One respondent shared, "Ageism is so intertwined with sexism, so it is hard to separate the two."

We heard from participants that ageism can unfairly impact racialized women. One respondent commented, "Ageism is proportionally much higher for racialized women." Another said, "The perfect age in the workplace for a woman is a perpetual 34-years-old. But that's too young to be in the C-suite or in a senior position. Women of colour need to be older, but still look full of vitality."

Taking Action Against Ageism: A Call for Organizational Change

"The findings of our survey are a call to action — it's time for systemic change," said Dr. Billan. "We must collectively work towards creating environments where age does not define capability or limit opportunity. Our commitment at Women of Influence+ is to continue advocating for and supporting these necessary changes."

The actionable steps below have been compiled using information gathered in the survey. When asked what support or resources would be helpful for those experiencing ageism in the workplace, respondents weighed in. With these five actionable recommendations, change in the workplace can begin.

Raise awareness and provide training and education. The first step is to accept that ageism is a real issue and is having more of a significant impact than we think. "Recognize it and name it," said one respondent. From recognition comes action. "Educate employees," said another. "Provide training and workshops to raise awareness about ageism and its impact on individuals and the organization. Help employees recognize and challenge ageist stereotypes and biases."

Implement preventative policies and hold people accountable. Armed with the knowledge that ageism exists, the next step is to put policies into place and adhere to them. "Understand that a policy only translates to action if it's proactively applied by senior people in an organization," said one individual surveyed. "You can have the best policies in the world, but it can still be awful for people in practice if you have inadequate or poorly trained managers who don't think discrimination is a big deal," shared another respondent. A policy is only as good as the action that follows.

Develop reciprocal mentorship programs. A call for mentorship as a solution to ageism came through loud and clear. "Have mentorship programs to ensure both ends of the spectrum can learn from each other and respect each other," said one individual. The key, said another, is "connecting on a human level to learn about different experiences." Another respondent shared, "The C-suite needs to create a culture of multigenerational employees and mentorship for ageism to become irrelevant."

Focus on competencies over age when recruiting and hiring. What we heard repeatedly is that professionals want to be recognized for their abilities rather than their age or years of experience. It's time to look past these distracting numbers and seek out examples of success instead. "Start looking at talent, knowledge, and wisdom rather than 'years of experience' to prove that a candidate is valuable or worthy of a position," said a respondent. Individuals urge employers to restructure the hiring process by "seek[ing] skills over stereotypes."

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Include ageism as a part of DEI strategy, initiatives, and programs. The need for ageism to be included as a pillar of DEI was agreed upon by respondents across the board. “Ageism [can be] as damaging as racism and sexism and should be recognized as such,” said a respondent. Another added, “[Ageism] seldom forms part of DEI programs or anti-bias training.” The call for action was clear: “Truly walk the talk about diversity and inclusion.”

The survey, *Exploring the Impact of Ageism on Women in the Workplace*, demonstrates that age-based discrimination is an issue impacting women in the workplace across countries, organizations, industries, and sectors. No organization or individual is immune to it.

For more information, to download the white paper, or to view the infographic, visit the Women of Influence+ website: www.womenofinfluence.ca/ageism.

Methodology: The survey was conducted between January and February 2024. An online survey using a mixed-methods approach went live on January 9, 2024, and closed on February 4, 2024. The survey was sent via e-newsletter to Women of Influence+’s database and was also shared via social media channels. In the end, 1,258 respondents across 46 countries participated in the survey. Of those, over 98 per cent self-identified as women.

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About Women of Influence+

For more than three decades, Women of Influence+ has been at the forefront of sharing the unfiltered success stories of diverse role models to illustrate the unique paths and challenges self-identifying women and gender-diverse individuals navigate to reach success. Our goal isn’t to change the narrative — we are rewriting it.

We understand that there are many challenges women and their intersectionalities face when trying to navigate advancement in their careers. Instead of watching from the sidelines, we take a proactive, inclusive, and multi-faceted approach to ensure women are supported and celebrated every step of the way.

Through our work — carefully curated success stories, our awards programs, learning and development events, and our research — we are providing a reimagined definition of what it means to be influential. This definition isn’t static, it’s inclusive and dynamic and deeply considers how influence is used to positively impact the world of business and work.

We equip women with connections, support, training, and tools to carve new pathways and excel within their careers on their own terms. No matter what stage you are at in your career when you discover the WOI+ platform, there is something here for you.

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