

Age discrimination at work: measures at the organisational level to address prejudice and negative stereotypes related to older age

POLICY BRIEF
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BALTIC SEA LABOUR FORUM
FOR SUSTAINABLE WORKING LIFE



SUMMARY

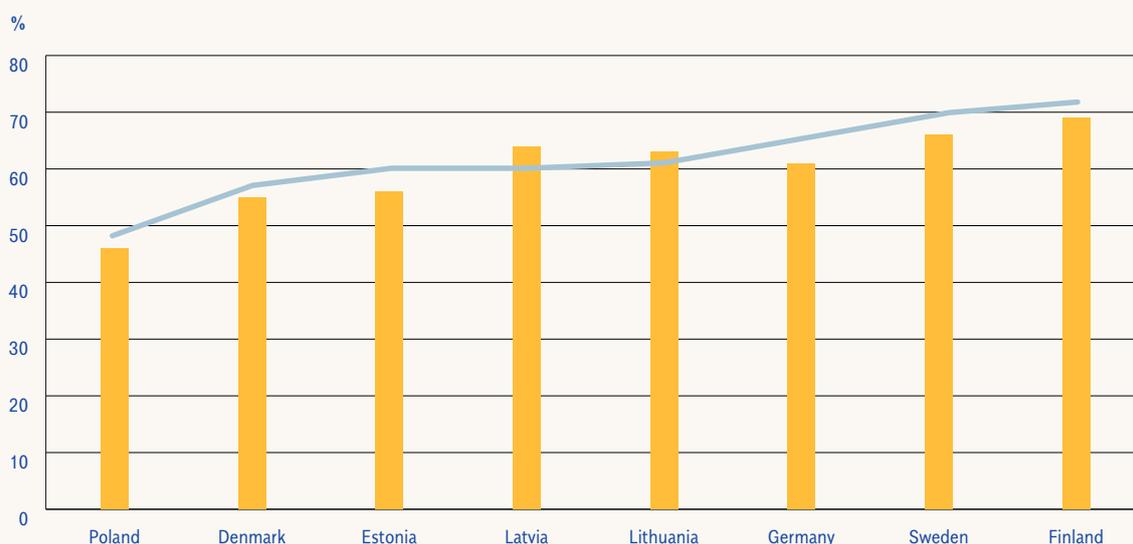
Age discrimination is still predominant at workplaces despite anti-discrimination laws in place in almost every country. Here we look at different aspects of age discrimination, its sources, as well as its effects on both individuals and organisations in the labour market. We include perspectives from Sweden, Finland, and Belarus. In Sweden, our example shows how researchers collaborate with human resources professionals to introduce age management practices in workplaces. A good practice from Finland provides us with an example of how older workers become empowered to fight age discrimination at work.

Perceptions of age discrimination are strong despite anti-discrimination legislation and prohibits longer working lives

The principle of equal treatment - i.e. the right to receive the same treatment and not be discriminated against on the basis of age, disability, nationality, race or religion - lies at the heart of the European Pillar of Social Rights (2017).¹ The Pillar's first category focuses on equal opportunities and access to the labour market. Discrimination based on age is, however, still prevalent at workplaces despite anti-discrimination laws being in place in most countries. Special Eurobarometer 437, which assessed discrimination in the EU in 2015, showed that on average 60 percent of respondents², including managers, found that older age is a factor that puts job applicants at a disadvantage.³ In the Baltic Sea Region, the figures range from 46 percent in Poland to 69 percent in Finland (Figure 1.) Age discrimination is a barrier to longer working lives: many older people face difficulties related to their age when looking for a job, and in accessing opportunities to training and career development at work. Age discrimination also occurs in relation to retention of older workers, especially in economic downturns.⁴

Figure 1. Percentage of respondents who indicate that being older than 55 years old may be a disadvantage when applying for a job, Eurobarometer 2015

Question: "When a company wants to hire someone and has the choice between two candidates with equal skills and qualifications, which of the following criteria may, in your opinion, put one candidate at a disadvantage?"



Source: Special Eurobarometer 437, Discrimination in the EU in 2015.

● All respondents — Managers

1 Eurofound, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/industrial-relations-dictionary/equal-treatment>

2 The survey was carried out in the 28 EU Member States. It included 27,718 respondents from different social and demographic groups and who were interviewed face-to-face at home in their mother tongue.

3 European Commission (2015), Special Eurobarometer 437- *Discrimination in the EU in 2015-Report*, Publications Office of the EU, available online at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/d629b6d1-6d05-11e5-9317-01aa75ed71a1>

4 Czaja Sara J., Sharit J., Boone James J. eds. (2020), *Current and Emerging Trends in Aging and Work*, Springer Nature

There is direct and indirect age discrimination

Age discrimination refers to less favourable treatment of an individual or group due to conditions or requirements relating to age which cannot be shown to be justifiable.⁵ It is possible to distinguish between direct and indirect discrimination. Direct discrimination refers to less favourable treatment, examples of this include receiving a lower salary, not being given access to training or being fired because of one's age. Indirect discrimination is more difficult to prove, as this implies that an apparently neutral provision or practice puts a person with a particular religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation at a disadvantage.⁶

Age discrimination is based on prejudice and stereotypical thinking

Age related discriminatory practices stem from prejudice and negative age-related stereotypes, which can be found at individual, organisational and institutional levels.⁷ The concept of ageism refers to the stereotypical construction of older people, ageing, and old age.⁸ Research confirms that older women are facing particularly high challenges with regards to discriminatory behaviour, while factors such as societal context and educational attainment are also important to take into consideration. As WHO points out, age discrimination persists even if older workers are not, by definition, less healthy, less educated, less skilled or productive than their younger colleagues.⁹ And it is these negative stereotypes that need to be dismantled.

What are the effects of age discrimination?

At a societal level, age discrimination has consequences for the economy, as it may lead to less available experienced workforce which can have negative implications for productivity and economic growth. At an individual level, discrimination in employment practices has negative effects on the employee's health and well-being, research has demonstrated.¹⁰ It also affects how older workers look for work: due to age discrimination older people may restrict their job search to sectors which seem to be less discriminating, even focus on poor-quality jobs only, or they may stop searching for employment altogether.¹¹ Age discrimination also has implications for the solidarity between generations and age groups.

Legislation and agencies have been put in place to combat age discrimination, but there is need for direct measures at organisational level, with focus both on employers and employees

There is a range of specialised bodies both at international and national level that work with combatting discrimination, and discriminatory practices are banned through anti-discrimination legislation in all countries in the Baltic Sea Region. At EU level, it is the Employment Equality Directive (Council Directive 2000/78/EC) that establishes a general framework to ensure equal treatment for all in relation to employment and occupation, encompassing both direct and indirect discriminatory acts.

Research indicates that from the employers' side, a ban of age discrimination is not enough, but there is need for guidance and greater encouragement of the employers to manage an age-diverse workforce in an efficient way, which would allow all workers to stay longer in employment.¹²

5 Eurofound, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/glossary>

6 Eurofound, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/industrial-relations-dictionary/indirect-discrimination>

7 Ayalon L., Tesch-Römer C., eds. (2018) *Contemporary Perspectives on Ageism*, Springer open access, available online at: <https://www.springer.com/gp/book/9783319738192>

8 Ayalon (2018)

9 World Health Organisation, <https://www.who.int/ageing/features/workplace-ageism/en/>

10 Chang E-S, Kanno S, Levy S, Wang S-Y, Lee JE, Levy BR (2020) Global reach of ageism on older persons' health: A systematic review. *PLoS ONE* 15(1): e0220857. Available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0220857>

11 OECD (2019), *Working Better with Age, Ageing and Employment Policies*, OECD Publishing

12 OECD (2019)

Focus on the employee-perceived age discrimination

Employees may internalise age stereotypical thinking.¹³ When stereotypical practices and policies prevail in an organisation, such as a workplace, and in society at large, the employee may internalise these with negative consequences for self-esteem and assertiveness. Older employees' own beliefs of themselves might be stereotypical, for example related to beliefs of decline in capabilities and competences due to age, and can lead to lack of motivation and confidence, and unwillingness to invest in developing oneself at work.¹⁴ In efforts to reduce age related stereotypes and prejudices at the workplace, it is therefore of vital importance to address also the employee's own perception of age discrimination, i.e. the employee's subjective feeling. Perception of age discrimination has proven to be an important factor that threatens the motivation of older employees to participate in work life, several researchers have found.¹⁵

Finland: Good practice - Engagement for Late Careers Programme

In line with the reasoning described above, Engagement for Late Careers Programme brings a bottom-up approach to age management by considering employees as the agents and active participants who can cultivate positive working identities of themselves and their peers.¹⁶ Through their own action they themselves can produce change. Here, the focus is on decreasing the ageing employees' perception of age discrimination by enhancing their self-efficiency regarding seniority skills, such as assertiveness against age discrimination, recognising own strengths and sharing experience-based knowledge with colleagues and their confidence in dealing with career setbacks.

The 'Engagement for Late Careers Programme', was a pilot peer group training programme, carried out by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (FIOH) between 2015-16. It involved pilot trials comprising 17 different organisations and over 300 employees with the mean age of 58. The main aim of the programme was to reduce senior employees' (55+) perceptions of age discrimination at work and increase their engagement for their current working career. It aimed at motivating senior employees to retain their working career until and beyond retirement age and manage the associated challenges.

The programme consisted of peer group training that involved participatory group process. It was part of FIOH's concept of life-course management focusing on fostering individual career management in career transitions and strengthening participation in working life. The training built senior employees' confidence by recognising and optimising self-efficacy towards skills, work ability and employability, as well as prepare to confront career setbacks and barriers. The training had three steps: (1) Goals are identified in peer groups; (2) solutions and tasks for carrying out these goals are defined and (3) required skills and actions are practiced in small groups.

The success of the programme has been demonstrated in a randomised controlled trial.¹⁷ After the training, participants reported lower perceived age discrimination and better work engagement and future time perspective at work. Participants with lower education and younger supervision benefitted the most from the training.

Sweden: 'Collaborative Research for Age Management' – collaboration between research and human resources professionals

Human resources management that has an explicit focus on the requirements of an ageing work force – age management – can also be an effective framework for addressing stereotypes and prejudices at work,

13 Vuori, J. and Ruokolainen, M. (2018), Engagement for Late Careers as a Good Practice, *Extending working lives of an ageing workforce*, WP 8: Good practice, Research Association for Gerontology at TU Dortmund University, available online at: http://www.ffg.tu-dortmund.de/cms/de/Projekte/Arbeit_Wirtschaft_und_Technik/Social-inequalities-in-extending-working-lives-of-an-ageing-workforce-EXTEND/EXTEND_GoodPractice_WP8.pdf

14 OECD (2019)

15 Vuori J., Törnroos K., Ruokolainen M., Wallin M. (2019) Enhancing late-career management among aging employees – A randomised controlled trial, *Journal of Vocational Behavior* Volume 115, December 2019

16 Vuori, J. (2018)

17 Vuori J. et al. (2019)

as pointed out by United Nations Economic Commission for Europe.¹⁸ Age management is by definition holistic, intergenerational and life-course oriented.¹⁹

In Sweden, a collaboration between researchers and human resources practitioners called 'Collaborative Research for Age Management' took place between 2015 and 2018.²⁰ The objective was to study the conditions and practices in workplaces that inhibit and promote the retention of employees beyond the previous norm for age of retirement. The study was designed as a process intervention that took place within the framework of a "research consortium", i.e. a longitudinal collaboration between researchers and practitioners. Human Resources (HR) representatives currently involved in age management in their organisations took part in the regular meetings of the consortium. The meetings were designed for the participants to exchange ideas, knowledge and experience of ongoing practices. A number of experts drawn from various disciplines were invited at times so as to give inputs to the discussions. The discussions were kept confidential in order to promote free exchange of experiences and ideas.

The variation of themes of the discussions during meetings, mainly influenced by the participants' interests, showed a changing and multifaceted meaning framework for what is considered relevant to issues of prolonging work life and implementing age management. This included discussions of age discrimination, occupational health, recruitment of talent, employer branding, promoting work motivation, giving financial advice and legal restrictions. An important ingredient seen in the project was that it provided participants with a platform that enhanced learning from colleagues. An obstacle that was identified was that the power of HR to influence actual practices of the organisation was often limited: HR might know what was needed, but top management did not see the business case of age management measures.

Lifelong Learning as a means to fight stereotypes and prejudices

Access to lifelong learning and opportunities to upgrade one's skills through relevant training are of utmost importance for remaining in working life and are also means to fight stereotypical views linked to older workers. Older people should be ensured equal access to training opportunities with other age groups. However, ageist management practices where older workers are less frequently selected for trainings still prevail, statistics indicate that older workers access training to update old or gain new skills to a lesser degree than other age groups, one of the reasons being ageism. As pointed out by UNECE, these practices can reinforce generalised distorted perceptions that older people are resistant to change, harder to train, have a lower ability to learn and have less potential for development.²¹ However, targeted measures regarding lifelong learning and training will have a positive effect in the work to eradicate age related prejudices and stereotypes.

Belarus: attitudes to older workers

Misguiding beliefs about productivity and age as well as about older workers taking away the jobs from younger ones remain current in Belarus, even though it is known that in any given economy the labour market is not contained in a prescribed number of jobs: it shrinks or grows, undergoes important structural changes, embraces new professions and sheds some old ones.

Currently, working people can retire at the age of 57 (women) and 62 (men) in Belarus, independent from the years of service. The law forbids the lay-off of older workers two years before retirement (though not in case of job contract ending during that period) and, in principle, people can continue to work beyond retirement age, in which case they may receive their pension in addition to their professional income. In practice, however, barriers exist in the labour market that may prevent individuals from staying in their jobs after retirement or finding new occupations.

18 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) 2019, Combating ageism in the world of work, UNECE Policy Brief on Ageing No. 21

19 https://eguides.osha.europa.eu/all-ages/UK_en/what-age-management

20 <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOEPP-06-2019-0047/full/html>

21 UNECE (2019)

The trade unions do occasional screening for job announcements to check if they contain the upper age limit for job seekers. However, except for a warning, no penalty system seems to be in place for those publishing such announcements. On the other hand, it is possible that in the “forbidden-by-law” environment, age-discrimination takes place in a less obvious form, i.e. where age limits are not explicitly declared but applied in practice. As there is no ombudsperson institution in Belarus, the cases of age discrimination can be brought to court. Yet, it is an expensive and time-consuming procedure. In turn, older people also seem to view social exclusion after a certain age as normal.

The view that the young should be helped in finding employment, rather than the old, can also be observed in Belarus. This is in part related to the fact that younger people do not have any income, while retired people at least have a pension. Also present is a stereotyping of employees in their early fifties or older as lacking dynamism, efficiency, skills and health necessary to succeed in changing labour market. Their acquired professional experience might be not recognised by hiring managers particularly in new technology-driven sectors. Nevertheless, there seems to be a growing recognition among the employers that after receiving training/new tasks an older worker might be more reliable and stable in his or her job than a younger one who is more driven by a fast-paced career and is ready to leave the job quickly for a better opportunity.

Employers need to be encouraged to employ and retain older workers. Awareness raising can help employers understand the advantages of an age-diversified workforce. Offering incentives to hire or retain older workers, e.g. tax incentives or state-provided/subsidised training opportunities could help too. Currently, there seems to be no culture of providing age-friendly workplaces or offering flexible working arrangements in Belarus, even though the present labour legislation defines a number of them. Similarly, there seems to be no practice in providing an opportunity to older workers to change to different roles/assignments after being offered training.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Awareness raising: In addition to strong legal frameworks for addressing discriminatory practices in the workplace, measures need to be concentrated on changing the prevailing prejudices and stereotypical views regarding older people. These measures should be directed not only at employers and employees in the workplace, but also at society at large, as ageism at work stems from negative ageist perceptions in society. This work will entail awareness raising, which in order to be effective and reach the right audience needs to be adapted to specific societal contexts and labour structures. Women and vulnerable groups should receive specific attention here.
- Fostering intergenerational solidarity: Specific actions related to the workplace are needed, such as ensuring a proper age mix, which will foster intergenerational solidarity and understanding, knowledge transfer and learning. Age management practices and introducing incentives for employers to retain older workers are means to do this. As older people increasingly employ themselves in society, this group of senior self-employed also needs financial and other structural support in upgrading and keeping their skills up to date.
- Lifelong learning: Older workers will be able to remain attractive in the labour market, increase their well-being and professional self-esteem through proper access to relevant skills-upgrade and also attainment of new skills. This will require targeted policy measures at the employers' level, and the role of social partners is significant here.

This policy brief is part of a series of policy briefs written for the project **BSLF for Sustainable Working Life** (BSLF-SWL) which is funded by the European Social Fund and Swedish Institute. The project addresses the demographic challenge in the BSR - i.e. an ageing population, low fertility rates and a shrinking labour force - by focussing on the working population in the age group 55+ and efforts to prolong working life through Active Ageing and Lifelong Learning. The overarching aim of the project is to support the improvement of working conditions and lifelong learning provisions, systems and policies for the older labour force in order to promote active ageing and employability.

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<https://bslf.eu/sustainable-working-life/>

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