How to Foster Age Inclusivity in Your Nonprofit

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I remember the first time I felt ridiculed at work because of my age.

I worked as a reporter for a daily newspaper. I'd been assigned a story about a regional bank shareholder meeting. I put on my sharpest suit and headed out for the long drive. When I introduced myself to the bank's marketing director, she chirped, "Oh, aren't you a cute little thing." I can't be sure, but I sensed she wanted to intimidate me so I wouldn't ask tough questions.

I hope her words didn't influence how I did my job that day. I honestly don't remember. What I recall is how the interaction rattled my confidence. I was in my early 20s and looked even younger. Being reminded of that fact as I interviewed people in positions of power had an impact.

Many years later, during a job search, I questioned the professional impact of my age in a different way. I pored over job postings that sought "digital natives" to work in "fast-paced" organizations that prized "hustle." This time, I wondered if I'd be judged too old to work in those places, based on the years of experience on my resume.

At some point in our careers, any of us could be the youngest person in the room—or the oldest. Nearly 80 percent of older workers have seen or experienced age discrimination in the workplace, according to a 2021 AARP survey.

Those experiences can vary by gender, race, and more. Women experience the largest share of age discrimination in the workplace, social gerontologist Tetyana Shippee told AARP. AARP research on women age 50 and older found that African American women in this age group reported the highest levels of discrimination, followed by Latinas and Asian American/Pacific Islanders.

Organizations don't always consider whether their employees or job candidates see them as a place for people of all ages. But if nonprofits don't actively seek age diversity on their teams, they court major risks. Age discrimination against people over 40 is against the law under the federal Age Discrimination in Employment Act, which applies to organizations that employ more than 20 people. And research has shown that diversity of all kinds, including age diversity, can make teams more innovative, creative, and effective. Without a diverse mix of professionals and ideas, nonprofits can languish or become obsolete in an increasingly diverse world.

Here are some strategies to pursue age diversity on your nonprofit's team.

Set the Foundation for Age Inclusivity

- Share information about your nonprofit's open positions widely within your team. Make sure employees across age groups and career stages know about all your job opportunities.
- If you have a management team, designate an executive sponsor to support your nonprofit's age diversity recruiting efforts. Seek a champion with a passion for your mission and for multigenerational hiring. This champion could help you focus on initiatives like recruiting young professionals, mid-career leaders, and older professionals to join your staff team as well as your board.
- Add age diversity to your organization's DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) objectives, and set measurable goals.
- Review your diversity policies and make sure they include age. Craft language that explains how age diversity fits into organizational culture and values, DEI goals, and action plans. Include statements from leadership about the importance of age diversity, and share information on non-retaliation policies for reporting discrimination.
- Include age in your nonprofit's official statements about diversity. This includes the equal employment opportunity (EEO) statements frequently found on job postings, and any communications that explain your organization's stance on the importance of all forms of diversity.

Address Age Diversity in Hiring

- Post your organization's open positions on job boards focused on age diversity, like the AARP job board. Consider a variety of job posting locations, from newspapers and magazines to local websites and neighborhood newsletters.
- Include language in your recruitment materials that encourages workers of all ages to apply.
- Never ask for graduation dates or dates of birth in your application process.
- Don't ask for salary history, and always post the salary or wage for an open position, or a salary range.
- Audit your job descriptions. Avoid phrases such as "recent college graduate," "young, dynamic team," or "digital native." Such language could give the impression older people shouldn't apply. Use AARP's guide, "Say This, Not That," to review and make changes to your job descriptions and postings.
- Seek recruiting partnerships with organizations that serve older people.
- Create flexible work situations and tailor job designs to meet the needs and preferences of older workers.
- Start or participate in a return-to-work program (called "returnships") for midcareer professionals who have taken time out of the workforce to raise children, care for elders, or focus on other aspects of their lives.

As with any type of diversity, creating change takes thought and care. Whether you know it or not, your nonprofit is communicating messages about age to employees, job candidates, and clients. With specific steps to make those messages more thoughtful, you can begin to create a workplace that all your employees will find welcoming, no matter their age.

Want more on this topic? Stay tuned – we'll focus on managing across generations in an upcoming Risk eNews.

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