

Don't Make Fun Of My Age!



According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the percentage of workers 45 and older will increase from 33 percent of the labor force

in 1998 to 40 percent in 2008—adding nearly 17 million workers to this age group. As a corollary to the majority of the workforce aging and nearing retirement, it comes as no shock that the courthouse floodgates have opened to age-discrimination cases. As of 2006, nearly all of the baby boomers came within the Age Discrimination

in Employment Act's protected class. The number of age-discrimination charges received by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is up 12 percent from 2006.

Age discrimination is different from prejudice against a person's race or religion. Whereas race-based actions, for example, typically derive from an animus and prejudice toward minorities, ageism in the workplace often stems from stereotypes about older employees being resistant to learning new skills and concepts. As age discrimination is often motivated more by ignorance and a lack of consideration, rather than hostility, ageist language has become a normal—and accepted—part of our everyday conversations.

A recent study by Bob McCann, a professor at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business, revealed that ageist language has played a major role in age-discrimination lawsuits. While the workforce is composed of an age-diverse demographic, ageist language—unlike universally banned racist or sexist terms—is commonly used in the workplace.

In his analysis of age-discrimination lawsuits, McCann found common uses of age-related terms, such as “old goat,” “too long on the job,” and “old fart.” While employers (defendants) view such comments as unactionable stray remarks, employees (plaintiffs) perceive them to be evidence of age discrimination.

With the downfall of the economy and increased layoffs, we will likely be seeing more older employees taking these remarks to court and citing them as discriminatory evidence. The perpetuation of ageist comments in the workplace, even without the existence of age animus, puts companies at risk for more and more ADEA lawsuits.

In addition to significant legal expenses due to the rise of age-discrimination claims, language denigrating older employees could affect employee morale and in turn, productivity and profit. Stereotypical beliefs about older workers are likely to lead to ageist language, which is likely to cause frustrated baby boomers to believe their worth is not being fully recognized and appreciated. As the baby boomers dominate the workforce and avoid retirement, ageist remarks in the workplace cannot be ignored. As human resource professionals, we need to address subtle denigration of older workers by educating the workforce that, although ageist language still may be accepted in today's society, it is not accepted in the office.

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