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## **Ageism: A Threat to Career Progression Despite Labor Shortage in the Construction Industry**

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Considering the degree and rate of aging of construction workers around the globe, which is compounded by intensifying labor shortages, the industry requires serious attention to workplace policies that safeguard older workers against ageist stereotypes and prevent early retirement while at the same time attracting younger workers. Ageism has been identified as a barrier in all four layers of career progression (recruitment and hiring, retention, promotion, and firing/dismissal). Therefore, the steps to tackle ageism in the construction industry need to include a strategy that ensures the career progression of older and experienced workers, and an approach that welcomes a more diverse young workforce. Through a comprehensive literature review, this research sought to explore the current state of ageism in the construction industry. The findings of this research show that even though minimal research has been conducted thus far, there is a strong business case that justifies further research in this area. Research findings further point out to ageism as a threat in career progression. Sources of ageism barriers include societal and employer attitudes, coded language, and worker self-directed ageism. This research recommends both quantitative and qualitative analyzes of the prevalence and impacts of ageism in the construction industry.

**Key Words:** ageism, construction industry, older workers, career progression

### **Introduction**

Given the forgoing construction labor market conditions facing a shortage of labor and skills, there is a need to retain experienced and high-performing older workers longer. This assertion is confirmed by previous research that suggest that performance of older workers is better in comparison to those who are younger because of their experience (E.g., North, 2019; Loretto & White, 2006). However, one major obstacle facing recruitment/hiring, promotion, and retention of aging workers is ageism which is characterized by discriminatory stereotypes, behaviors, and attitudes toward older workers. Such practices have the potential of discouraging and demoralizing aging workers from seeking and remaining in the workforce. In the process, valuable experience is lost while at the same time the problem of labor shortage is escalated.

The construction industry median age is 43 years old with majority of the workers lying between ages 45-64 (O'Connor, 2021; Seniorliving.org, 2020) in comparison to the United States (U.S.) workforce

average age that is forecasted to rise from 42.0 to 42.3 years between 2016 and 2026 (FOR CONSTRUCTION PROS.com, 2019). It is also forecasted that the proportion of workers in the U.S. aged over 55 years in 2024 will be double the figure in 1994, increasing from 11.9% to 24.8% (FOR CONSTRUCTION PROS.com, 2019). Therefore, the degree and rate of aging of construction workers in the United States compounded by intensifying labor shortages, the industry requires serious attention to policies that safeguard older workers against ageist stereotypes and prevent early retirement. Furthermore, even if replacements for older workers were to be found, there are fears that valuable experience will be lost as older workers retire.

In the U.S., statistics from Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) show that age discrimination-related cases have been on the rise. In monetary terms, research by Kolmer (2021), argued that the US economy lost \$850 billion in 2018 due to ageism. Further, Kolmer (2021) argued that more than \$91 million had been recovered from employers in ageism-related lawsuits from 1967 to 2021. For individual cases, the most expensive cases have cost companies between \$2.85 million and \$250 million (Kolmer, 2021). This is clear evidence that ageism is a significant problem in the workplace. These statistics point out that ageism could be a threat to one's career progression if these trends were to remain persistent.

Despite the Federal and state laws to protect individuals against age discrimination in the workplace, the vice is still prevalent. According to Kolmer (2021), 67% of workers aged 40-65 will continue working beyond age 66, which means that the number of older workers likely to stay in employment will increase. This increasing number will be exposed to ageist attitudes and stereotypes as research reveals that at least 60% of older employees have experienced or seen ageism with 90-95% of those saying that ageism at the workplace is common (Kolmer, 2021). Additionally, at the recruitment and hiring phase, older workers are 40% less likely to be offered jobs in comparison to workers who are younger. This same trend is noted with promotion and firing of older employees.

Therefore, this paper aims at examining how ageism could be related to an individual's career progression in the wake of labor shortage in the construction industry. Through a literature review and existing data from government agencies, the paper will focus on how ageism could be a threat to the major milestones in one's career otherwise referred to as layers of career progression in this paper. Talent acquisition, hiring managers, human resource departments, supervisors, and construction management professionals, in general, will find this paper useful in understanding the scale and breadth of ageism in relation to a career progression in construction which ultimately can be a solution to the much-needed staffing demands of the industry. This paper will also advance knowledge through the introduction of this novel idea which has been well-advanced in other sectors into construction practice and research.

### **Ageism defined**

The definition of ageism has evolved throughout these years. The word ageism was first explained by Robert Butler who explained ageism as a preconceived notion of one age group against another (Butler, 1969). This definition addressed the prejudicial notion due to the generational gap and further noted the same to be a national problem. Butler contended that ageism is a form of prejudice where younger and older age groups are discriminated upon by the middle-aged group who society assumes responsibility for the well-being of the younger and older age groups. For further understanding of ageism, he juxtaposed the effects of negative stereotypes of ageism to those of racism and social class as well as the intersections with other forms of prejudice (Butler, 1969). In his ensuing research, Butler (1980) carried on with comparisons between ageism, racism, and sexism, where he argued that ageism manifests itself as attitudes, behaviors, and institutionalized policies and practices against older individuals.

A broader definition of ageism corresponds ageism to age-based discrimination. Age-related stereotypes are ignored most of the time and people fail to notice their consequences because they are ingrained in society. This definition of ageism has further been explained broadly as discrimination against or in favor of one age group against the other. While ageism affects the young and the old most, because these two groups are mostly assumed to dependent (Angus & Reeve, 2006), people in the mid-age group may also be affected (Lloyd-Sherlock et al., 2002). Further definitions of ageism include behavioral, cognitive, and emotional aspects; implicit and explicit nature; positive and negative consequences; and how it is manifested (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2018).

Similarly, different people of different age groups respond differently to similar ageist acts because of varying life experiences, backgrounds, and histories. Everyone, at different levels, is involved in the formation of attitudes and behaviors toward ageism through interaction, negotiation, and ongoing discursive processes. Existing research reinforces this by arguing that as people age, they exhibit and maintain certain attitudes which may or may not be ageist, while at the same time they are likely to engage in self-directed ageism (e.g., Rocha et al., 2022; Krekula et al., 2018). Thus, if age were not to be used as an organizing principle at the workplace, it would form a compelling case since such a situation would be perceived as being neutral and would give an institution or firm an object through which recruitment, and hiring, retention, promotion, and dismissal occurs.

### **Ageism in the construction industry**

The imminent retirement of baby boomers and decreasing fertility rates in the United States since 1960 which has shrunk groups of younger prospective employees who could potentially rise the ranks and replace the aging workers has led to labor shortages in the country. The same scenario is replicated in many countries in Europe and Australia (World Health Organization, 2021). Globally, 2020 statistics show that the percentage of workers in the construction industry aged 55 and over, were almost twice the number in 2003, rising from 11.5 percent to 22.7 percent. This increase can also be attributed to the aging of the entire population. However, in comparison to the employed population, the proportion of aged workers is more pronounced for the construction industry.

Additionally, urgent attention is needed in the recruitment and retention of older workers in the industry. Disseminating currently available ageism laws and guidelines in the US and other countries around the world may require changes in work organizations and improved workplace standards and enforcement. Moreover, the steps to tackle the current skills shortage in the construction industry need to include an approach to ensure the retention, training, and promotion of older and experienced workers, and an approach that welcomes a more diverse workforce. This approach could respond to existing laws and policies on ageism that focus on individuals older than 50 years ignoring steps taken by organizations to recognize a younger workforce. On this basis, there is a lack of research focusing on ageism and younger workers which in its entirety ignores the true definition of ageism - a phenomenon directed toward all age groups.

### **Theoretical framework**

Ageism has been described as a social issue through biases by one age group against another. Population demographics are changing in all sectors of the economy and both current and projected data show that the average age of construction industry workers is above the overall average age of the current workforce (Sokas et al., 2019). This, therefore, mean that the demographics of the construction industry workers from an age perspective is changing and an understanding of what this means from a societal standpoint is timely. One such societal issue is ageism. To understand ageism, a theoretical framework in figure 1 is proposed and used as guide in this paper.

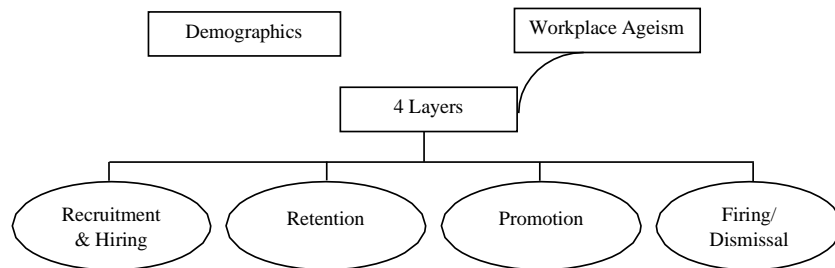


Figure 1. Theoretical framework for ageism in the construction industry.

The theoretical framework proposed and presented in figure 1 is used as a point of departure in this paper to guide the investigation of the existence and state of ageism research in the construction industry. The framework provides four layers to an individual's career progression in changing demographics in the construction industry. The four layers include 1) recruitment and hiring, 2) retention, 3) promotion, and 4) firing/dismissal. The theoretical framework specifically brings together the four most important milestones in one's career (i.e., how one finds a job, tenure, and career progression through promotion). However, ageism can be a barrier to achieving any or all these four layers of an individual's career. For example, research has shown that access to specialized training and education in the workplace decline significantly with age (World Health Organization, 2021), research in the United Kingdom (UK) showed that 26 percent of workers aged 39 to 54 reported age as a barrier to career progression with two-thirds contending that ageism barrier was difficult to overcome (Baska, 2020). Ageism issue in the UK gets even worse as one gets older according to research. According to Frith (2017), 46 percent of those over 55 cited ageism as their biggest barrier to career progression compared to 27 percent of those aged between 34 to 54.

## Methods

The literature review methodology as used in this research renders a qualitative approach for the authors to comprehensively agglomerate findings from articles reviewed to draw common themes and differences and use such findings to reach a conclusion. An in-depth search was carried out in ProQuest and Google Scholar databases using keywords. The Keywords of "ageism in construction industry", "ageism law", and "age discrimination in the construction industry" were used to conduct the search. Also, Google search engine was used to find current laws and policies that exist in the US to protect workers against ageism. To narrow down the focus of this research, keywords were limited to either the abstract or the title. Since this is an emerging social issue, it was expected that research study on ageism in the construction industry is limited and therefore, the search was not focused on a given construction type, but rather on the entire construction industry organization. Furthermore, the search was also expanded to cover other relevant literature from other industries. A review for relevance of the articles found from the search engines resulted in 65 studies that were considered for an in-depth analysis. The in-depth analysis established that 32 publications contained relevant information for the current research. Thematic analysis was utilized to help identify, analyze, and interpret patterns in the publications containing relevant information.

## Findings

The findings presented in this paper are summaries of the existing body of knowledge derived from the analyzed articles. These findings are organized based on the theoretical framework (figure 1) that was used as a guide for this research study.

### *Current state of practice*

This paper searched papers on ageism from major data databases and in particular, Google Scholar and ProQuest. It is noted that construction-specific research in this area is limited. Therefore, the paper borrows relevant materials from other industries to draw conclusions that can be applied in the construction industry. The other industries that published articles covered include gerontology, family science studies, human resource and talent acquisition, and nursing. The current trends relating to ageism and the four layers of career progression were researched and top literature findings with each layer presented as a subtopic.

#### *Recruitment and hiring*

The findings show that older workers were less likely to be invited for a job interview or considered for a job offer compared to younger applicants (e.g., Batinovic et al., 2022; Neumark, 2021). Furthermore, countries that have laws protecting older workers such as the US, show that there is less discrimination when the law requires larger damages to employers exercising such discrimination. For example, research by Neumark et al., (2019) shows evidence that there is less discrimination in US states where violators of discrimination laws are required to pay larger damages.

Research has shown that recruitment and hiring professionals are significantly less likely to rate job applicants aged over 45's as being job ready, being the best fit for the company culture, or having the best experience compared to candidates 35-44 years (McLaren, 2021). Further, this research shows that even the younger applicants aged 18-34 years were rated higher than those over 45 in all these categories. Another study showed that those over 50 years were up to three times more likely to be called for a job interview compared to a candidate 28 years old (Epstein, 2022). These statistics show a perception bias by the recruitment and hiring managers about older candidates. Similar studies show that when older people are given a chance, 87% of them perform better than their younger counterparts (McLaren, 2021). What this means, therefore, is that there is a difference between perception and reality. The task here is convincing and changing the perception of recruitment and hiring managers. What this does to older workers is that it leads to self-directed ageism (North, 2019), and they end up making concessions. For example, statistics reveal that in some way, 66% of older workers lowered their expectations, 30% ended up taking jobs in an area that they didn't want, 29% accepted lower salaries, and 24% accepted to step back and take lower positions (McLaren, 2021).

It is not only older candidates who receive rejections; younger jobseekers can also be denied job opportunities because of their age. However, this area of research on ageism is less studied and has received less attention partly because most laws and policies in place tend to focus on older workers. Studies that exist reveal that younger employees lack experience, are unmotivated and have other related stereotypes and thus they cannot be hired (Epstein, 2022).

#### *Retention*

Recruitment studies based on experimental research were used in this paper to draw a line of argument on this layer of career progression. For example, a study by North (2019) shows that older workers were denied training opportunities as compared to equally qualified younger counterparts. Training opportunities can be a motivating factor for workers to remain on the job. This argument then implies that retention on the job can be either voluntary or forced turnover. Harris et al. (2018) reviewed past research on ageism and older workers and found varied results in terms of retention. Studies in Spain, Greece, the Netherlands, and United Kingdom showed that employers had intentions for older worker retention at varying degrees, while on the other hand studies in China showed

decreased intention for older worker retention and forced retirement (Harris et al., 2018).

Ageism and ageist prejudice assume that a younger employee will be with the employer longer. This assumption is not likely nowadays as research has shown that on average, young employees leave their jobs after three years in contrast with older employees who on average, provide employers with longer tenures and more stability (Lipnic, 2018).

### *Promotion*

Audit studies were used to gain insights into this third layer of career progression. A survey of older employees shows that 12% of older workers reported being bypassed for a chance to take up a senior position due to their age (Perron, 2018). In the US, the Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT) has lost multiple lawsuits due to age discrimination. For example, *McClurg v. MoDOT* (Vockrodt, 2014) and *Justus v. MoDOT* (White, 2013) who were demoted from their positions due to their age. It is common practice in the workplace where it is suggested that someone consider retirement because of their age. Nevertheless, such positions are taken by younger workers.

### *Firing*

The data that were used in informing this layer in an individual's career progression were obtained either from past research based on qualitative analyses or from publicly available data from the EEOC. Older employees are facing challenges with increasing rates of unwilling job losses. For example, research shows that 7% of the workers were laid off or forced to leave their positions because of their age (Perron, 2018). Furthermore, findings from that same research revealed that 18% of older workers fear losing their jobs due to their age (Perron, 2018).

Data mined from health and retirement studies as well as surveys with workers over 50 years show that more than 50 percent of U.S. older workers are forced to let go of their positions, laid off, or fired on their way to retirement (Gosselin, 2018). The prevalence of ageism in the US can be evidenced by the number of claims and cases filed with EEOC. Of such cases, there have been successful lawsuits for dismissal due to age. For example, *Reid v. Google, Inc., 2010* where Reid successfully sued Google for termination due to his age. Other examples include recruitment and construction companies in Australia who were penalized due to age discrimination (Surpportah, 2021).

### *Sources of ageism barriers*

An analysis of published literature, the sources of ageism barriers can be categorized broadly into societal and employer attitudes, coded language, and worker self-directed ageism. Societal and employer attitudes include stereotypes against older workers. These stereotypes, for example, act as a constant reminder that as one ages, they are only destined to die (Martens et al., 2004), older workers are a burden to their employers since they are more costly (Kroon et al., 2018), older workers are systematically ignored by society (Thompson & Arrighi, 2007). These societal and employer attitudes are hurdles to career progression among older people.

Coded language as used mostly in recruitment and hiring is a source of barriers. Coded language can also be seen in the other layers of career progression. It is common to see job postings including languages such as "...fit in with a young team" (McGoldrick & Arrowsmith, 1993), "new or recent college graduate" (Kopytoff, 2014), "cultural fit" (McGann, et al., 2016). When such coded language is used in the workplace, it denies older workers an opportunity either to get hired, earn a promotion, or even they can be involuntarily dismissed.

As workers age in an ageist society and are exposed to ageism stereotypes, it can lead to self-directed

ageism. For example, job responsibilities that require memory tasks will undermine performance. Feeling old or young is very subjective and thus this source of ageism barrier can be broad in its analysis and deep in understanding (Angus & Reeve, 2006).

## Conclusion

Ageism is still a problem around the globe costing global economies billions of monies. The aim of this paper, therefore, was to explore ageism as a barrier to career progression in the face of labor shortages in the construction industry. Based on the current trends in the labor market which means that there are lower unemployment rates and growing skilled labor shortages, hiring, and retaining older workers can help construction firms fill open positions. To achieve this, recruiters and hiring managers should attract workers of all ages and avoid basing their hiring decisions on age and years of experience limitations despite their qualifications.

The prevalence of ageism is real, and it is on the rise globally. Therefore, ageism can be a threat to an individual's career progression at any of the four career progression layers presented in this paper. Therefore, strategies that can offer career guidance and counseling to workers of all ages at all career progression layers are recommended. Retention of workers by an organization will reduce costs related to employee turnover, retain knowledge, and experience and ultimately improve productivity. Sources of ageism barriers were also reviewed in the paper. There is sufficient evidence to show that societal and employer attitudes, coded language, and worker self-directed ageism can be obstacles to an individual's career progression.

The effects of ageism in an industry that is facing labor shortages and skills is the loss of valuable experience due to forced retirement or early retirement for those facing ageism. In terms of hiring, the reluctance of construction firms to hiring older workers means that these firms will continue finding it difficult to fill open positions. Research has shown that older workers tend to perform better due to their experience which is a strong message to construction companies not to shy away from hiring this group of workers.

The paper extends the body of knowledge by exploring this emerging social issue in construction research and concludes that ageism is a threat to an individual's career progression. Ageism is practiced at the recruitment/hiring level, retention, promotion, or firing/dismissal level. These layers are all essential in career progression and once ageist prejudices take control of the processes and process in a company, then an individual's career can stagnate or even come to an abrupt. Ageism in the construction industry is in its early stages. This paper, therefore, recommends an in-depth analysis of ageism both to the older and younger workers. Exploration of industry wide practices is also recommended through the analysis of job advertisements, promotion, and tenure policies as well as dismissal. Additionally, this research recommends both quantitative and qualitative analyzes of the prevalence and impacts of ageism in the construction industry.

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## biggest-barrier-career-progression-survey-finds

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