Women Are Always the Wrong Age

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Julie O'Neill spent nearly three decades as a top anchor for Cincinnati's WCPO news station, but early last year, her career took a gut-wrenching turn.

Despite her longtime coverage of the Cincinnati Bengals, O'Neill was passed over in favor of a younger, male colleague to report on the team's 2022 Super Bowl appearance. Soon after, she said, she began receiving complaints from the station's news director about a decline in her performance. Puzzled, she began recording footage of her segments, hoping to identify and correct any stumbles. The exercise left her only more confused. Her delivery seemed as strong as ever, she told me, and even her coanchor was perplexed by the feedback. Tensions between O'Neill and her bosses continued to escalate, she said, finally reaching a head in September when she was called into a meeting with management. In the meeting, O'Neill was told she would no longer be cohosting the network's morning show and that her station contract would not be renewed after December 31. O'Neill recalled the station's general manager citing her recent on-air mention of a colleague's recovery from COVID-19 — which the colleague had posted openly about on social media — as the "disrespectful" final straw.

"Until all the criticism started, I had had stellar performance reviews and was never, ever accused of being disrespectful or making people uncomfortable," O'Neill said. At the time, she had a sneaking suspicion that her age and gender might have played a role in the abrupt turn of events,

but it was an older, male mentor who made her see the connection as crystal clear.

“He said to me, ‘When do you turn 55, Julie?'” she said. “And I said, January 9. ‘That’s interesting,’ he said. ‘Nine days after your contract was up, you were put out of the 18-to-54 demographic'” — the target age bracket for network-TV ad buys. (WCPO did not comment on Julie’s dismissal, but leadership has said, “We do not agree with many statements that have been made. As usual, we don’t talk about personnel matters publicly.”)

The station’s leadership never said that O’Neill’s age was a factor in its decision-making. But she believes they didn’t have to. In her view, “they made it clear that I was not the future,” she said.

No ‘prime’ age for women

O’Neill’s account seems shocking but may be an all-too-familiar story for many women in leadership roles. A new, qualitative survey of 913 women across four disparate industries — law, faith-based nonprofits, higher education, and healthcare — found a dismaying amount of age-based discrimination against women in top jobs. The research, recently published in Harvard Business Review, found that many of the women surveyed reported being at the receiving end of age-related judgment that implied they were unfit for the job.

Perhaps the most discouraging finding of the survey was that the ageist behavior wasn’t just directed toward one age cohort. For women under 40, ageism often showed up in the form of “role incredulity” — higher-ups (who were frequently, if not exclusively, men) registering surprise at their seniority, sometimes even calling them by condescending nicknames such as “kiddo” or dispensing pats on the head. (Previous studies have also found that women of childbearing age are routinely passed over for jobs or promotions because they could become

pregnant.) Women over 60, on the other hand, reported being ignored altogether, their skills overlooked and their experience discounted in favor of "fresh, new ideas." Many of the ageist dismissals echoed across age groups: Women who were up for jobs, promotions, or bonuses were told they either lacked experience or had too much of the wrong kind. Many also described hearing ageist remarks used to discredit other women who were up for professional opportunities.

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Amy Diehl, a gender-equity researcher and one of the coauthors of the new report, wasn't surprised by the prevalence of ageism against the oldest and youngest women she and her colleagues surveyed. But she was taken aback by the extent to which middle-aged women like O'Neill reported experiencing age-related discrimination at work.

"When men get to their 40s or 50s, they're considered to be in the prime of their careers," Diehl told me. Women of the same age, however, continue to bump up against "age-related constraints."

It is a grim irony that successful women in midlife, in particular, are so often made to feel as though they will be difficult or distractible while at the height of their professional prowess. The researchers believe that this happens precisely *because* middle-aged women feel they have less to lose by flexing their hard-earned expertise. Their confidence, and competence, makes them threatening.

"When you get a woman in her 40s or 50s who has progressed in her career and is probably more willing to speak her mind, I think it's intimidating to the insecure men in our workforce," Diehl said. "They would rather diminish that woman, not promote her, keep her in her place. It's not that they don't

want her in the workplace — they just want her in a role that's going to support the men in the workplace and not compete with them. And certainly not give them a contrary opinion."

In the survey, middle-aged women described a wide variety of put-downs from higher-ups: concerns about "menopause issues" or vague accusations of being "difficult to manage." Others reported being told that their phase of life put them at risk of "family-related issues" getting in the way of their job performance — a line of commentary directed against professional women across ages.

"You're too young and then, in a moment in time, you're considered to be too old," Diehl said. "There really is no sweet spot for women."

'Call it 'sexism' because that's what it is'

While age discrimination itself may not strike many as surprising, the fact companies are so blatant about it is shocking, especially in light of recent cultural shifts. Over the past several years, activist movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter have helped raise mainstream public consciousness over systemic sexual harassment and racism. "Diversity," "equity," and "inclusivity" have entered the lexicon of corporate accountability. Companies have dutifully launched workplace-sensitivity seminars and adjusted their hiring practices; some have even set up entire human-resources departments dedicated to DEI. Whether or not these initiatives have proved successful in leveling the professional playing field, a majority of American workers say they appreciate the effort.

Even as businesses have invested in building fairer work environments — or have, at the very least, invested in

elaborate lip service to the cause — age discrimination against women workers not only persists but also is often perpetuated in plain view. Gendered ageism may even be the last acceptable form of workplace discrimination — and that's even truer for women who are not white or who encompass multiple marginalized identities.

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How did this happen? The likeliest answer is also the simplest. Age is universal; everyone has one. Just as it's become commonplace to debate generational differences and compare the (real or perceived) attributes of people who grew up in different eras, people feel generally OK discussing age out in the open.

"The concept of aging is something that is socialized into our fabric to be acceptable to point out," Amber L. Stephenson, another coauthor of the study, told me. "We are just so much more comfortable taking shots at different age stages or career stages, in comparison with other types of bias."

But the researchers are emphatic that in our appearance-focused, age-obsessed society, using a woman's age against her in a professional setting is a mask to express the gender biases we have yet to truly shake as a culture.

"Instead of 'gendered ageism,' we can just call it 'sexism' because that's what it is," Diehl said.

Leanne M. Dzubinski, the third coauthor on the study, agreed: "When we put it together — that so many women, no matter what age they are, are always being told that they're not the right age — then what we see is it's actually just an excuse for sexism, period."

‘They would rather keep her in her place’

Research has found repeatedly that the public imagination of a “leader” remains static — and regressive. Men are more likely than women to be perceived as leadership material and overwhelmingly more likely than women to hold leadership positions across virtually every industry.

This is not to suggest that all is hunky-dory for men in the workforce. Much has been written about the steady decline in employment among 25- to 54-year-old American men, and recent surveys have also indicated that men aren’t immune to workplace ageism. In one 2019 poll of 400 US workers ages 40 and older, more men than women reported experiencing or witnessing age discrimination on the job. Research has also found that older job seekers face age discrimination regardless of gender, despite a 56-year-old federal law that purportedly protects against older-age discrimination in employment. And, as always, race and identity stigmas play a significant role in predicting whether women will be hired, promoted, or recognized for their achievements.

It’s undeniable that workplace age discrimination occurs across gender lines, but the qualitative experiences surfaced by Diehl, Stephenson, and Dzubinski help paint a picture of how an open culture around age discrimination can ultimately end up fueling good, old-fashioned sexism. The researchers urge women at the receiving end of superficial or immaterial workplace criticisms to recognize that age-related feedback — or negative character-based appraisals such as “being difficult” — are more likely to reflect on the shortcomings of their superiors than on their performance.

O’Neill, the Cincinnati anchor, offers herself as a case in point. After departing from WCPO, she refused to sign the nondisclosure agreement that would entitle her to a job

severance package and, instead, recently published a memoir about her career. Its 13th chapter details her final jarring months at the news station where she'd worked for 27 of her 31 years in broadcasting. This summer, O'Neill filed an age discrimination lawsuit against her former employer. Its allegations include her account of her termination and the lead-up to it. When asked to comment, the station said it does not comment on pending litigation.

"People might look at my experience and say, 'It's not personal. It's just business,'" she told me. "I say all business is personal because it involves people. And maybe that sounds a little idealistic, but I don't care. That's the beauty of being 55."

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https://www.entrepreneur.com/business-news/ageism-against-women-in-top-jobs-persistent-new-survey-says/458205