

Enough of 'OK, Boomer'

Ageism is a real problem in the South African job market. Even if a job seeker has an impressive CV and experience that stretches back many years, they might not secure the position they apply for because of their age.



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Furthermore, those employees who are approaching their 50s and 60s might become the first targeted when the company restructures or retrenches. Of course, the reverse is also true, with young candidates also being overlooked because of stereotypes that exist around millennials being lazy or selfish. Nicol Myburgh, Head of the HR Business Unit at CRS Technologies, says it is still vital for organisations to ensure that policies are in place to manage age discrimination before it becomes an issue.

South Africa's Employment Equity Act states that 'no person may unfairly discriminate, directly or indirectly, against an employee, in any employee policy or practice, on one or more grounds, including age.'

Despite this, age discrimination is difficult to prove. The occasional 'OK boomer' comment (usually used to ridicule older people for their perceived lack of knowledge) may not be considered harassment, but this can quickly escalate out of control when it becomes a habit in the company.



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"Similarly, referring to millennials at the workplace as 'snowflakes' can also constitute harassment or ageism if the references become regular occurrences," says Myburgh.

"Additionally, brushing off these comments as 'just a joke' should never constitute a valid legal defence," he adds.

Balancing expenses

At a time where company costs are carefully managed and budgets are increasingly under pressure, older workers find themselves hard-pressed to justify their higher salaries and growth potential inside the organisation, Myburgh continues. “After all, some might argue that it would be better to invest in new talent rather than have senior resources put a strain on company funds.”

Yet, organisations can ill afford to lose the experience of these older workers. A best case scenario sees the business balance receiving an influx of young talent and leveraging the insights of senior management based on their experience of the market and customers. However, older workers also need to enhance their technological capabilities, while treating the ‘newcomers’ with respect, especially given the technologically rich skills they bring to the business.



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Steps to take

If an individual feels they might have been unfairly discriminated against because of their age, Myburgh says there are various steps that can be taken.

“At the most basic level, the employee should report the issue to the HR department. However, in the case of a dismissal, a good route to follow would be to file a complaint with the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA).”

According to statistics, claims that typically relate to age discrimination happen in the context of retirement. A positive sign is that only 3% of complaints of unfair dismissal lodged with the SA Human Rights Commission were based on age.

“This does not mean employers (and employees) can rest on their laurels. Company policies must be continually reviewed to ensure that there is no potential for discrimination of any kind,” Myburgh concludes.

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