

When words get old: Ageist language undercuts workers and companies

USC Marshall professor and litigation consultant says words can harm the workplace

LOS ANGELES – The wrong language – denigrating older workers, even if only subtly – can have an outsized negative impact on employee productivity and corporate profits, says Bob McCann, an associate professor of management communication at the USC Marshall School of Business and a litigation consultant with *ComCon* Kathy Kellermann Communication Consulting.

While demographic trends point to a more age-diverse workforce, said McCann, ageist language is still to be found in many workplaces, and can have severe repercussions for both older workers and their employers.

The workplace is a particularly fertile and problematic area for ageist communication, given that people derive so much of their identity from work.

Age-related comments such as “the old woman,” “that old goat,” “too long on the job,” “old and tired,” “a sleepy kind of guy with no pizzazz,” “he had bags under his eyes,” and he is “an old fart” are just some of the hundreds of ageist comments McCann unearthed in his analysis of age-discrimination lawsuits.

Such language has become so common in age-discrimination cases that some groups of ageist comments even have their own names. “Young blood” remarks are perhaps the best illustration, including such examples as: “We need young blood around here,” “Let’s make room for some MBAs,” or “Let’s bring in the young guns.”

“Young blood” communication has appeared in numerous cases, including one where a company president detailed his wishes for a “young line of command,” while in another, management expressed its wish to “get rid of the good old Joes.”

For the plaintiff, the defendant’s ageist comments typically are perceived as clear evidence of the company’s discriminatory intent toward older workers. Defendants, by

contrast, generally view these same ageist comments as "stray remarks" proving little other than that ageism is prevalent in society at large.

For corporations, age discrimination can also lead to significant expenses. In Fiscal Year 2006, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission received nearly 17,000 charges of age discrimination, resolving more than 14,000 and recovering \$51.5 million in monetary benefits. Costs from lawsuit settlements and judgments can run into the millions, most notably with the \$250 million paid by the California Public Employees' Retirement System under a settlement agreement a few years ago.

McCann said he hopes that as increasing numbers of older workers stay on the job longer or come out of retirement, both management and younger workers will better appreciate their value.

“Then,” said McCann, “maybe ageist comments can be put out to pasture for good.”

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