

## EMPLOYMENT AGE-NCY

As a father of two and often having the opportunity of working with lots of younger people it's probably not surprising that some days it makes me feel old. Well, older, at least. Increasingly it seems that the majority of people are younger than me. Even policemen are starting to look young. Ouch! They tell me I'm past it! I have no idea what 'it' is but apparently I've left it behind, at least as far as my kids are concerned. Out of touch too, though with what, I couldn't tell you! But isn't it funny how we, as the older people, are scorned and viewed as old fashioned, whilst we see ourselves as right up to date and cutting edge?

In business, as in life, 'the old' are often discarded and put out to pasture in the proverbial field for no better reason than how long they've been around. This is fine when it's voluntary. If you have loads of money and no longer want to play corporate politics you can spend your time doing all those things you never had time for - yoga, cattle farming, watching the grandchildren and the roses grow...

Sending the old out to pasture is based on the premise that you can't teach an old dog new tricks and a leopard can't change its spots. But what about an elephant never forgets? I can remember a saying which I heard as a youngster that went 'In youth we learn, in age we understand'. In other words, as we grow older so we gain wisdom. But is it valued?

For years the 60/65 barrier or thereabouts has been the absolute limit for working. In many countries this is the official retirement age. Now isn't that just the epitome of narrow-minded thinking and pigeonholing people? We shouldn't however be surprised by this conventional wisdom because that is how we control the masses - age determines when you can legally have sex, regardless of physical or mental maturity, drive a car, yet my 12 year old daughter can already drive very well, vote, though I know lots of mature adults who should never be allowed to even remotely influence the government of the day! The 60/65 rule supposes that when you get there you are this, that and the next thing. Even the word retirement implies it all - time for bed. You're tired out. You need to rest. But how can it be a hard and fast rule? I know people half that age who run out of steam and just as many who never get started. I also know plenty of older people who are totally indefatigable.

Here are some of the myths that surround older employee and their debunking, according to research conducted. Do older workers take off more time of work? No they don't. Is it true that older workers are less productive? No it is not. Older adults have difficulty adapting to change? Wrong again. So if all the myths about older people is wrong then limiting people of a certain age to certain jobs or barring them from others is indeed discrimination.

To employers who argue that they don't want someone who will only stay for a few years I am tempted to retort 'then don't employ someone young'. Chances are your older employee is likely to stay a lot longer. As for when the employer describes itself as recruiting for a young, dynamic team that means they have already accepted as true all those myths and pre-decided that they doesn't want an oldster around.

Consider this. In January 2005 a bill was introduced in the US House of Representatives allowing for the retirement age of aeroplane pilots to rise from 60 to 65. It was a contentious piece of legislation but backed up by considerable research which challenged the widely held assumption that after age 60 there is a general decline in cognitive functioning and reaction times. A report published in *Aviation, Space and Environmental Medicine* in March 2002 reached the conclusion that "There appears to be no medical, scientific, or safety justification for the age 60 rule. It represents age discrimination." Similarly the Hilton Study found "no hint of an increased incident rate for pilots as they neared their 60<sup>th</sup> birthday."

But aren't we all guilty of ageism in one form or another? Regardless of research examine your own reaction to flying with an airline that has a pilot of 60 as opposed to one that has a pilot of 35? How would you feel as you crossed the Pacific Ocean? Would you feel more at ease with the young pilot with his quick reflexes and high energy level or would you feel more secure in the experienced hands of the older jockey? I'm betting you'd probably be more concerned that the old geezer may just fall asleep at the joystick? Understandable, but ageist!

It's easy to see how these preconceptions influence whom we decide to employ and whom not. And it opens up the debate on should one person be favoured over another person because of something like age? If you allow that to happen surely any other factor can be used to make the employment decision? This is discrimination rearing its ugly head again.

Countries like South Africa, United Kingdom and the US all have very stringent discrimination and protection laws. A resume in these countries will normally not contain any reference to gender, age, nationality and even how many children you have. It is even illegal for the interviewer to ask. It's different here. In a small country like Botswana it is increasingly difficult to sell yourself clearly on merit because people know you or of you. At worst they can trace people who know you. So you stop being judged by your experience and successes but more on how you are perceived. This is in effect discrimination

There are even some who feel that discriminating against older people in the work place may not be such a social issue for us in Botswana. There appears to be some justification for retiring older people to make way for younger people and keep them off the streets. This may be well-intentioned but it is still discrimination. And even though companies are very cognisant of ensuring transparency in the recruitment process, there is no legislation to back this up and ensure it is enforceable.

There is one solution and that is to make employment about competence. The single and most weighted factor should be the person's attitude, knowledge and skill. This is what a competence is. What difference does it make if the person is male, female or hermaphrodite, 19 or 59 or has one child or ten? If they can do the job why legislate a compulsory retirement age or any other opportunity to allow discrimination? We must avoid stereotyping and see people for who they are and what they do. If at the end of the day it's all about getting the job done, surely better a fired-up 50 something than a burnt-out baby!

