

# Does Age Matter?

By Sarah Mahoney

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In the last two years, estimates one New York tech consultant, he's applied for 70 to 100 agency jobs that sounded just right for him. And while it's been a bad time to look for work, this exec has 30 years of experience, most recently as an EVP of client services and before that as a COO, managing global brands. For the most part, however, his inquiries have gone ignored—he's had a few nibbles and no offers.

"I know I'm qualified enough to at least get an interview," he says. The problem? "I'm 56, and that's old." So, he has begun to accept that his ad career may be over. "I know there's a window of opportunity, and I know it's closing fast."

Although age discrimination is illegal in the workplace, agency staffers and recruiters generally agree that youth is frequently favored over experience. Advertising, after all, is obsessed with youth, and in turn, the makeup of agencies is skewed young. It's most noticeable in the creative department, where even 40 is sometimes seen as over the hill.

"Writers and art directors are usually between 25 and 35," says John Zweig, an internal consultant to WPP. "Anyone older has likely either made it to the executive floor, been pushed out altogether because of downsizing or they've gone off and opened a B&B. The preoccupation with youth in the advertising business affects us at a profound level."

## Bureau of Labor Statistics Data

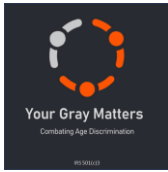
According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than 59 percent of employees in the ad industry are ages 25-44, vs. 50 percent of all workers; the median age of workers in advertising is 38, vs. close to 40 for all workers.

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While the American Association of Advertising Agencies does not compile age-related stats, and agencies generally don't make such data public, numbers from the U.K.—where legislation banning ageism is only now going into effect—show how dramatic the bias can be.

The U.K.'s Institute of Practitioners in Advertising says only 4 percent of employees in its member agencies are older than 50. And at Grey's MediaCom in London, for example, 82 percent of the 334 staffers are under 35, while just 1 percent are over 55, according to a Sunday Times profile of the shop.

While U.S. employers need to be more careful about exposing themselves to lawsuits, that doesn't necessarily open up the hiring process. "Ageism in advertising has always been the big elephant in the living room that nobody wants to talk about," says one recruiter. "Agencies use a kind of a code when they're hiring, but everyone knows what it means." For example, the recruiter explains, "We don't need someone too experienced" or "We want someone on their way up" translates to, "Get me someone younger." Likewise, "This person wouldn't fit in our hierarchy" means, "We don't want a 45-year-old reporting to a 30-year-old."

Age discrimination extends well beyond the issue of who's hired and who's let go. "There are thousands of career decisions made at ad agencies all the time," notes Howard Rubin, a litigator at Davis & Gilbert in New York who has defended ad agencies in various discrimination suits. For example: What's the average age of the team working on the highest-profile accounts? The average age in the new-business department?

There are several ways to protect yourself. "Get closer to clients; bring in new business," urges Rubin. "People who are valuable to an organization don't get let go."



As an applicant, it helps if you "think young." New York recruiter Paul Gumbinner says job seekers who project energy do well. "But some people don't just get old, they act old," he says. One symptom of acting old is coming across as a "know-it-all," he adds.

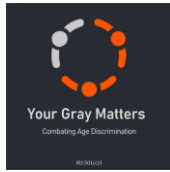
If you think you are a victim of ageism, talk to an employment lawyer, who may advise notifying the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. "A person doesn't have to be absolutely certain that they've been discriminated against," says EEOC lawyer Joe Cleary. "We are the investigative authority—we'll look for comparative data, what the various salaries are, what has happened in similar situations."

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You remain anonymous while the EEOC looks into your claim. (In its fiscal year ended in September 2003, the EEOC investigated 21 age-related discrimination charges against ad agencies, down from 28 in 2002.) If the commission finds enough evidence to move forward, the case goes to mediation or to court.

Retaining a lawyer is an especially good idea if you've been let go. "Getting laid off is very demoralizing—lots of the time, people don't feel like they're ready to take on City Hall, and some companies take advantage of that," says Paul Shoemaker, a lawyer at Greenfield Stein & Senior in New York. At the least, a lawyer will likely get you better severance terms.

The irony behind age discrimination is that many of its victims, even those as young as 39, are technically baby boomers, the generation that coined the phrase, "Don't trust anyone over 30." But as the boomers get older, perceptions about age will likely evolve.

Gumbinner, who recently placed a 62-year-old at the svp level, thinks ageism is less of a problem than it was 10 years ago. And WPP's Zweig adds: "The opportunity is that the market is getting older, too. Its needs and aspirations will change, and people who understand those changes will succeed."

<https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/does-age-matter-71511/>

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