

‘Not easy to get a job past 40’: How ageism at agencies affects older employees

September 27, 2019 | By [Kristina Monllos](#)



Chris Thilk is 44 years old. It’s been three years since he was let go from full-time agency work, and he has yet to find another full-time gig. That’s not for lack of trying, as he has applied to hundreds of jobs over the years. With 15 years of experience in the business, Thilk believes his age and experience level are hurting, rather than helping him in his quest for a new job.

“It wasn’t too long after I started applying for other open positions — including many at agencies — that I realized there was a big, fat thumb on the scales of the application process,” wrote Thilk in an email.

“Listings said they were looking for candidates with two-plus years of experience who had managed at least three major brands. I had all that and more. What I soon realized was that they meant someone with just two years of experience.”

Advertising is known for its youth obsession — look no further than Advertising Week programming, millennials are out and Gen Z is in — but that’s to the detriment of aging agency employees. Those employees are not only affected by age discrimination in agency culture but find it harder and harder to land the next job.

The fee-based agency business model — currently under more pressure than ever with fewer agency-of-record assignments, longer payment windows, clients going in-house, among other market realities — has long been dependent on cheaper talent. Teams at agencies rely on armies of younger (cheaper) employees, along with a smattering of more senior-level staffers. It makes experience a commodity. And as agencies need to staff up and down with the number of clients currently on their roster, and fluctuate due to wins and losses, agency economics are in favor of younger (cheaper) employees.

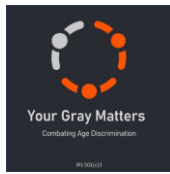
“It’s definitely not easy to get a job past 40,” said Sandy Rubinstein, CEO of full-service digital ad agency, DXagency, adding that there is an assumption when she walks in a room that due to her gray hairs she’s unable to understand digital.

Agency sources believe there’s more conversation than ever about ageism — especially in recent weeks following creative exec Duncan Milner’s wrongful termination suit against TBWA, which was first reported

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by Adweek earlier this month. Known for his work for Apple, Milner was terminated by TBWA last June as the agency reportedly said it couldn't afford his salary anymore and that it no longer had a position for him. That came after Milner was replaced as CCO of the shop, instead named the global chief creative president of MAL/For Good.

But even with the buzz about Milner and renewed conversation about ageism, agency sources don't believe that discussion has enacted real change yet to combat ageism within agencies. According to Digiday Research, 54% of employees with more than 15 years of experience believe they've experienced ageism at agencies and 43% of employees surveyed believe they've experienced ageism.

Part of the problem is that ageism isn't obvious. Often, it's a slow realization for agency employees who've experienced ageism that the problem is, in fact, their age rather than something else they may have done. The mental gymnastics required to get to that realization can be exhausting and stressful, according to agency sources, who find that ageism can be why they aren't invited to certain meetings or that it can crop up with coded language, like "cultural fit" in job listings.



"No one slams a door in your face while calling you 'gramps,'" wrote Rob Rooney, creative director, and co-creator of Over30Under30, a project that works to highlight older agency employees. Ageism didn't suddenly appear but came up in subtle and overt ways. As for subtly, Rooney believes ageism is why freelance work was easier for him to find in his late thirties rather than his late forties. Much more overt was when a CCO reorganized a creative department seating chart which suddenly had "everyone who had gray hair was sitting at the same table — we 'joked' that it was the Elephant's Graveyard," wrote Rooney.

Mental health



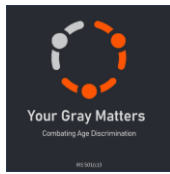
Ageism doesn't exist in a vacuum. Agency sources who've dealt with ageism believe it impacts the mental health of those who experience it. For freelancers, the worry that their age will make it difficult for them to get another job, whether that's a freelance gig or another full-time position, can be consuming.

"It took a huge toll on me mentally," wrote Rooney. "The stress of having to worry about bills and health insurance in addition to paying for a child's college tuition was hard to bear. I was struggling so much to perform at my current gig and at the same time trying to find the next one that I let my efforts at self-care

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take a back seat. I was silently suffering the whole time. There were many, many nights of worry and tears.”

Older employees who are still full-time, meanwhile, may be left wondering if the way they are treated is tied to their age. At the same time, the looming threat of potentially being laid off due to their age and position — often older employees are higher ranking with bigger salaries — is causing stress and anxiety levels to spike, explained Simon Fenwick, 4A’s EVP of talent, equity and inclusion. For example, a more junior employee like an account coordinator may make anywhere from \$35,000 to \$60,000 annually versus a more senior account director making between \$85,000 to \$155,000, according to data from The Creative Group.



“The experience of being discriminated against, particularly in the category of age has a way of literally eroding your confidence,” said Patti Temple Rocks, head of client impact at ICF Digital and author of *I’m Not Done: It’s Time to Talk About Ageism in the Workplace*. “You start to doubt yourself.”

“It can make you question your own worth,” said industry advocate Cindy Gallop, adding that there’s “a ton of talk and zero action” when it comes to reining in ageism in the ad world.

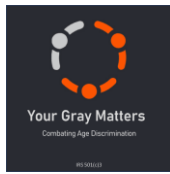
Salaries and new skills



Questioning your worth as an older employee can also be the result of seeing older employees let go from agencies due to their salaries. That can be especially stressful for employees who realize the changing nature of the agency business — as more work is project-based rather than agency of record and clients push out payment windows, among other myriad issues — will certainly impact the number of full-time employees agencies have on staff. “These days, when a 50-year-old is laid off, obviously employers aren’t telling them it’s because they’re too old, but because they can no longer afford them,” wrote Susan La Scala Wood, copywriter and co-founder of Under30Over30 in an email.

Those who recognize the nature of the agency business coupled with their age also likely feel even more pressure to stay relevant within the industry, needing to master new digital skills each week. While people of all ages certainly feel the pressure to master new platforms or ad units, there’s a shift when at age 50 to suddenly become an expert “at things you wouldn’t think a 50-year-old would be an expert at,” said Libby Delana, co-founder and creative director of Mechanica.

While that feeling that learning new skills to stay relevant can be stressful, agency sources believe that older employees are just as capable as young employees when it comes to figuring out new platforms. “Gen Xers have used and adopted every digital do-hickey from Friendster to Napster to



Myspace to Facebook to Twitter to Tumblr to Snapchat,” wrote Rooney. “Don’t tell us we were not digital natives. Just give us some time to master TikTok. We’ll get there eventually.”

A way forward

Given the size of the Baby Boomer generation, agency sources believe that the on-going conversation about ageism within advertising will enact change eventually. What that change will be is still yet to be determined. Agency sources believe that older agency employees shouldn’t simply be left wondering when or if they may experience ageism and be without a job but that there needs to be an on-going conversation about what the career path of older employees should be.

“Many people find themselves in a dark place and it’s difficult to know how to get out,” wrote La Scala Wood. “Young people are given all sorts of guidance and opportunities, as they should be. But I think the same needs to be done for older folks. This is new territory for most. They need help navigating. They need opportunities.”



What that opportunity looks like may simply be different than a full-time agency job with a high paying salary. While employees may initially balk at the idea of reevaluating what their role within an agency is, Temple Rocks believes that older agency employees may start to be open to rethinking their roles rather than being out of a job or stuck searching for one that may not pay nearly what they were making previously. Others may find work elsewhere, rather than working at an agency finding brands who are moving services in-house may be a benefit older generations of agency employees, according to Delana, adding that some brands will pay higher salaries for seasoned creatives instead of contracting agencies ultimately saving money.

Whatever the next step is in employment for older agency employees, helping each other through it is not only necessary but can make the search for work less painful, according to Rooney. “It is tough out there,” wrote Rooney. “There is a massive sea-change sweeping through our industry and there are many, many talented people out there who are under-appreciated and underemployed. During my stint, there were many people who sent me a text just to see how I was doing, shared their list of recruiters, recommended me to a colleague, returned an email promptly, or, and this is a big one, met me for a coffee or a drink to talk shop.”

Chris Thilk is a freelance writer for Adweek, where this reporter previously worked from March 2014 to April 2019.

<https://digiday.com/marketing/not-easy-get-job-past-40-ageism-agencies-affects-older-employees/>

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