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Ageism-Induced Anxiety of Job Seekers Aged 50-83: Preliminary Findings from a Phenomenological Case Study Problem of Practice Dissertation

Nadine E. Franz
Baylor University
nadine_franz1@baylor.edu

Nicholas R. Werse
Baylor University
nick_werse@baylor.edu

Tony L. Talbert
Baylor University
tony_talbert@baylor.edu

ABSTRACT

Ageism in today's job market has a range of detrimental emotional, psychological, and economic impacts on older job seekers aged 50-83. Even as such job seekers "de-age" their professional documents and online profiles, they still navigate misperceptions about older workers that disadvantage them in the recruitment and hiring process. While anecdotal evidence raises concerns about older job seekers' equitable access to employment, empirical evidence documenting the impacts of ageism on this population remains limited, thus impeding the efficacy of their support systems. This article reports on progress from the qualitative case study that I designed for my CPED-informed Problem of Practice Dissertation that captured data from 30 job seekers, aged 50-83, through one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires. This article offers preliminary findings from this research, documenting the negative financial, emotional, psychological, and physical effects of navigating persistent ageism for older job seekers.

KEYWORDS

ageism, age discrimination, employment, job search, ADEA

Job seekers aged 50 and older are a rapidly growing sector of the U.S. labor force (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Many older job seekers are healthier than their predecessors, passionate about their careers, and seek long-term professional growth (Heisler & Bandow, 2018). This dedication to their occupations influences their desire to remain in the workforce indeterminately (Heisler & Bandow, 2018), yet many older Americans encounter ageist assumptions and hiring practices during job searches and career advancement pursuits (Barrington, 2015; Veldon, 2013). Even as reports document growing trends of ageism and ageist tendencies in the workplace and job market environments (e.g., U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018), the implications of consistently navigating such ageist environments remain underexplored. The construction of effective support systems for these older job seekers, however, depends upon a robust understanding of how older job seekers identify, internalize, and respond to ageism in their job searches and career advancement pursuits.

My awareness of this problem arose from my almost 20 years of experience in the Human Resources (HR) and recruiting field, including ten years of experience working as a career coach and HR consultant with job seekers aged 40 and older. These clients, particularly those aged 50 and older, consistently expressed negative experiences and concerns about ageism. Many of them believed that their struggle with ageism became more pronounced as they progressed in age. It was disheartening to hear my clients talk about the depression, anxiety, fear, frustration, and anger they felt as ageism victims. These recurring client conversations and coaching sessions over ten years heightened my awareness and commitment to addressing the issue of ageism. I began to assist my clients with de-aging their resumes, LinkedIn profiles, interview skills, social media profiles, interview strategies, and physical appearances through image consulting to ensure a more youthful appeal that fostered job search success. Although I designed these practices to help my clients circumvent select ways in which ageism may negatively affect their job searches, this experience fueled my passion to advocate for a broader social and cultural change in Human Resources management and job placement firms to begin addressing the often-unrecognized ageist assumptions within these industries.

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I chose to pursue an EdD in Learning and Organizational Change because of how much the principles of andragogy informed and enriched my approach to career coaching with my clients. This practitioner-focused degree, furthermore, allowed me to both conduct practitioner-based research to better understand the experiences of my clients and the nature of the broader problem of ageism that they continually navigate. As such, my Problem of Practice Dissertation embodies the six CPED principles that guide the "Professional Practice Doctorate" (Perry, 2013, p. 116). First, as stated in the first CPED principle, this Problem of Practice research focuses on a core issue of "equity, ethics, and social justice" (Perry, 2013, p. 118) to address a complex problem of ageism in the job market. The worldview through which I conduct this research is deeply shaped by the Critical Theory approach, reflecting my passion for and commitment to ensuring fairness and equity to marginalized employees. This Critical Theory lens enables me to advocate for the voiceless. Second, the journey toward this Problem of Practice research began with my personal commitment to hone the research and educational skills needed both to improve the experiences of my clients and to affect the broader industry. Third, this research process has led to collaboration with numerous scholars across institutional lines as I honed the precision with which I examined the problem of ageism in job market searches and the methods used to disseminate my findings to impact market practices. Fourth, while drawing upon academic social science research methodologies, I conducted this research as a "field-based" attempt to "analyze problems of practice" (Perry, 2013, p. 118). Fifth, I draw upon and contribute to both "practical and research knowledge" (Perry, 2013, p. 118) on aging, ageism, and the job search process. Finally, in keeping with the sixth CPED principle that emphasizes "the generation, transformation, and use of professional knowledge and practice" (Perry, 2013, p. 118), I desire to conduct research that raises awareness of the injustices that employees and job seekers face while informing organizational leaders on changes necessary to improve the employee experience within the recruiting process and the workplace.

To address this need in professional practice, I constructed a phenomenological case study for my Problem of Practice Dissertation that collected data from 30 job seekers age 50-83 through questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups. This study explored the experiences of these job seekers throughout their job search processes and the anxiety-inducing effects of navigating explicit and implicit manifestations of ageism while on the job market. While the findings have the potential to inform both corporate and governmental policy changes to minimize the impact of ageist hiring practices on older job seekers, the data additionally revealed the urgent need to construct emotional and psychological support services for job seekers age 50-83 who regularly navigate the experience of ageism while on the job market. The following article, therefore, proceeds in three parts. First, I examine the past scholarship that identified ageist hiring trends, noting the absence of job seeker voices concerning their identifications of and response to these practices. Second, I present the research design and methodology that I developed to capture the experiences of job seekers aged 50-83 as they identify and respond to ageism on the job market. Third, I provide a preliminary report on the study's findings. Finally, I conclude with three data-informed recommendations for changes in industry practice based on the findings.

These research findings have the potential to inform HR and recruiting leaders as they develop and implement non-ageist hiring and HR practices. I hope that these research findings foster deep reflections within organizations that drive organizational change that results in the recruiting, hiring, and retention of older workers. My goal is to educate hiring decision-makers on the value that older workers offer and the importance of including older workers' needs in their overall diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

AGEISM ON THE JOB MARKET: EVIDENCE OF A PROBLEM IN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Ageism, also known as age discrimination, is the injurious treatment of individuals based exclusively on their ages. Gerontologist Robert Neil Butler introduced the term in 1969, identifying age discrimination as a premeditated classification and prejudicial treatment of older persons. He notes the prevalence of ageism throughout the job search process for older career seekers (Rippon et al., 2014). Consequently, older job seekers face a complex web of interconnected misperceptions about older workers that propagate bias against them when they become unemployed (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019).

Although federal regulations prohibit discrimination against older workers on account of their age, the data identify substantive evidence of ageist biases and practices that disadvantage older workers seeking new employment and career advancements. The parallel between age and the reemployment of older workers reveals a detachment between current recruiting policies and legislation since the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) administered the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 (ADEA). Considering the subsequently growing concerns over age-based employment discrimination, Congress later updated the ADEA in 1990 with The Older Workers Benefit Protection Act (OWBPA) (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). The OWBPA formally shelters employees over the age of 40 from specifically defined age-related workplace discrimination (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). However, scholarship on the topic demonstrates that ageism remains a spiraling problem in current employment recruitment and hiring processes. Several scholars conclude that companies use ageist employment practices to exclude older job seekers from applying for positions (Barrington, 2015; Grossman, 2013; Hujsak, 2015; Lesonsky, 2017). Such practices can range from youth-oriented job description language to more explicit decisions made in the recruitment process (Lahey, 2005). One study found that 64% of respondents age 45-74 experienced some form of workplace ageism (Grossman, 2013). These findings complement earlier studies that conclude that employers were more likely to respond to the applications of younger candidates (Lahey, 2005) and that identify ageism as one of the fastest-growing types of workplace discrimination cases (Gibson et al., 2010). Older workers discover that, notwithstanding the presence of laws to protect them, employers wield inventive ways to inflict age discrimination without accountability (Gibson et al., 2010). Despite labor laws that protect older workers, many organizations impose prejudicial attitudes towards older workers (Gibson et al., 2010).

Past scholarship links three common misperceptions or "myths" about older workers that can make employers hesitant to hire them (Gibson et al., 2010; Koeber & Wright, 2001; Malinen & Johnston,

2013). First, a recent report by the U. S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018) suggests that some employers are circumspect of employing older individuals for fear that they are overly expensive. Second, employers are also hesitant to hire older job seekers for fear that they may soon retire (Malinen & Johnston, 2013). Third, employers fear that older workers are physically less capable or skilled to accomplish the job for which they apply (Stark, 2009). The implications of these myths take many forms, including damaging attitudes, inequitable practices, and direct and indirect established stratagems that prolong these stereotypical views (Malinen & Johnston, 2013). While these myths remain influential factors in hiring-related decisions, they remain difficult to prove. In fact, Malinen and Johnston (2013) cite examples of studies in which older workers outperformed their younger counterparts.

These job market conditions, naturally, result in older workers experiencing longer periods of unemployment. The evidence reveals a correlation between age and reemployment status, noting that job seekers over the age of 50 faced greater reemployment challenges (Wanberg et al., 2016). The U.S. Department of Labor (2018) statistics demonstrated that job seekers over the age of 55 spent an average of nearly 25 more weeks in the job search process than those under the age of 55. These longer periods of unemployment negatively affect job seekers over the age of 55 who risk losing motivation as they accumulate larger gaps in their employment history that further disadvantage them on the job market (Ahn & Song, 2017).

The experience of ageism in the job search process, therefore, leads to several harmful implications for older job seekers. In addition to the economic strain caused by these periods of unemployment (Clark, 2012; Mandal et al., 2011), older job seekers report negative psychological and emotional experiences, such as employment-related anxiety, self-doubt, despair, and other health issues (Lyons et al., 2014; Mandal et al., 2011). Older job seekers likewise experience job-loss depression, especially after the unexpected termination of their employment (Mandal et al., 2011).

To combat the experience of ageism during the hiring process, many older job seekers implement de-aging strategies to rebrand themselves to avoid encountering ageism on the job market. These older job seekers are aware that their perceived older appearance will negatively affect their interview standings (Lyons et al., 2014). The identity management tactics may comprise de-aging employment marketing documents, coloring gray hairs, assuming a youthful wardrobe, and using technical and trendy language. Older employees apathetically transform into an altered identity that begets employment prospects (Lyons et al., 2014).

Veldon (2013) advocates for detecting and confronting inequitable employment policy-level and statutory improprieties to curtail ageism in the job search process. Pursuant to the research, prevailing legislative armors remain insubstantial for shielding and championing older job seekers. Correspondingly, Veldon (2013) avouches that organizational and governmental amenableness for the nullification of workplace ageism ameliorates organizations and older workers alike. Regulatory acquiescence and principled culpability on the part of organizations forestall prejudiced and ageist employment policies that occlude employment possibilities for older job seekers.

While the data suggest that ageism remains a prominent problem for older job seekers, one of the challenges to studying the impact of ageism on this demographic is the difficulty they have linking their lack of success on the job market as individuals to larger trends of age-based discrimination. Ageist staffing approaches are habitually veiled and become difficult for job seekers to identify (Stypinska & Turek, 2017). This veil makes it difficult for older workers to identify clear transgressions of their rights during the recruitment process and to link these transgressions with larger trends experienced by older workers on the job market (Malinen & Johnston, 2013). This veil could leave older job seekers uncertain whether their lack of success derives from their age or other factors such as a lack of qualifications.

In conclusion, while substantive data suggest that older workers experience age-based discrimination when searching for reemployment and career advancement opportunities, scholarship concerning how older workers identify and experience ageism as well as the impact that it has on their well-being remains limited (Grossman, 2013; Powell, 2010; Roscigno, 2010; Veldon, 2013). The pursuit of research on this problem in professional practice, therefore, has implications for not only policymakers but also for the professionals who support older job seekers throughout the job search process. To address this problem and to contribute to the on-going study of ageism, I conducted a phenomenological case study to gather data from 30 job seekers age 50-83 concerning the impact that their experiences with ageism on the job market had on their well-being.

DATA COLLECTION AND ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES

This phenomenological case study examines how job seekers age 50-83 identify ageism in their job search experiences and the impact it has on them throughout the job search process. The findings from this study potentially inform companies concerning the negative impacts of prejudicial recruiting and hiring practices on job seekers aged 50-83 as well as ways in which they may exclude older job seekers, regardless of intentionality. This study gives voice to the collective experiences of older job seekers concerning ageism's role in obstructing employment prospects. To accomplish this purpose, this study answers five research questions:

1. How do job seekers aged 50-83 identify and describe the anxiety triggered by ageism while job hunting in the United States?
2. What are the perceptions, attitudes, and lived experiences among persons aged 50-83 about anxiety-inducing experiences when involved in the job search process?
3. What are the perceptions, attitudes, and lived experiences among persons aged 50-83 about the specific measures to take to overcome age-related biases during the job search process?
4. What are the perceptions, attitudes, and lived experiences among persons aged 50-83 about gaining or not gaining employment when taking specific measures to overcome age-related biases?
5. What are the perceptions and attitudes among persons aged 50-83 about how they experience the impacts of age-related biases based on race, ethnicity, gender, and other similar factors?

Data Collection & Analysis

The phenomenological case study is the optimum research design for this study on the effects of ageism on employment candidates aged 50-83. I employed snowball sampling and purposive criteria-based sampling to select participants (following Creswell & Clark, 2018; Naderifar et al., 2017; Patton, 2014). I first identified 30 job seekers aged 50–83 from my client database of job seekers and their referrals. I then utilized purposive criteria-based sampling (following Creswell & Clark, 2018; Naderifar et al., 2017; Patton, 2014) to identify participants who were over the age of 50, have engaged within the last two years or are currently engaged in an active job search, and lived within the United States. This sampling strategy ensured the collection of participants linked by their mutual lived experiences of a studied phenomenon (following the methodological guidance of van Manen, 2014) rather than a physical research site (as noted in Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study, therefore, included geographical, racial, and gender diversity. I solicited participants across all racial backgrounds, yet only Black and White job seekers responded.

The data collection process consisted of four steps that gathered data in different ways to ensure the reliability of the study's findings. First, I interviewed participants using comprehensive semi-structured interview questions to afford a non-judgmental haven for them to express their experiences with ageism in the job search and any associated emotions (Yin, 2013). Conducting these thorough interviews allowed me to decode parallels and variances across the participant experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, I gathered 18 participants into six focus groups of two to four participants each. I used key themes from the interview data to guide the focus group conversation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus group conversations allowed me to further explore the parallels and variances across the participant experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this process, I observed how the participants connected their individual experiences on the job market with emerging trends across the participant experiences. Third, I appraised archival information (Creswell & Poth, 2018) from three of the participants' online job applications to identify evidence of the experiences and awareness of ageism during employment searches. Supplementary archival data, including online employment vacancies and job specifications, complemented the online application data information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Fourth, the participants completed a questionnaire containing structured, semi-structured, and unstructured questions that provided accompanying evidence to ensure the assemblage of far-reaching answers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Collecting data from multiple sources using these four data collection strategies allowed for data triangulation, thereby ensuring the validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of the research (Yin, 2013).

Data analysis procedures took place between each of these four phases in the data collection process. Between each stage, I performed open, axial, and selective coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process allowed me to identify themes and categories across the participant experiences and across the phases of data collection. I thoroughly arranged the data to prevent vagueness and misperception during the analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I employed direct interpretation to clarify the data analysis, recognize an isolated occurrence, and determine meaning and significance without categorizing various instances (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I then compared key themes in light of the race, gender, industry, geography, education, and age of the participants.

While constructing this phenomenological case study, I took care to establish trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) in all stages of the research process. Applying the *a priori* lens of Critical Theory, I implemented a three-staged qualitative data analysis protocol involving pattern matching within case framework analysis and across case framework analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this rigorous qualitative data analysis protocol, I triangulated (Denzin, 2007) the data, thereby verifying the interpretation and understanding of the findings (Miles et al., 2020). Critical Theory provided a lens for capturing the experiences of older job seekers while considering the relationship between individual experiences and the power of organizations and institutionalized systems (Dejours et al., 2018; Horkheimer & O'Connell, 1972). Critical Theory provided a foundation for advocating for social change within corporate systems. I, therefore, operated with both a constructivist worldview (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and a transformative worldview (Mertens, 2009) as I strove to empower the voices of older job seekers while advocating for social change.

Throughout this process of conducting research using past clients from my professional practice, I intentionally adopted a scholarly-practitioner positionality as one conducting research grounded in my professional context. I began this study both with a preexisting sense of the challenges that older job seekers face because of my professional experience as a Certified Professional Career Coach and with preexisting professional relationships with the study participants. My nearly twenty years of experience as a human resource consultant and career coach provided a robust assortment of professional experiences that shaped my perspective and positionality.

This "insider status" and substantive experience observing the phenomenon of ageism in professional practice not only inspired this research but also raised the important issue of the study's limitations and ethical considerations (Smith et al., 2020). I designed the study to achieve credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Furthermore, I crafted the study to prioritize my ethical convictions as both a researcher and industry practitioner, by following the IRB regulations, acquiring informed consent, and obscuring the participants' identities to ensure their confidentiality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

This study's findings, therefore, contained two limitations and two delimitations (on limitations and delimitations see Creswell & Creswell, 2018). My extensive human resource background, which informed my preexisting sentiments, mindset, and concerns for ageism, presents the first possible limitation. My experiences with the phenomenon under consideration shaped my emic view on ageism. While such experience may allow for bias, I used the above-mentioned research methodologies to conduct fair and accurate data collection and assessment processes. The second limitation was that the data collection relied exclusively upon the participant reports of their experiences. My inability to observe job seekers during interviews prevented me from verifying their interview experiences. The first delimitation of the study was my close association with some of the participants. This familiarity developed between the participants and me possibly allowed for participant bias in which the participants may engorge experiences to garner compassion. Second, my exclusion from the participant's routine job search activities is delimiting since the candidate applies for jobs online and

interview independently. These limitations and delimitations posed latent threats to the breadth of implications and informed recommendations drawn from the study's findings to inform changes in professional practice. I assiduously conducted ethical research and reporting that assures credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

DISCUSSION OF PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The participants reported remarkably consistent experiences with ageism, regardless of gender, industry, age, and race. The participants were highly educated, poised, and anxious to work. All were at the top of their fields and revealed a great deal of professionalism, efficacy, and exceptional skills and knowledge. Twenty-eight participants held college degrees, one held an MD, and one held a Ph.D. The participants represented sales, marketing, medicine, academia, and other industries, having served in both the for-profit and non-profit sectors for an average of 25 to 30 years.

The participants collectively submitted close to 2,000 resumes and job applications with little success in receiving responses or interviews. Those who interviewed typically felt the meetings went well, only to receive rejections afterward. All of the participants are still job-hunting as of this publication, and none have reported gaining employment. The length of unemployment ranged from two months to five years, with an average unemployment length of 18 months. All thirty expressed that companies are losing out on the loyalty, maturity, experiences, dedication, work ethic, and common sense that older job seekers offer the workplace. In my opinion, all thirty job seekers would be hired much quicker if ageism were not a factor.

While the participants were very candid in their one-on-one interviews, the focus group interactions were exceedingly beneficial because they created a community where the participants commiserated on the shared experiences. The open communication elicited further insights, and the participants bonded over their shared anguish and wonderment at how ageism profoundly impacted their lives. The participants were relieved to see that their individual experiences were part of larger trends experienced by others. The participants supported each other and offered insights to each other in a non-threatening way. The focus group gave participants a chance to vent their frustrations while encouraging each other to persevere.

The comparison of participant experiences across gender and race yielded few differences. Black participants reported that race likely played a role in addition to ageism in their pervasive job search rejections. In general, women handled the employment rejection easier than men in terms of how they processed their new normal. In the following discussion, I focus on three findings that emerged from the data analysis process: that participants tended to identify ageism in the same two parts of the job-search process, that participants experienced shockingly harmful outcomes because of prolonged exposure to ageism during the job search process, and that participants tended to use four strategies to avoid encountering ageism during the job search process.

Perceiving Ageism in Two Places

The research revealed that the study participants almost unanimously believed that ageism was a significant deterrent in the job search process. Twenty-eight of the 30 participants indicated that ageism has negatively impacted their job search results. When asked for specific examples, the participants predominantly identified evidence of ageism in two places: the interview process and the job descriptions. First, the participants who received interviews overwhelmingly described their interviewers as younger than them with an average age range of mid-twenties to mid-thirties. According to most participants, this age discrepancy posed a problem as younger, inexperienced people made hiring decisions to reject people they believed to be too old to contribute to the workforce's knowledge and expertise.

The second place where the participants identified signs of ageism in the hiring process was in the wording of job descriptions. All but one of these job descriptions mentioned age as a protected status. Many job seekers noted that the job descriptions they often encountered requested applicants with five years of relevant experience. The participants reported that this language alienated those with substantive more experience (such as 25-years), raising concerns that employers could exclude them for far exceeding this target level of experience. My review of numerous job boards, job aggregators, and job descriptions confirmed that ageist language is inconspicuous and widespread. In my review of job postings for this study, I found no postings acknowledging experience levels beyond ten years. By focusing on candidates with five to ten years, these postings assume job seekers are in their mid-twenties to early-forties.

The Negative Impacts of Prolonged Exposure to Ageism in the Job Search

In addition to identifying concrete examples of ageism in the same two parts of the job search process, the participants reported remarkably troubling effects that the prolonged exposure to ageism in the job search process has had on their well-being. I categorized these implications into two types of effects: emotional and psychological effects as well as social or environmental effects. First, the interviews, focus groups, and the survey revealed that the pervasive experience of ageism in the job-search process had severely harmful emotional and psychological effects on the participants. While some participants remained reserved throughout the data collection process, most revealed deep pain and disappointment. Participants commonly described their feelings using the terms "depressed," "anxious," "disappointed," "rejected," "unwanted," "defeated," "sad," "angry," and "hopeless." Job seekers felt miscategorized, misunderstood, and relegated to a lack of opportunities because they were deemed "too old." Some job seekers even described a feeling of expulsion from the labor market. Many expressed that they felt things got worse as they aged, and some discussed the drastic differences they noticed as they transitioned from their forties to fifties. Many felt hopeless because of the unfair discrimination they faced based only on age. Most suffered self-doubt due to uncertainty of what they can do to convince employers of their value in the workplace. While most participants described heightened anxiety and mental health impacts, a few even sought professional counseling to cope with the emotional and psychological impacts of the job search process.

Second, many participants described ways in which the persistent experience of ageism in the job search process led to unanticipated negative ramifications on their social lives and living environments. These effects most often took the form of the negative financial implications of extended periods of unemployment on their

lifestyles and families. Some had dire financial situations due to long-term unemployment. About half of the participants expressed that they needed to work to avoid serious financial consequences. Many expressed a fear of unemployment, living off savings, and entering a forced early retirement. One participant even experienced physical abuse from her spouse due to the financial strains attributed to her unemployment. Those close to retirement age reported feeling forced into retirement when they still had much more to offer the workforce. Those further from retirement worried about their futures, deemed full of uncertainty and rejection.

Strategies for Avoiding Ageism in the Job Search Process

Since the participants overwhelmingly reported that ageism posed a persistent obstacle to their job search endeavors, many described various strategies they used to avoid encountering ageism in the job search process. I group these strategies into four broad approaches to overcoming and circumventing the ageism they met in the job search process. First, some participants described seeking to bolster their credentials through pursuing additional certifications and training in hopes of circumventing age discrimination. Second and more commonly, many participants expressed a need to play-up their youthfulness to convince employers of their vibrance. The participants discussed several steps they took to "de-age" themselves, such as coloring gray hairs, dressing younger, exercising, losing weight, removing older employment from their resumes, using special lighting on Zoom to add a more youthful glow, and removing LinkedIn photos to make it more difficult for employers to identify their ages. Third, some participants whose industries and experiences allow for contract work entertained the possibility of becoming self-employed. Finally, the participants who were closer to retirement expressed greater inclinations to quit their job searches and retire early.

Conclusion

In conclusion, job seekers aged 50-83 overwhelmingly identified ageism as an obstacle to their pursuits of new employment prospects. Perhaps one of the most important findings of this case study is not simply the existence of persistent ageism in the experiences of job seekers age 50-83 but the remarkably harmful and even dangerous effects it can have in people's lives. The persistent experience of ageism throughout the job search process has far-reaching negative implications for their emotional, psychological, and physiological well-being. It can have disastrous results for their finances, families, and other aspects of their lives. These job seekers have developed numerous strategies for circumventing ageism with only minimal success. It is imperative to divulge the lived experiences of job seekers aged 50-83 as they deal with ageism to spotlight the harsh treatment of job seekers aged 50-83 while spearheading transformations to eliminate prejudicial employment trends nationwide.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDUSTRY PRACTICE

This Problem of Practice research aims not only to illuminate an under-researched area of inquiry but also to recommend data-informed changes in industry practice (Hoffman & Perry, 2016; Jones, 2016). Specifically, these findings have implications for senior human resource leaders as well as for diversity and inclusion officers concerning the harsh realities and experiences of older job seekers during the job search process. The following discussion, therefore, provides three data-informed recommendations for industry practice to address the problem of ageism in the job search process.

The first data-informed recommendation for change in industry practice concerns how employers present themselves and their employment opportunities on job postings. Employers can make three simple changes to their company documents and job postings to be more inviting to older applicants. First, organizations can write job descriptions that use age-inclusive language that invites older job seekers to apply as serious contenders. Rather than requesting a minimum amount of experience—which can come across as excluding applicants with substantively more experience—employers can request applications with an experience range of "up to and beyond 30 years." Such language intentionally includes career-long industry veterans who bring a wealth of experience to an organization. Second, job descriptions should avoid language that often plays into youth stereotypes, such as "seeking high-energy employees" or "must be tech-savvy." Coding job descriptions with stereotypical "youth" language may dissuade older job seekers from applying, even when they bring decades of experience of evolving and growing with industry technology. Third, companies can revise their EEOC notice on their websites and applications to include "age" as a protected class.

The second data-informed recommendation for change in industry practice concerns the need to include anti-ageist efforts into preexisting Diversity and Inclusion initiatives in the workplace. Many companies tout Diversity and Inclusion—also called Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion—as part of their overall human resource focus, yet typically exclude older workers as a protected class. Such initiatives lead to not only a more equitable and inclusive workplace but also to more equitable and inclusive hiring practices (Friedman et al., 2016). Powell (2010) explained that with the older population's rapid growth, increasing numbers of them desire career continuation and development. Given the pervasiveness of ageist experiences identified among job seekers age 50-83, Diversity and Inclusion initiatives should include anti-ageist hiring and retention strategies. The lack of intentional focus on age among equity and inclusion initiatives could unfairly exclude a large and vital part of society. The workforce benefits from a diverse talent pool, including employees of all ages, races, sexual orientations, gender identities, national origins, religious backgrounds, national origins, and other protected classes.

One of the goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives is to create a workforce reflective of larger society. To achieve this outcome for older workers, human resource leaders must implement a comprehensive anti-ageism plan that includes: anti-ageist recruitment strategies and practices; anti-ageism training for employees; training and development for older workers; career planning and succession planning that provides for older workers; support and mentoring that targets age-related employment concerns; and retirement preparation and support for those who seek assistance.

The third data-informed recommendation for a change in industry practice concerns protocols for executing "reduction in force" (RIF) initiatives. The participants revealed that they often felt targeted during RIF initiatives that sought to quickly reduce a company's expenses. Companies must implement RIF policies that

protect older employees, ensuring that such initiatives—when necessary—are equally dispersed and do not result in higher layoffs for older employees.

It is wise for companies to make concerted efforts to prioritize addressing ageism before ageism becomes a hashtag. Diversity and Inclusion programs often feel reactionary to workforce issues, a band-aid that companies prioritize when the need arises for righting wrongs. When it comes to ageism, companies with existing Diversity and Inclusion policies can evaluate and update their plans to include older workers. Organizations without Diversity and Inclusion initiatives should now complete the meaningful work of creating Diversity and Inclusion strategies that promote and represent fairness, impartiality, and inclusion. These policies can then guide not only company culture but also recruitment and hiring procedures. Aging is inescapable, so organizations must recognize this fact and create fair and equitable employment solutions to address an aging workforce's predestined needs.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from this research that older workers are ready, willing, and able to contribute to the workforce. Yet, many experience obstacles and rejections due to ageism within the job search process. While the veiled nature of ageism has made it difficult to identify and rectify, through the careful alignment of data collection methods to triangulate the findings, this study reveals the pervasive nature of ageism as well as where older job seekers identify it in the job search process, strategies they employ for overcoming it, and the dangerous toll it takes on them. In addition to the financial consequences of extended periods of unemployment, job seekers aged 50–83 in this study reported a range of negative emotional, psychological, and even physical implications of experiencing ageism during the job search process. This discrimination alienates older job seekers from the workforce and creates additional issues that companies fail to consider. The aging workforce's financial, social, and emotional needs do not fade with age, and neither should the potential for earning a living.

This mistreatment of older job seekers yields disastrous results when companies prevent them from contributing their immense expertise and knowledge. Older job seekers face continuous roadblocks as they forcibly exit the workforce to employment exile. This talent eviction harms older job seekers and deprives employers of the experience they bring, resulting in a workforce "brain drain" of valuable skills and knowledge honed by on-the-job experience.

The gross maltreatment of older job seekers exasperates me. It is unimaginable that ageism is a problem in 2021. My worldview and positionality that is profoundly entrenched in Critical Theory fuels my passion, drive, and commitment to exposing the problem of ageism through scholarly research and practical fieldwork with clients. I am fervent about and devoted to safeguarding fairness and equity to disregarded older employees. I am relentless in my desire to bring awareness to ageism's atrocities and its impact on older workers and job seekers. The Critical Theory approach guides me in the development of a voice of advocacy as I strive to empower the voices of older job seekers.

By applying the precision of academic research methodologies in the social sciences to the experience of ageism in the job search process, this Problem of Practice Dissertation uncovered numerous findings of value to both academic research and industry practice. While these findings have the potential to advance the scholarly study of aging in modern United States society, my positionality shaped by decades of industry service led me to bring the implications of these findings to bear on employment advertising, recruiting, and hiring practices. The next step in this process of affecting industry change, therefore, involves the creation of sample policies and training materials to help interested employers begin the process of creating a more aging-friendly company culture and hiring practices.

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