

Tension makes for fertile bullying ground

By DONALEE MOULTON

There is no generation gap when it comes to bullying. New research indicates both younger and older workers are being bullied in the workplace.

According to the most recent survey from the Workplace Bullying Institute in Bellingham, Washington, 39 per cent of workers 50 to 64 years old are currently or have been bullied. For 18 to 29 year olds, the figure is remarkably similar: 36 per cent.

The numbers are not surprising especially given the current economic landscape. "Competition is escalating so there is more tension at work. There is more likelihood of misunderstanding as values of different generations collide in the workplace," said Karim Jamal, an accounting professor at the University of Alberta's School of Business in Edmonton.

"We do see bullying," said Barbara Jaworski, chief executive officer of the Workplace Institute, a talent management firm, in Toronto. "People feel very strongly when they're trying to get ahead. Organizations need to look at their workplace culture."

That culture needs to foster an understanding of the problems faced by older and younger workers. The former may be less driven to get ahead, said Jaworski. "This lack of drive may lead some others to be dismissive."

There is also a tendency, she said, to question the cognitive abilities of older workers, and this can permeate the thinking of the entire workforce. "It can be very subtle, and a workplace can begin to discriminate against older workers."

Even the individuals themselves may start to believe what they're hearing, Jaworski noted. "Older workers begin to internalize what is said about them — for example, that they should retire, that they're not as astute."

Company policies may reinforce this impression. "Public accounting firms now require all their partners to retire at 60 or even at 55. Most pension plans are set up to provide significant financial inducement to retire at 55," said Jamal.

The reality is that the proficiency and insight older workers bring to the job are important, said Mike Gooley, regional vice-president of Robert Half International, a staffing firm in



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Toronto. "Companies are looking for professionals with specialized skills who can hit the ground running without a lot of preparation or training, so someone with outstanding experience is definitely attractive."

Older individuals looking for work, he added, should emphasize their experience. "Professionals should highlight relevant accomplishments in the resume — as well as include any certifications or other designations that reinforce their commitment to continuous learning. During interviews, professionals should discuss how they stay up to date on industry trends."

Younger workers would do well to be a little more deferential.

Baby Boomers, those workers born between 1946 and 1964, are expected to be around for a while yet, often in senior management positions.

"With the repeal of mandatory retirement, older workers are staying on the job longer," said Jaworski.

Indeed, said Chuck Underwood, founder of The Generational Imperative, Inc., a consulting firm based in Miamisburg, Ohio, "Boomers are going to remain in the workplace long beyond traditional retirement age. And modern science and medicine, along with Boomers' own enthusiasm for working ... will enable them to work to a later age than any gener-

ation in the history of the planet."

Younger workers face a different array of discriminatory challenges than their older co-workers. Paramount among those is being disregarded because of presumed lack of skill. "Having some experience and grey hair always helps to get taken more seriously," said Jamal.

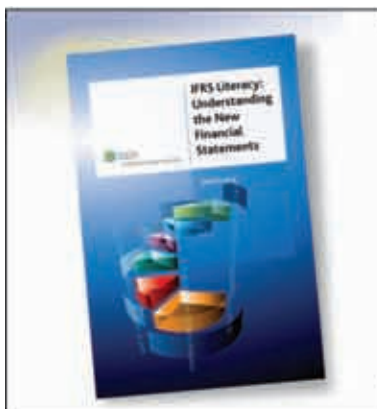
"It's difficult for younger people to be taken seriously and to have the opportunity to show their skill," agreed Jaworski. "Part of this is lack of confidence and part of this is ... thinking that young people may not have the judgment."

And they don't, said Underwood. "Youth does equal inexperience, doesn't it? This is an unavoidable reality. So, younger generations shouldn't waste their thinking on their own inexperience. They should acknowledge it and demonstrate a desire to learn from their more experienced elders, while contributing new ideas to the firm and client whenever they can.

"If young accountants demonstrate the proper work ethic, loyalty, ethics, and willingness to learn, their supervisors are almost certain to give them the respect and recognition they deserve," he added.

Ultimately, said Gooley,

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Older, younger stung by preconceptions



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“respect is based on performance and attitude, not age. The most important criteria for most employers and employees is working with people they get along with and who have a strong work ethic.”

The country’s young people haven’t demonstrated this commitment, Underwood said. “Canada’s younger adults, as is the case in the U.S., have tended to be more frequent job-hoppers than the older generations. And many of them entered adulthood with a some-

times flawed sense of entitlement. When employers and clients encounter this, their negative perception has less to do with age than with attitude.”

If companies are concerned that younger people aren’t being given the respect they are due,

there are options, noted Jamal. “Clearly promoting young people fast (with a formal title) and assigning them distinguished mentors helps to solidify their standing and overcome doubts about their youth and inexperience.”

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Chuck Underwood, The Generational Imperative

firm’s confidence in their own employees, said Underwood. “A client wants his accounting to be handled by skilled and experienced accountants. Refined, well thought out coaching, mentoring, and veteran/newbie buddy programs within a firm, along with executives’ explicit support of those newbies... will create a client willingness to work with younger workers.

“But if the firm’s executives are not giving respect to younger employees, it’s nearly impossible for the client to ever do so,” he stressed. “Executives must hire well, train new hires thoroughly, and then back them in front of the client. This can be demonstrated in direct communications with the clients as well as in marketing collaterals.”

“Many companies are finding that multigenerational work teams are a real asset, in that getting groups together of different ages



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JAMAL

and experience levels helps them develop better products and services,” said Gooley.

“In fact, 43 per cent of employees polled by Robert Half said the greatest benefit of working with multiple generations is bringing together people of various experience levels to provide expertise on projects.”

If this common ground is not created through training and other programs, there will be divisiveness and dissension within the ranks at all ages. “Without this training, problems within multigenerational workforces are quite likely to escalate and ravage an organization. It’s that absolute,” said Underwood.

“For these same reasons, workforce bullying will either diminish or escalate, depending upon how generationally trained and enlightened each workplace happens to be.”