

Massachusetts Senior Workers Struggle with Workplace Discrimination

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When Joanne Meyer, 53, finally decided to pursue a career that would guarantee more stable pay and schedule, she didn't foresee that over the next year she would be seeing a lot of doors slammed in her face.

"It's scary," said Meyer, who now works for [Spaulding Outpatient Center Wellesley](#). "I got to the point at one time where I was begging. I don't care what I do, I'll sweep the floors. Just give me a chance. I even remember saying, could somebody let me come and just work for free for a week."

The lack of trust Meyer encountered in her job search because of her age is not unusual. In the past three years, age discrimination remains the [fifth most common](#) component for filing a complaint to Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination, approximately 11 percent, higher than national origin and sexual orientation.

Yet, with [only 3 percent](#) of people who have encountered age discrimination reporting they chose to file a complaint, the phenomenon might be much more commonplace than the MCAD data indicated.

In fact, [61 percent](#) of the respondents of an AARP survey in 2017 reported they've witnessed or encountered workplace age discrimination, including barriers to job opportunities and negative remarks from their co-workers or bosses.

It's not easier for workers looking for a job within their own field.

Jeff Landis, 60, has spent more than 30 years in media relations. He was unemployed for around a year before accepting his current position with Metro Housing Boston as the communications manager. His former employer downsized and eliminated his position, only keeping an associate position for the same work.

Despite knowledge from previous job searches, huge investments in networking and targeting only suitable positions, Landis didn't get chosen, even when he secured final in-person interviews after excellent phone conversations.

“When you get the bad news that you didn't get a job, you're always looking for reasons and explanations in your own mind,” Landis said. “And you're wondering, is it my age? And after a while, you start to believe that it must be my age.”

Age Bias is No Myth to Older Workers

In fact, [45 percent](#) of the respondents who were unemployed at the time they took the AARP national survey share the same pessimism. They saw age as the major reason why they couldn't locate a new job within three months, with another 22 percent seeing it as a minor reason.

In the [October data digest](#) by AARP Public Policy Institution, the national average duration of unemployment for the age group 45-54 and 55-64 are both one-third longer than the national average of 23.1 weeks for all workers above the age of 16. In the last nine years, with an improving economy, unemployment decreased in all age groups but workers ages 55-64 continue to be the group out of work the longest.

Despite laws in place on the state and federal level, it's hard to prove age is the sole reason behind a 55-year-old worker not getting the job, said Mark Gyurina, the chief program officer at [Operation ABLE](#), a non-profit organization specializing in providing job-seeking services and trainings to workers between jobs, especially seniors.

A Business Journal analysis found at least two in every three MCAD complaints have at least one component other than age among nearly 900 employment cases released to the public in the past three years.

“The laws are there but it's sometimes difficult to proceed, knowing whether that was the reason or not,” Gyurina said.

The bar was also raised by the Supreme Court's 2009 decision in Gross v. FBL Financial Services, said Susan Weinstock, vice president for financial resilience of AARP. The ruling requires age to be the only reason, instead of one of several reasons to hold employers responsible.

Among the cases out of investigation by MCAD, around 15 percent of complaints are filed against health care agencies such as hospitals, medical school or centers, and 10 percent of the complaints are filed against the education industry including schools, universities, academies or campuses, with Boston Medical Center being the employer with the most complaints investigated, with a total of six.

The friction for senior workers is a result of mixed factors, said Steve Taranto, the director of human resources of Massachusetts General Hospital, which is listed as an age-friendly employer by Operation A.B.L.E and works closely with senior workers. The factors include stereotypical beliefs, inability to recognize the transferable skills mature workers have, and concerns about salary needs.

The stereotypical beliefs that older workers cannot work in teams, are not good at technology, are not flexible nor good communicators, could be pervasive but usually not true, said Weinstock.

As salaries are tied with candidates' experience and skills for the job, Taranto said sometimes a mature worker was refused the job opportunity not because of age, but their years of experience makes the employer see them too costly to hire.

"Sometimes there's a perception that the person is an older worker and that they're going to want certain accommodations or certain types of salary," Taranto said.

He said the judgment is invalid unless employers engage in consideration of the individual. Given the skills the worker brings and the company budget, Taranto said if the worker has the right skills and experience, they should be credited and paid accordingly to the budget.

When companies encounter financial challenges, employers might consider substituting mature workers with younger associates who are less experienced to save on their budget, Taranto admitted, but the decision is usually a hard one.

"If an employer provides an incentive to a mature worker to retire, that employer needs to be very thoughtful about how will they replace the skill and experience," Taranto said.

With structural changes like this, Operation A.B.L.E's Gyurina said, mature workers are the first ones to get laid off because of their higher wages. Usually some younger workers are laid off at the same time, but they are able to locate the next job much faster, Gyurina said, leaving mature workers facing the bigger challenge.

"Sometimes they feel that the mature worker could retire and get on Social Security, is able to take care of themselves, and we don't have to worry too much about them, but that's not the case anymore," Gyurina said.

The amount of money that people are able to save through retirement funds and retirement savings are far less than before, he said. With longer life expectancy and rising expenses, financing retirement is much more difficult than before.

Beginners vs. Seniors

Massachusetts produces a huge new workforce every year with its numerous schools and colleges. However, MGH's Taranto does not see a conflict between offering opportunities to young graduates and maintaining senior workforce. Instead, he sees the practice would benefit both sides.

"I think of it as a circle," Taranto said. "If there are going to be initiatives to engage in encouraging high school students or younger college students to enter certain professions, it's essential that there is a deeply experienced person to help develop and grow the skills of the younger workforce."

Although company budgets determine overall staffing, the right mix of workforce ensuring a continuum and cycle of people in different stages of their career is more important to the productivity of the company, Taranto said.

As the state reaches a 50-year-low in unemployment rate with 2.9 percent, Taranto said the competitiveness of hiring people does require employers to become more open-minded.

"It's what I call an employee job market or an applicant job market," Taranto said. "I think a smart and savvy employer would be wise, to be open-minded to a mature job seeker."

By the end of 2022, 35 percent of the whole workforce nationally will reach [50 years old or above](#).

In an economy with these characteristics, Weinstock said, it is an opportunity for older workers to shine as a cohort for employers to consider.

She said AARP has conducted several national surveys similar to the Value of Experience survey for employers to face their neglected good traits of older workforce.

"Employers are saying that their biggest pain point now is actually finding qualified workers," Weinstock said. "This gives us the opportunity to talk about the value of older

workers what they bring to the workforce, things like that they are calm under pressure, that they are empathetic, that they are good at problem solving.”

Taranto does not see the number of years a senior candidate is able to contribute to a position being as important today. As people move around a lot, he said, even a younger worker cannot guarantee where they will be in five to eight years. Plus, some people are still working in their 70s.

Nor do mature workers want to retire early. Both Landis and Meyer spoke about their hope to work on their current positions as long as they could, as their job keeps them busy and they are happy about what they are doing.

“I don’t think the old formula of retiring at the age of 62 or 65 happens anymore,” Taranto said.

He suggested employers looking at more flexible hours for workers who reach retirement age, which is a popular approach at MGH. Retiring workers reduce their weekly hours from 40 to 24 or even 20 and still receive benefits. Younger workers who have other responsibilities may also choose the same approach. Taranto said the flexible schedule ensures a multigenerational workforce.

Targeting Employers

Both AARP and Operation ABLE plan programs and initiatives with employers to break misconceptions toward senior workers.

Weinstock talked about AARP’s national employer pledge program that has urged over a thousand employers to sign the pledge to employ workers for their credentials and abilities, regardless of their age.

At the same time, AARP is pushing the Protecting Older Workers Against Discrimination Act bill to restore the Age Discrimination and Employment on a federal level, targeting at the 2009 Supreme Court decision and asking employers to bear more responsibilities. The U.S. House passed the bill this summer.

For Operation ABLE, by partnering with numerous employers and bringing them in for their graduating students’ workshops and events, Gyurina said it offers a chance for employers to meet individual senior candidates in person, allowing those candidates to showcase their skills, especially to new employers.

“I think some folks come in here and think the folks are going to come in on walkers and canes and be so old and shaky,” Gyurina said, “And our folks are there, they're viable and energetic, you know, they have a lot of energy, and enthusiasm, personality.”

Spaulding's Meyer graduated from one of Operation ABLE's training programs that focuses on medical and health care administration, and was able to work several temporary positions with MGH because of the partnership.

Now, working as a medical services representative, she feels appreciated for her hard work, as well as receiving a better schedule, solid benefits, and respect.

“When I take on a job, I give my 110% and I just get really frustrated when I don't get that back,” Meyer said, “You know, you want to feel like you're working towards something.”