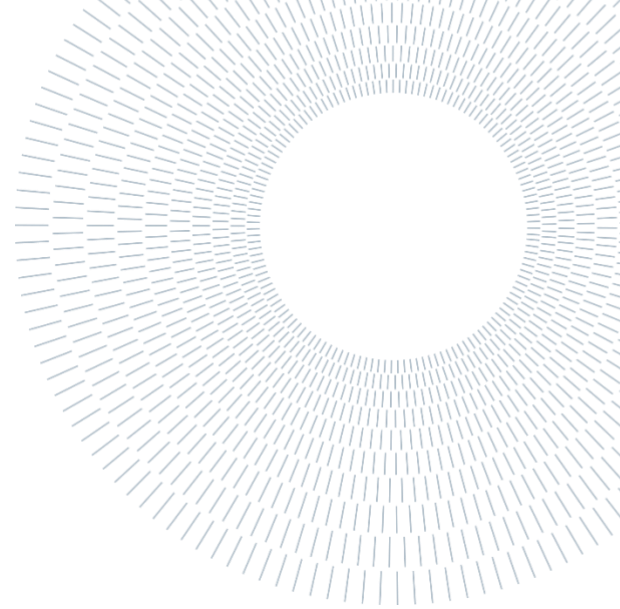




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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE THESIS

Exploring Age-Based Discrimination in Project-Based Organizations: A Focus on Senior Professionals

TESI MAGISTRALE IN MANAGEMENT ENGINEERING – INGEGNERIA GESTIONALE

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1. Introduction and Context

Over the past decades, demographic ageing has emerged as one of the most significant global transformations affecting societies, labour markets and organizational systems. According to United Nations projections, global population growth is increasingly driven by demographic momentum and rising life expectancy, despite a sustained decline in fertility rates across most countries (AFFAIRS & UN, 2025). As a result, population ageing represents a long-term and structural trend, particularly pronounced in advanced economies.

This demographic shift is accompanied by a progressive increase in the global median age and by rising old-age dependency ratios, reflecting a growing proportion of older individuals relative to the working-age population (UN, 2023). These dynamics generate mounting pressure on welfare systems, pensions and healthcare, while simultaneously increasing the relevance of older workers within labour markets. In this context, the ability of organizations to retain, engage and effectively utilise senior professionals becomes a key condition for sustaining productivity, innovation and organisational continuity (UN, 2023).

Beyond quantitative labour supply challenges, population ageing raises

qualitative issues related to how older workers are perceived and treated within organizations. A substantial body of research shows that workplace ageism—defined as the presence of stereotypes, prejudice and discriminatory behaviours based on age—remains widespread and persistent (World Health Organization; Kunze et al., 2011; Carral & Alcover, 2019). Age-based bias often operates implicitly, shaping managerial evaluations and organisational practices through assumptions about adaptability, technological competence and motivation, rather than actual performance (Rosales & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2020; Carral & Alcover, 2019). Empirical evidence consistently links perceived ageism to lower job satisfaction, reduced engagement, emotional exhaustion and stronger intentions to withdraw from work early (Bayl-Smith & Griffin, 2014; Desmette & Gaillard, 2008; Thorsen et al., 2016; Mazzetti et al., 2022).

Within this broader context, Project-Based Organizations (PBOs) represent a particularly relevant yet underexplored setting for the study of workplace ageism. PBOs are characterised by temporary structures, time-bounded objectives and frequent team reconfiguration, where careers depend less on hierarchical progression and more on cumulative participation in projects (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1998). In such environments, access to projects constitutes a critical organisational resource, shaping learning opportunities, professional visibility, social networks and future employability.

Project teams typically combine junior professionals—often associated with speed, flexibility and digital skills—and

senior professionals, valued for experience, contextual knowledge and leadership (PMI, 2022). While this generational diversity can represent a strategic asset, it also increases the risk of age-based stereotyping, particularly under conditions of time pressure, rapid technological change and high managerial discretion (PMI, 2023). Moreover, project work frequently involves high mobility requirements and continuous adaptation to new tools and methods, which may implicitly disadvantage senior professionals through assumptions about availability or technological adaptability (Eurofound, 2017).

Despite the growing diffusion of project-based work across industries, ageism within PBOs remains insufficiently examined in the literature. Addressing this gap is essential to understand how demographic ageing interacts with contemporary organisational forms. Against this background, this thesis investigates workplace ageism in Project-Based Organizations, focusing on senior professionals and integrating insights from the literature with empirical evidence from semi-structured interviews conducted in the Italian context.

2. Methodology

Research Questions

This thesis adopts an exploratory and interpretative approach to examine workplace ageism within Project-Based Organizations (PBOs). Building on a systematic review of the academic literature and on qualitative empirical evidence, the study aims to identify how

age-based discrimination manifests in organizational settings, the mechanisms that sustain it, and its consequences for both individuals and organizations. Particular attention is given to project-based contexts, where temporary team structures, discretionary project allocation, and rapid technological change may intensify age-related inequalities. Rather than proposing prescriptive solutions, the research seeks to map and interpret the processes through which ageism emerges, is perceived by senior professionals, and is reproduced in everyday organisational practices.

The analysis is structured around four research questions:

1. *What are the main areas and dimensions in which ageism manifests within organizations?*
2. *What are the key drivers of workplace ageism?*
3. *What are the individual and organizational outcomes of workplace ageism?*
4. *How do formal anti-age discrimination frameworks differ from actual organisational practice?*

Together, these research questions define the analytical scope of the thesis and guide both the literature review and the empirical investigation, enabling a systematic examination of workplace ageism as a multidimensional phenomenon in project-based organizational environments.

Literature Review

The literature review was conducted through a systematic and structured

approach aimed at mapping the existing academic knowledge on workplace ageism and building a coherent conceptual foundation for the study. Academic contributions were identified using the Scopus database, selected for its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals in management, organisational behaviour and the social sciences. The review focused on studies explicitly addressing ageism and age discrimination in organisational and corporate contexts and was carried out using the following query string:

TITLE-ABS-KEY ((ageism) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (age discrimination) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY (corporate) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (workplace)))

The initial set of records was progressively refined through a multi-stage screening process based on title, abstract and full-text analysis, with the aim of ensuring thematic relevance and conceptual coherence with the research objectives. Studies in which ageism was not a central analytical focus or where the organisational context was unclear were excluded. This process resulted in a final sample of 44 academic articles, encompassing a variety of organisational settings and methodological approaches.

To analyse and synthesise the selected literature, the study adopted the Gioia methodology (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). This inductive approach enabled the systematic coding of first-order concepts, second-order themes and aggregate dimensions, allowing fragmented and heterogeneous contributions to be organised into a coherent analytical structure. Rather than offering a purely

descriptive overview, this method supported the identification of recurring patterns and relationships across studies, while preserving sensitivity to context and empirical variation.

Overall, the literature review serves as a theoretical roadmap for the thesis. It consolidates existing research on workplace ageism, clarifies the main conceptual mechanisms discussed in the literature, and provides a structured foundation for the subsequent qualitative analysis. In particular, the insights emerging from the review directly inform the design of the semi-structured interviews, guiding the development of the interview protocol and enabling a systematic comparison between established theoretical perspectives and the lived experiences of senior professionals in Project-Based Organizations.

Interviews

The empirical component of the study is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with senior professionals currently employed in Project-Based Organizations (PBOs) in Italy. The selection of participants followed a purposive sampling strategy, consistent with the exploratory and interpretative nature of the research. Interviewees were selected based on an age threshold of 50 years or above, a criterion widely adopted in the literature to identify workers who are more likely to be exposed to age-based stereotyping, exclusion from development opportunities and discriminatory organisational practices (Thorsen et al., 2012; Kunze et al., 2011; Yeung et al., 2021).

This age threshold reflects evidence showing that age-related bias often emerges well before statutory retirement age and tends to intensify during later career stages, when assumptions regarding adaptability, technological competence and future investment potential become more salient in managerial decision-making (Kunze et al., 2011; Carral & Alcover, 2019). Focusing on senior professionals therefore allows the study to capture experiences of ageism at a critical career phase, where access to projects, training and visibility plays a decisive role in shaping continued employability, motivation and organisational attachment.

Participants were required to be actively involved in project-based work environments, characterised by temporary team structures, time-bounded objectives and frequent reallocation of human resources across projects. This criterion ensured alignment between the organisational context under investigation and the research objectives, allowing the study to explore how ageism is experienced and interpreted within settings where careers are strongly influenced by informal project allocation processes.

The semi-structured interview format was chosen to ensure comparability across interviews while allowing respondents sufficient flexibility to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions. Interviews aimed to capture concrete episodes of age-based discrimination, perceived drivers, individual responses and consequences, as well as the extent to which formal organisational policies addressing age discrimination are translated into

everyday practice within project-based environments.

The interview protocol consisted of the following questions, reported below exactly as administered:

- **RQ1:** *Demographic questions:*
 - *current role*
 - *Age*
 - *Gender*
 - *year of experience*
 - *educational level*
 - *industry*
- **RQ2:** *Have you ever experienced or observed any form of age-based discrimination in your company? (For example, being excluded from training or reskilling opportunities, not being considered for certain projects, or feeling left out of informal gatherings or networking moments)*
- **RQ3:** *Thinking about the situation you mentioned, what do you think led to that experience? (For instance, was it related to team dynamics, organizational culture, personal attitudes, or other contextual factors)*
- **RQ4:** *How did you respond to that situation? (For example, did you talk to your manager or HR, share your feelings with colleagues, or prefer not to take any action and move on)*
- **RQ5:** *How were you personally or professionally affected by that experience? (For example, did it influence your motivation, confidence, well-being, stress level, or relationships with colleagues and managers, performance, willingness to take initiative in projects)*

- **RQ6:** *Are you aware of any company policies or diversity programs that aim to prevent age discrimination? (For example, initiatives related to inclusion, equal opportunity, or age diversity management). Have you ever seen these policies actually applied in practice within your project team or department?*

3. Results

Definition

In the academic literature, ageism has been conceptualised through multiple definitions that differ in scope, emphasis and disciplinary background. In its most general sense, ageism is defined by the World Health Organization as “holding stereotypical, prejudicial, and discriminatory attitudes against individuals or groups simply because of their age” (World Health Organization). This definition is adopted in the present study as it integrates the three core dimensions of age bias—stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination—providing a comprehensive framework for understanding how age-based attitudes and behaviours shape organisational decisions and interpersonal relations.

While ageism may affect both younger and older workers, this thesis specifically focuses on ageism directed at senior employees. In this regard, the concept is commonly used to describe the “process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old” (Carral & Alcover, 2019). This perspective highlights how

generalised assumptions regarding competence, adaptability or motivation may lead to biased evaluations and exclusionary practices, whereby organisational judgments are driven primarily by chronological age rather than by actual performance or capability.

Areas of Manifestation of Ageism in the Workplace

The findings show that workplace ageism manifests across multiple organisational domains through predominantly indirect and cumulative mechanisms. Both prior research and empirical evidence indicate that age-based disadvantage emerges most clearly in recruitment and hiring processes, access to training and reskilling opportunities, allocation of innovation-oriented and high-visibility projects, informal communication and networking structures, and late-career management practices (Kunze et al., 2011; Carral & Alcover, 2019).

At the entry and re-entry stages of the labour market, ageism is frequently observed in recruitment processes, where older workers face explicit or implicit preferences for younger profiles. The literature consistently identifies recruitment as one of the organisational phases most exposed to age discrimination, with systematic exclusion of workers over 50 regardless of experience or qualifications (Oude Mulders, 2019; Encel & Studencki, 2004). Interview evidence confirms that similar dynamics persist in practice, even after positive selection outcomes.

Within organisations, ageism also emerges during restructuring processes

and late-career transitions. Both the literature and interview findings highlight progressive marginalisation of senior professionals through role downgrading, reduced responsibilities, or negotiated exit pathways. Cost considerations are often intertwined with age, reinforcing exclusion from core organisational activities and long-term career development.

Access to training, reskilling, and innovation-related initiatives represents another critical area of manifestation. Research shows that older workers are less frequently included in development opportunities, particularly those related to digital transformation (Rosales & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2020). The interviews confirm that in project-based contexts, exclusion often occurs through informal allocation mechanisms rather than explicit policy decisions, reinforcing cumulative disadvantage over time.

Drivers of Ageism

The findings identify a set of interconnected drivers sustaining workplace ageism in Project-Based Organizations. Economic considerations represent a central driver. The literature highlights how senior professionals are often perceived as high-cost resources, particularly in environments characterised by budget constraints, short-term efficiency pressures, and project-based staffing logic (Kunze et al., 2011; Cebulla & Wilkinson, 2019). Interview evidence confirms that wage levels, seniority-based contracts, and perceived

cost–benefit trade-offs play a key role in age-related exclusion.

Technological change constitutes a second major driver. Prior research documents persistent stereotypes associating younger workers with digital competence, speed, and adaptability, while older workers are often perceived as less flexible or less capable of keeping pace with technological innovation (Meng et al., 2021). The interviews corroborate these findings, showing that access to digital training and innovation projects is frequently shaped by age-based assumptions rather than objective skill assessments.

Organisational culture and managerial routines further reinforce these dynamics. Both the literature and empirical findings indicate that project staffing decisions are often based on familiarity, availability, and perceived fit rather than formal competence-based criteria. In project-based environments, high managerial discretion and time pressure amplify the role of informal judgments, embedding age-related bias in everyday organisational practices.

Outcomes & Effects of Ageism

The findings show that workplace ageism produces significant consequences at both individual and organisational levels. Prior research and interview evidence indicate that the effects of ageism range from psychological distress and disengagement to more adaptive and strategic responses. In the most severe cases, perceived ageism is associated with withdrawal behaviours, including reduced organisational

commitment or decisions to leave the organisation following experiences of marginalisation or loss of recognition (Bayl-Smith & Griffin, 2014).

More commonly, ageism leads to a gradual erosion of motivation, trust, and professional identity. Both the literature and the empirical findings highlight emotional distress, reduced initiative, and a long-term loss of confidence following experiences of demotion, exclusion from projects, or diminished organisational investment. These outcomes are consistent with existing evidence linking perceived age discrimination to emotional exhaustion, reduced work engagement, and burnout (Bayl-Smith & Griffin, 2014; Mazzetti et al., 2022).

At the same time, the findings also point to the presence of adaptive trajectories. Research shows that not all senior workers respond passively to age-based exclusion, and the interviews confirm that some individuals proactively seek inclusion in projects, invest in reskilling, or renegotiate their professional roles. In these cases, accumulated experience combined with updated competencies becomes a strategy to counteract exclusion and maintain professional relevance. Overall, the results indicate that the effects of ageism are not uniform and depend on both individual agency and organisational context.

From Policy to Practice: Gaps in Anti-Age Discrimination Frameworks

The findings reveal a persistent and structurally embedded gap between formal anti-age discrimination frameworks and everyday organisational practices. The literature highlights that,

within most Diversity and Inclusion initiatives, age remains a marginal or implicit dimension, often overshadowed by other diversity categories such as gender or ethnicity (World Health Organization, 2021). When age-related policies are formally included, they are frequently framed in broad and generic terms, lacking clear operational guidelines, accountability mechanisms, or measurable objectives.

Both the literature and the empirical evidence indicate that this weak institutionalisation limits the practical effectiveness of anti-age discrimination frameworks. Interview findings show that senior professionals are often unaware of specific policies addressing age-related inclusion, or perceive them as symbolic rather than actionable. Formal commitments to equality coexist with limited monitoring systems, weak reporting channels, and a strong reliance on managerial discretion in handling age-related issues.

In Project-Based Organizations, this policy–practice gap is further amplified by the structural characteristics of project work. The temporary and decentralised nature of projects, combined with time pressure and frequent team reconfiguration, reduces the visibility and enforceability of formal HR policies. Project staffing, task allocation and development opportunities are largely managed at the project or line-manager level, allowing informal norms and personal judgments to prevail over formal anti-discrimination guidelines.

Overall, the findings indicate that age-related inclusion is rarely embedded in

organisational design or project governance mechanisms. As a result, senior professionals remain formally protected by anti-discrimination principles but inconsistently supported in practice, particularly in project-based contexts where informal decision-making dominates and responsibility for addressing ageism is diffuse.

4. Discussion

Answer to RQ2

Ageism in Project-Based Organizations emerges as a multidimensional phenomenon that reflects patterns already identified in the literature, while also acquiring specific characteristics due to the project-based nature of work. Age-based disadvantage manifests both internally—through restructuring processes, access to training and allocation to innovation projects—and externally, in recruitment and interactions with the labour market.

Empirical evidence illustrates how age and cost become closely intertwined in organisational decision-making. Interviewees describe situations in which older employees are “gradually pushed aside within the organization, with the more or less explicit idea of accompanying them out of the company,” until “either they had reached retirement age or they tried to find a way out, such as negotiating an exit package.” Similarly, a professional reports being “explicitly told that I cost too much, that I was above the ‘average cost bracket,’ and that younger employees were less expensive to maintain.” These dynamics resonate with the literature showing that seniority-based wage

systems reduce the economic attractiveness of retaining older workers (Heywood & Jirjahn, 2016), while the interviews extend this logic to internal downgrading and late-career “accompaniment” out of the organisation.

Recruitment represents another critical dimension. Interviewees report being told that companies “were looking for younger candidates” or that a “younger profile” was preferred even after positive assessments. This aligns with evidence that “More than half of the employers (58 per cent) have a strong or slight preference for younger workers when it comes to hiring a new employee” (Oude Mulders, 2019). In PBOs, such exclusion is particularly consequential because careers are shaped primarily through access to projects rather than hierarchical progression.

A further dimension concerns access to training, reskilling and innovation-related initiatives. Interviewees report that opportunities were “naturally directed towards younger employees,” while senior professionals “had to actively request to be included.” In some cases, exclusion was explicitly justified by statements such as “for this initiative we need young people, faster, more used to working with new technologies.” These narratives closely reflect mechanisms described in the literature, where stereotypes that older workers “already know enough” limit access to structured learning (Wulff & Lassen, 2024; Previtali & Spedale, 2021).

Answer to RQ3

Ageism in Project-Based Organizations is driven by a combination of economic pressures, technological change, organisational cultures and broader market logics. A central driver concerns cost-based reasoning. Interviewees describe how senior employees are framed as expensive resources, summarised in the statement that dismissals occur “not because they are older, but because they cost more and have less updated skills.” This aligns with literature showing that organisations prioritise workforce rejuvenation and cost containment as a response to competitive pressures (Cebulla & Wilkinson, 2019). In PBOs, interviews reveal that this logic not only affects hiring decisions but also justifies internal demotion, reduced responsibilities and exclusion from strategically relevant projects.

Technological change represents a second major driver. Interviewees report that younger employees are perceived as “naturally more digital, more flexible, and quicker to adapt,” while older workers must actively seek access to training and innovation initiatives. Those who fail to continuously update their skills risk being labelled “a ‘dinosaur.’” These perceptions mirror persistent stereotypes documented in the literature, including the belief that “older workers cannot keep up with the speed and development” (Meng et al., 2021), despite empirical evidence showing that resistance to change is “slightly negative” with age (Kunze et al., 2013). In project-based environments, these stereotypes translate directly into staffing decisions, shaping who is considered

suitable for fast-paced or innovation-oriented assignments.

Organisational culture and managerial habits further reinforce these dynamics. Project staffing decisions are often shaped by familiarity, visibility and symbolic associations between youth and innovation, rather than by formal competence-based criteria. This reflects the literature's distinction between formal equality and everyday practices, where "actual equal opportunity practices are distinguished from written policies" (McVittie et al., 2003). In PBOs, high managerial discretion, time pressure and frequent team reconfiguration amplify the role of informal judgments, embedding age-based bias in routine project allocation and team formation processes.

Answer to RQ4 & RQ5

The outcomes of ageism in PBOs range from severe psychological distress and early exit to more adaptive and resilient responses. In the most severe cases, perceived ageism leads to rupture and rapid withdrawal from the organisation, as illustrated by the decision to leave "right away because, for him, working in a company like that didn't make sense anymore." These trajectories align with findings that "age discrimination predicted early retirement in our study" (Thorsen et al., 2016), suggesting that when older professionals experience strong devaluation or exclusion, the resulting loss of meaning and recognition can translate into

immediate exit choices rather than gradual disengagement.

More commonly, however, ageism produces a slower and cumulative erosion of motivation, trust and professional identity. Interviewees describe feeling "extremely hurt, discouraged and even depressed," experiencing "a particular kind of humiliation that comes from being undervalued after giving so much to your profession," together with a "long-term loss of self-esteem, damaged trust in management and a durable reduction in initiative." In project-based settings, these consequences are amplified because career development depends heavily on visibility, participation in strategic projects and access to learning opportunities. When senior employees are repeatedly overlooked for high-value assignments or excluded from innovation-related initiatives, the impact extends beyond emotions: it progressively weakens perceived employability, professional relevance and the willingness to invest additional effort. These experiences closely mirror literature linking perceived age discrimination to emotional exhaustion, reduced engagement and burnout (Bayl-Smith & Griffin, 2014; Mazzetti et al., 2022).

At the same time, adaptive trajectories also emerge, showing that the effects of ageism are not uniform. Some senior professionals respond by "asking to join key projects," actively seeking inclusion in training opportunities and investing in new competencies. Over time, they may reframe their profile as "updated digital skills with decades of experience — a combination that turned out to be very valuable." These responses resonate with

identity-based perspectives showing that older workers can reframe ageing as expertise and preserve engagement under supportive conditions (Desmette & Gaillard, 2008). In this sense, the interviews suggest that agency and context interact: while ageism can trigger withdrawal and depletion, it can also lead some individuals to adopt strategic behaviours aimed at restoring credibility, maintaining visibility and protecting professional identity.

Answer to RQ6

A clear gap emerges between formal protections against age discrimination and everyday organisational practice. Both the literature and the interviews indicate that age is often absent from company policies or absorbed into generic Diversity and Inclusion frameworks. One interviewee states: “In our organization there are absolutely no programs or initiatives related to age or generational diversity management,” while others report that “none of us had ever heard of any initiatives of this kind.” This reflects the literature’s conclusion that formal protections often “prohibit explicit exclusion but fail to tackle subtle or structural practices” (Bayl-Smith & Griffin, 2017).

When age-related policies exist, they are frequently perceived as “just proclamations,” lacking concrete implementation, monitoring and accountability. Responsibility for addressing ageism is largely delegated to individual managers, leading to uneven application across projects. Formally

neutral instruments, such as voluntary exit programmes, are perceived as selectively applied, while reporting mechanisms are described as weak or unsafe.

These patterns mirror evidence that legislation often addresses only “hard” discrimination, leaving “soft” discrimination outside regulatory reach (Stypinska & Turek, 2017), and that age-blind approaches can still “structurally disadvantage older jobseekers” (Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2021). In Project-Based Organizations, the temporary and decentralised nature of work further limits the effectiveness of formal frameworks, allowing informal project practices to prevail.

Overall, anti-age discrimination frameworks in PBOs remain largely declarative, offering formal protection without consistently translating it into everyday organisational practice.

Theory Explanation

Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory provides a coherent framework for interpreting ageism in Project-Based Organizations. COR theory conceptualises individuals as motivated to acquire, retain and protect resources central to their identity and well-being (Hobfoll, 1989). In PBOs, access to projects represents a key mechanism through which career-relevant resources—such as skills, visibility, networks and recognition—are allocated.

Exclusion from training, reskilling and innovation projects therefore constitutes an initial loss of resources. Interviewees describe how younger colleagues

were “automatically added to training groups,” while senior professionals “had to actively request to be included,” or were excluded because organisations needed people “quicker” and “more familiar with fast-paced iterations.” In COR terms, these episodes trigger resource loss spirals, whereby early exclusion increases vulnerability to further disadvantage and limits future access to similar opportunities (Hobfoll, 1989).

The theory also helps explain the psychological and behavioural responses observed. Emotional disengagement—captured in the statement that “going the extra mile would not change my situation”—reflects the cumulative depletion of psychological resources, consistent with research linking perceived age discrimination to burnout and reduced engagement (Bayl-Smith & Griffin, 2014; Mazzetti et al., 2022). At the same time, proactive behaviours such as reskilling and assertive project-seeking can be interpreted as resource investment strategies aimed at restoring balance and protecting professional relevance.

Overall, COR theory clarifies why ageism in PBOs emerges as a cumulative and structural phenomenon rather than as isolated episodes. By focusing on unequal access to career-relevant resources embedded in project-based work arrangements, it explains how age-based disadvantage can persist even in the absence of explicit discriminatory intent (Hobfoll, 1989).

4.1. Propositions

Proposition 1: Toward an Organizational Response to Ageism in Project-Based Organizations

The findings indicate that ageism in Project-Based Organizations is primarily sustained by discretionary organisational practices and informal routines embedded in project allocation, rather than by explicit discrimination. In the absence of age-specific policies, organisational responses remain fragmented and highly dependent on managerial sensitivity, allowing age-based assumptions to persist.

Proposition

1.

In project-based organizations, targeted organizational interventions—such as age-focused bias-reduction initiatives, intergenerational collaboration mechanisms, and formalized project staffing criteria—can weaken the cognitive and cultural mechanisms that sustain workplace ageism by limiting discretionary exclusion and redefining age-based assumptions of competence and adaptability.

Proposition 2: Toward Age-Responsive Organizational Design in PBOs

The results show that generic equality-based frameworks are insufficient in project-based contexts, where careers depend on cumulative participation in strategic projects. Informal exclusion from innovation-oriented initiatives persists despite formal equality commitments, indicating the need for structural solutions rather than symbolic inclusion.

Proposition**2.**

Project-based organizations that adopt age-responsive organizational design—by integrating age diversity into project staffing processes, recruitment practices, and development frameworks—are more likely to transform age diversity into a strategic resource, reducing age-based exclusion through structural inclusion rather than relying on attitudinal change alone.

Proposition 3: Toward Sustainable Late-Career Pathways in Project Environments

The findings highlight that ageism in PBOs often leads to disengagement and early exit, but also reveal differentiated late-career trajectories shaped by organisational conditions. This suggests that withdrawal is not inevitable and can be mitigated through targeted late-career design choices.

Proposition**3.**

In project-based organizations, the implementation of differentiated late-career pathways—such as flexible project roles, mentoring-based assignments, phased transitions, or job redesign—can reduce disengagement and premature exit associated with ageism, transforming late career into a phase of continued contribution and mutual value creation.

4.2. Conclusions

This thesis investigated how workplace ageism manifests within Project-Based Organizations, integrating insights from the literature with empirical evidence from semi-structured interviews with senior professionals. The findings show that ageism in PBOs is a multidimensional and largely implicit phenomenon, embedded in everyday organisational processes rather than expressed through overt discriminatory acts. In project-based contexts, where careers depend heavily on repeated access to projects, age-based disadvantage emerges primarily through exclusion from training, innovation initiatives and high-visibility assignments, producing cumulative effects on professional identity, motivation and future opportunities.

Theoretical implications

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the ageism and organisational literature by extending existing research into the underexplored context of Project-Based Organizations. While prior studies have documented age-based discrimination in traditional organisational settings, this thesis shows how ageism is reshaped by project-based work arrangements, where careers are built through temporary assignments and informal staffing decisions. By integrating Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, the study conceptualises ageism as a cumulative and structural process driven by unequal access to career-relevant resources rather than by isolated discriminatory events. This perspective helps explain why age-based disadvantage persists even in

organisations with formal equality frameworks, highlighting the role of project allocation, visibility and learning opportunities as central mechanisms through which resources are gained or lost over time.

Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, the findings underline the need to move beyond symbolic commitments to diversity and inclusion and to address age as a concrete dimension of organisational design in project-based environments. The results suggest that relying on informal discretion in project staffing and development decisions increases the risk of cumulative age-based exclusion. Managers and organisations should therefore pay particular attention to how training access, innovation projects and high-visibility assignments are allocated, ensuring that age does not implicitly become a proxy for assumptions about cost, adaptability or technological competence. More structured and transparent project staffing criteria, together with targeted late-career pathways and intergenerational collaboration mechanisms, may help organisations retain experience, support continuous learning and transform age diversity into a strategic resource rather than a source of disadvantage.

Limitations of the research

Despite its contributions, this study presents several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, there is no universally shared definition of what constitutes a “senior” worker. In this research, the threshold of 50 years was adopted to

ensure coherence with existing literature, but alternative age thresholds may lead to different interpretations of age-based dynamics.

Second, the empirical investigation is based on a limited number of semi-structured interviews conducted within the Italian context. While this approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of individual experiences, it limits the generalisability of the findings to other national, institutional or cultural settings, particularly those characterised by different labour market regulations or organisational norms.

Third, the study focuses exclusively on the perspectives of senior professionals. Although this choice was consistent with the research objectives, it excludes the viewpoints of younger workers, managers and HR professionals, which could provide a more comprehensive understanding of age-related dynamics and organisational decision-making processes in Project-Based Organizations.

Finally, the qualitative nature of the research does not allow for causal inference or statistical generalisation. Future research could address these limitations by adopting comparative cross-country designs, larger and more diverse samples, and multi-actor or mixed-method approaches to further investigate how ageism interacts with project-based work structures.

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Annex

Ageism Definitions

<i>"direct age discrimination occurs when a person is treated less favorably than another in a comparable situation because of his or her age" (Furunes and Mykletun, 2010)</i>
<i>"Characterized by negative attitudes and behaviors toward an individual solely based on chronological age" (Greenberg, Schimel, & Martens, 2002)</i>
<i>"direct age discrimination occurs when a person is treated less favorably than another in a comparable situation because of his or her age. Indirect age discrimination occurs when an apparently neutral provision, criterion or practice would disadvantage people on the grounds of age unless the practice can be objectively justified by a legitimate aim (O'Kinneide, 2005)"</i>
<i>"Age discrimination is characterized by the expression of negative attitudes and behaviours towards an individual based upon their membership to an age category" (Kunze, Boehm, & Bruch, 2011)</i>
<i>"Ageism is a particular form of discrimination, in which individuals are judged according to age-based stereotypes, or views on what people should be doing, experiencing, or feeling depending on their age" (Rosales and Fernández-Ardèvol, 2020)</i>
<i>"Ageism is defined as holding stereotypical, prejudicial, and discriminatory attitudes against individuals or groups simply because of their age" (World Health Organization)</i>
<i>"When beliefs become stereotypes and likes or dislikes become prejudices, there is a risk of discriminatory behaviour – age discrimination" (Solem, 2016; Stypinska & Turek 2017).</i>
<i>"With regard to older people, ageism is based on a view that focuses on disabilities and implies 'inferiorization' and 'patronage' (Neves and Amaro, 2012: 3), uses practices that deprioritize, disregard, or even exclude older people (AGE Platform Europe, 2016), and influences digital usage habits age (Rosales and Fernández-Ardèvol, 2020)"</i>
<i>"process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old" (Carral and Alcover, 2019)</i>
<i>"holding stereotypical, prejudicial, and discriminatory attitudes against individuals or groups simply because of their age" (World Health Organization)</i>

Articles Coding tree (Gioia Method)

Citations	Quotes	Subthemes	Themes
Bayl-Smith and Griffin, 2017	A more active work style ameliorated the negative effect of age discrimination... those who approach their work in a quick, effortful, consistent, and persistent manner perceive less decline of D-A fit across time in the presence of high age discrimination	Cognitive & Identity Drivers	Drivers of Ageism
	The framework integrates Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and Social Identity theory: discrimination acts as a resource loss stressor (time, energy, opportunities) that reduces engagement, while simultaneously heightening the salience of late-career identity. Cognitive identification becomes the channel through which discrimination translates into lower engagement		
	Conversely, affective identification can buffer this effect: when employees hold positive emotions toward their late-career status, the negative link between discrimination and engagement is largely mitigated		
Desmette and Gaillard, 2008	Early retirement intentions were significantly predicted by cognitive identification with older workers... participants were more likely to retire early when they categorized themselves as older workers ($b = 0.169, p < 0.001$)		
	The less participants thought of themselves as "older workers", the more they intended to develop their career ($b = -0.130, p < 0.05$)		
	Redefinition of ageing was significantly predicted by affective identification with older workers: the more participants were emotionally involved with their in-group, the more likely they were to positively redefine the occupational role of its members ($b = 0.192, p < 0.05$)		
	Devaluing the work domain was shown to be more likely when the boundaries between younger and older workers' groups were impermeable and/or when older workers were not affectively involved in their in-group		

Von Humboldt et al., 2023	Overall, results show that older workers are more likely to be associated with negative work-related stereotypes, especially by younger workers	Stereotypes & Cultural Drivers	
	Further, younger and middle-aged participants perceived older workers to be less work effective. Thus, it appears that, at present, negative stereotypes regarding older workers that place them in a disadvantaged position compared to other age groups are still well entrenched		
	Older participants reported being the most likely to experience age discrimination in the workplace. Furthermore, the results of the present study also suggest the existence of a growing sense, depending on age, of perceived age discrimination in the workplace: as age increases, so does the perception of experiencing age discrimination.		
Meng et al., 2021	The negative attitude that the largest proportion of the respondents believed their managers to have was, 'Older workers cannot keep up with the speed and development		
	The positive attitude that the largest proportion of the respondents believed their managers to have was, 'Older workers' experience and knowledge is a significant resource for the workplace		
	Overall, the results showed that in general a larger proportion of the respondents reported their managers to have more positive than negative perceptions of older workers		
	Nevertheless, it is generally only about a quarter of the respondents who believe that their managers have the positive perceptions except for the perception, 'Older workers' experience and knowledge is a significant resource for the workplace', which about half of the respondents point at.		
Kleissner and Jahn, 2020	Explicit measures of work-related age stereotypes (competence, performance, adaptability, reliability, warmth) revealed clear age stereotypes in all three samples: younger workers were rated higher on performance and adaptability, older workers were seen as more competent and were rated higher on dependability and warmth		

	Our results highlight the spread and the nature of explicitly and implicitly measurable age stereotypes and age attitudes in the workplace		
Blomé et al., 2020	If I can choose between a 30-year-old and a 65-year-old with the same qualifications, I will take the 30-year-old, because that person will last longer		
	When you pass 50, you're older. Then you're over the hill right away. Then it's over."		
	he study reveals persistent stereotypes linking older workers with declining adaptability and limited digital skills, reinforcing harmful attitudes that portray them as less suitable in an increasingly digitized workplace		
	In general, you are not welcome on the labor market when you are over 55. It is in many employers' heads		
	For white-collar workers, it was not the physical limits but the mental attitude. One's mental attitude was considered very important... When age was considered an obstacle, it was above all a mental obstacle		
Bowman et al., 2017	Older workers are dismissed not because of any real inabilities but because of 'their capacity to question new management decisions and practices'		
	Rusty' older males experienced their (older) embodied masculinity as hindering their perceived 'employability' for manual jobs		
	This was illustrated by the difficulties that older 'invisible' women experienced in the labour market for retail, customer service and secretarial jobs, despite the efforts of several to look 'young' or 'impressive' through dying their hair or dressing in particular ways. Biological ageing had eroded the capacity of these women to deploy the symbolic capital of a young, slim, female embodiment.		
Kim and Mo, 2014	The categories with the highest scores are 'elderly workers don't accept changes' (M=3.28) followed by 'they take more time to learn new things' (M=3.23), 'they are stubborn' (M=3.23), and 'they are less creative' or 'they have less new ideas' (M=3.0)		

	Older employees... are negatively evaluated in sociability ($M=3.13$, $SD=0.61$), competence ($M=3.11$, $SD=0.61$) and yet positively perceived in terms of reliability ($M=2.16$, $SD = 0.55$) Companies which are commonly hierarchical, less democratic and have more discriminatory policies, result in respondents holding stronger prejudicial beliefs against senior workers. In addition, stereotypical beliefs of respondents are also stronger when wage decision systems in their companies are based on seniority.	
Kunze et al., 2013	We observed a negative relation between age and RTC ($r = -0.07$, $p < 0.001$) First and foremost, the SOC model provides a framework explaining why older employees might have better strategies to cope with organizational change. A significant negative slope for white-collar workers ($\beta = -0.12$, $p < 0.002$) and a non-significant slope for blue-collar workers ($\beta = -0.02$, $p = ns$)	
Berger, 2006	It doesn't matter that we can do the same job as well or better, they look at my grey hair and they see an old man	
Eppler-Hattab et al., 2024	organizational ageism had significant negative associations with WAF dimensions, namely age-friendly values ($\beta = -0.489$, $p = .000$), development ($\beta = -0.284$, $p = .000$), wellness ($\beta = -0.409$, $p = .000$) and flexibility ($\beta = -0.317$, $p = .000$), with a significant stronger association with agefriendly values compared with its associations with development ($\Delta\beta = 0.205$, Bonferroni-corrected $p = .001$) and flexibility ($\Delta\beta = 0.172$, Bonferroni-corrected $p = .004$). Inter-age contact had a significant, albeit more moderate, positive association with age-friendly values ($\beta = 0.041$, $p = .000$), development ($\beta = 0.023$, $p = .049$), and wellness ($\beta = 0.055$, $p = .000$), which did not differ significantly from one another, thus partially confirming Hypothesis 2.	Organizational & Structural Drivers
Wulff and Lassen, 2024	When analyzing our data, we found two dichotomies shaping the field, which we hope to dissolve with the capacity for competence development framework. First, we found a dichotomizing belief that nonparticipation is caused either by the demotivation of 55+ employees or by managers' disinterest in investing in these employees. The capacity for competence development framework shows that this dichotomy overlooks the cultural and ambiguous negotiations and dynamics of reaching out for, applying for, being encouraged to, and participating in learning	

	activities. Simply put, manager and employee proneness to engage 55+ employees in learning activities is formed by the cultural dynamics of the workplace and general societal ideas about aging and decline.		
	However, this age stereotype, while well-intentioned, may inadvertently constitute a barrier, as it presumes a limited capacity for the acquisition of new knowledge, thus potentially leaving older employees in a state of educational stagnation		
Rosales and Fernández-Ardèvol, 2020	Innovation teams on digital platforms are primarily made up of young, educated men... it is comparatively more unlikely for them to properly include the older population's experiences when designing digital tools		
	Big data approaches implicitly assume that with large amounts of data there is no need to evaluate representativeness... the system thus deprioritizes users outside the mainstream, among whom older people are more commonly found		
	Homophily... leads teams to disregard older people in their design decisions		
Stypinska and Turek, 2017	Two types of age discrimination were specified based on legal regulations in this field—soft and hard discrimination—and were empirically verified on a sample of Polish older workers		
	Soft discrimination was reported more often (28.6%) than hard discrimination (15.7%). As expected in H2, there is a strong positive correlation between them.		
McVittie et al., 2003	At no point in the interviews do the participants state that they are opposed to employing older workers. Instead, the accounts are constructed to avoid this very attribution: actual equal opportunity practices are distinguished from written policies, age boundaries are renegotiated to avoid problematic characterizations, and the organization's role is supplanted by talk of external factors		

	The ways of accounting identified in the present responses therefore should not be regarded as being in some way distinct from the everyday practices and resources used within these organizations. These resources allow organizations on a daily basis to account for a lack of older workers		
	The language of equal opportunities it would appear has been readily incorporated into accounts of and justifications for practices which continue to marginalize older workers and jobseekers		
	Age balances described by the interviewees in the present study clearly indicate that the marginalization of older workers continues within these organizations notwithstanding the direct claims of equality offered by interviewees. The language of equal opportunities it would appear has been readily incorporated into accounts of and justifications for practices which continue to marginalize older workers and jobseekers		
Perry and Finkelstein, 1999)	This article has attempted to extend current theory by suggesting that organizational factors influence cognitive processes which, in turn, contribute to age discrimination in employment-related decisions		
	Little research has explored the extent to which organizational structure, values, or technology influence the salience of age and the activation of age-associated job stereotypes		
	Organizations that rely on ILMs with formal job ladders should strongly consider assessing age discrimination in their organizations as a matter of course and developing age discrimination awareness programming where necessary		
	Organizations may attempt to reduce age discrimination by changing the content of decision makers' stereotypes		

	The extent to which individuals are held accountable for applying what they learn in diversity training and are rewarded for promoting diversity on the job ... may influence how motivated individuals are to engage in more effortful cognitive processing		
Zvedelikova, 2024	Three mechanisms behind narrow search are proposed: search costs, youth favoritism, and wage related. Empirically testing the model's implications, this paper observes that, generally, firms that can afford more costly search strategies tend to search narrowly. Firms with fewer employees, firms hiring in urban centers, and firms instituting a probation period for new hires were more likely to set age limits than their counterparts		
	Further, indirectly analyzing the link between wage setting behavior and employee search strategy, consistent with theoretical predictions, firms conducting a narrow search do not seem to respond to changing labor market conditions		
Cebulla and Wilkinson, 2019	In fact, employers have been found to favour a 'rejuvenated' workforce, with older workers retiring and younger workers taking their places	Market & Institutional Drivers	
	Neither trades unions nor employers have shown much concern for promoting the retention, hiring or job quality of older workers		
	Industrial relations and labour market reforms introduced in the wake of the financial crisis... have fragmented collective bargaining arrangements and further weakened trade unions.		
	The Spanish government has likewise been relatively unconcerned with age management... beyond introducing pension age reforms and activation measures for older unemployed people		
	This policy vacuum contradicts the recent evidence that workers in Spain have raised their retirement expectations, aligning them to those held in other countries		

Maravelias, 2024	many older jobseekers are excluded from the recruitment process early	Recruitment & Hiring	Areas of Manifestation
	they follow a standardized checklist logic when selecting candidates ... they tend to check that they have not selected anyone with obvious No-symbols, such as ... and, in fact, old age		
	Unofficially, recruitment is about avoiding selecting the wrong candidate		
	Many of the older jobseekers, the interviewees explained, have such CVs. Yet, they are still excluded		
Zvedelikova, 2024	Out of the 2,683 unique job ads from 1,342 firms, 23.6 % included explicit age limits, with the most frequent eligibility cut-off age at 35 years. Additionally, up to 96 % of ads included content revealing a preference for a young age other than age limit		
Oude Mulders, 2019	Although distributions vary, a common finding for all three dependent variables is that very few employers prefer older workers. Preferences for younger workers are much more common, especially when it comes to hiring		
	More than half of the employers (58 per cent) have a strong or slight preference for younger workers when it comes to hiring a new employee		
	Hard qualities are qualities such as mental and physical capacity, willingness to learn new skills and the ability to adapt to new technologies, whereas soft qualities are qualities that could be classified as organisational citizenship behaviour, such as social skills, commitment and reliability. Hard qualities are, in the perception of employers and employees, more directly tied to productivity, whereas soft qualities are more tied to pro-social behaviour that benefits the organisation as a whole. This distinction between hard and soft qualities may also be useful to evaluate the effect of stereotypical views on ageist employment practices		

	However, a higher retirement age norm does not translate into a preference for older workers over younger workers for any of the employment decisions studied here. H1 is thus partly supported: employers that hold a higher retirement age norm are less likely to prefer younger workers, but not more likely to prefer older workers, than employers that hold a lower retirement age norm		
Heywood and Jirjahn, 2016	Such contracts backload compensation to elicit loyalty, learning and effort from workers. While this may be efficient, it has as a consequence the tendency of firms to employ older workers but not hire them.		
	We suggest that the continued lack of mobility and opportunity in the market of older workers reflects, in large part, the nature of life cycle contracts. Such contracts backload compensation to elicit loyalty, learning and effort from workers. While this may be efficient, it has as a consequence the tendency of firms to employ older workers but not hire them. The evidence of this seems clear both in Germany and in other countries. First, there is substantial evidence that such backloading of compensation exists. Second, it is nearly unanimous that in those circumstances with extensive backloaded compensation, older workers are less likely to be hired.		
	It is nearly unanimous that in those circumstances with extensive backloaded compensation, older workers are less likely to be hired.		
	share of German employers will only hire older workers for part-time jobs... when hired for permanent jobs, older workers are less likely to be in career jobs with chances for significant advancement.		
Encel and Studencki, 2004	Despite this positive focus, the results confirm the widespread conclusion that older workers continue to face enormous obstacles when seeking work		
	Older workers regularly complain that they are confronted by young, inexperienced staff who are unable to empathise with the problems encountered by older people		

	There is evidence that a significant number of staff in employment agencies are influenced by the same public stereotypes, which depreciate the abilities of older people A woman aged 59 noted that she had been told by a job network agency manager that “you are just too old despite your experience and skills” In the Age Limits study, one respondent declared that job agencies use an “identikit” picture of the ideal employee, which includes an age restriction		
Eppler-Hattab et al., 2024	However, the proportion of older workers in the sampled organizations was significantly and negatively associated with development ($\beta = -2.117$, $p = .013$), and organizational size was significantly and negatively associated with age-friendly values ($\beta = -0.160$, $p = .046$) Conversely, organizational mean age was significantly but negatively correlated with age-friendly values, development, and wellness		
Wulff and Lassen, 2024	With these five factors, we have attempted to analyze these dynamics and create a framework for addressing them. Second, managers tend to describe 55+ employees in two distinct ways, thereby creating a dichotomy that risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. On one hand, they portray the majority of 55+ employees as content with their current work life, terrific at doing their job, and therefore not actively seeking competence development. On the other hand, they highlight and salute a smaller group of 55+ employees who remain curious and proactive in their pursuit of competence development. What we have seen in our data, and what we emphasize with our framework, is that most 55+ employees tend to not be either satisfied or curious. Rather, they fall into a third category, where they are pending and awaiting. The pending and awaiting are not dismissive of further competence development. Instead, they need to perceive a clear purpose, ensuring that it aligns with the overall strategy of the workplace or their individual career plans. Additionally, they need to be acknowledged as important parts of the workplace and therefore worth investing in, and they need to be assured that participating will not increase their workload substantially	Access to Training & Career Advancement	

	This means that even when requirements and opportunities appear equal for all employees on paper, not everyone have equal access to competence development in the labor market		
Yeung et al., 2021	The participants perceived that training opportunities were less likely offered to older workers than to younger workers (52.9%), followed by less promotion opportunities (46.8%) and limited involvement in organizational restructure and change processes (41.4%)		
	Training opportunities in relation to the latest development in the industry were less likely offered to older workers. Training opportunities are crucial for employees to improve one's job-related skills and to keep up with the latest trends in the profession. Lower promotion and training opportunities would diminish the older worker's job satisfaction and positive behaviors at work, thus constraining their career development		
Previtali and Spedale, 2021	Educational/developmental needs are usually discussed in performance appraisal interactions and biased processes may endanger their outcomes and, for example, reduce the access to training that has been identified as a strategic element for older workers' retention		
	According to Smith (2005), texts enter and coordinate people's doing: WU's performance evaluation form is age-neutral in that it does not overtly incorporate age as an evaluation category, but it shapes interactions in a way that engenders the stereotypical 'doing' of age through talk by the participants. The evaluation form is, in other words, modelled on the ageless notion of an ideal worker but actively contributes to the maintenance and reproduction of ageist stereotypes: this sheds light on the difference between age-equal and age-blind work practices, whereby micro-dynamics based on stereotypical notions of age can be accepted despite the nominal equality of the workplace		

	A more nuanced appreciation of the interactional dynamics of 'doing age' at work may overcome some of the limitations of the current age-blind practices and enhance equal career progression		
Laliberte Rudman and Aldrich, 2021	What I've seen a lot lately is that those who have amazing experience in the field but don't have formal education at a postsecondary level are now being dismissed as, 'sorry, you don't have the qualifications', which is very insulting to them, right. ...education and training is valuable, but when we have not grandfathered to the greater measure those who probably could teach us... When they have disregarded [older workers], like their skills are now obsolete or they are an obsolete person, it really weighs heavily on them, and it's frustrating to me too		
	If you worked in IT for 30 years, as a programmer, 30 years passed, your company just laid off or closed. You find yourself out of work. If you didn't have a desire to update yourself, okay, then, yes you could find yourself [facing barriers]...A number of folks in that [situation] – and it doesn't really matter if it's IT, medical, any kind of profession. If you don't keep yourself current and marketable...you have a role to play in that, okay		
Porcellato et al., 2010	While training (OECD, 2004: 112–3) could be expected to mitigate against some of these skills gaps, employers have less incentive to invest in job-specific training for older workers since the returns on training are spread over fewer years		
	One unemployed interviewee pointed to a Catch 22 situation... it was often a requirement of a job to have had specific training but the opportunity for training was only available if you had a job in the first place		
	This research strategy indicated that... the most commonly cited influences... were factors relating to... investments in human capital or lack of human capital		
Wulff and Lassen, 2024	This means that even when requirements and opportunities appear equal for all employees on paper, not everyone have equal access to competence development in the labor market.		from policy to practice

Prokopenko, 2021	The desire of an employee who has reached retirement age to continue working is often met with reluctance of the employer		
	Managers were shown to hold two positions in relation to older people: they admit that older employees can work only as an exception for a specific employee... or they are forced to be loyal to older employees due to a number of circumstances		
	At the same time, 30 respondents (66.7%) called the age of an employee an important criterion in hiring and in questions about career advancements, and 12 respondents called it important in dismissal		
	The state must implement a policy to stimulate the continuation of labor activity after the onset of the retirement age and to destroy the prevailing stereotypes in society about the elderly and old age		
Laliberte Rudman and Aldrich, 2021	Overall, the findings illustrate how possibilities for managing later life unemployment were constrained by broader individualizing neoliberal mandates. Despite recognition of structural and systemic barriers tied to ageism, service providers recommended and enacted a narrow individualized approach to manage ageism. This individualized approach, in turn, produced tensions and shaped precarity for clients through encouraging the acceptance of wage displacement, precarious forms of labour, and negative stereotypes of older workers		
	Overall, despite recognition of systemic barriers tied to age and its intersections with other social markers, service providers, and sometimes older jobseekers, spoke to the need to accept ageism as the 'way the world is'. In turn, solution frames promoted and enacted within employment support services focused on how individuals could subvert ageism or accept it and work within its limitations		

	Overall, positioned within a context in which their age, sometimes intersecting with other social markers, was increasingly experienced as an insurmountable barrier to sustainable employment, many old jobseekers described their life situations as marked by a sense of stuckness. This stuckness encompassed an inability to move forward, a loss of hope, and a pervasive sense of insecurity		
Solem et al., 2020	According to the survey, the majority of the managers are indifferent or neutral, while 30 percent see the reform as a disadvantage for their company and 14 percent see it as an advantage. Thus, there seems to be little enthusiasm for the reform		
	The cognitive element of attitudes, or stereotypes about older workers, shows a stable pattern over the years around the MRA reform. Thus, there is no indication of reduced or increased age discrimination in this period		
	The government launched the reform primarily as a signal or encouragement for long-term increases in the employment of older workers and for the elimination of age discrimination in working life... However, managers still tend to exclude workers above 58 years of age from job interviews		
Wainwright et al., 2019	Extending workplace anti-discrimination law to include ageism may have brought benefits for older workers, but our findings suggest there have been detrimental effects too, as organisations have retreated from the active management of retirement through fear of falling foul of the legislation		
	This has left managers struggling with succession planning and workers unprepared for retirement and unsure of the options that might be open to them for extending their working life		
	Organisations and particularly line managers have an important role to play in encouraging and promoting this cultural change, not least by overcoming a mutual reluctance to discuss retirement		

	While there were variations in the degree of enthusiasm expressed by workers and managers about extending working life, typically there was reluctance to depart from the traditional retirement ages by more than a few years.		
	Despite the advantages in terms of recruitment, promotion and training opportunities for older workers, the adoption of an 'age-blind' approach often meant the loss of policies and practices that had been popular and beneficial		
Stypinska and Turek, 2017	The efficiency of the anti-discrimination laws on the actual situation of older workers is difficult to assess		
	This suggests that workplaces which tolerate ageist behaviours, even if they are not directly unlawful, are also more prone to exhibit patterns of prohibited discriminatory behaviours		
Bayl-Smith and Griffin, 2017	Age discrimination may negatively impact D-A fit through the denial of access to developmental opportunities and a reinforcing environment, restricting the employee's continued ability to meet workplace demands		
	Age discrimination ought to be conceived as a barrier to an employee's maintenance of skills and abilities necessary to successfully fulfil their job demands		
Kim and Mo, 2014	Even though the ADA (Age Discrimination Act) was passed into law in 2008, there are still many companies which publicize prejudicial job postings and practice overt discrimination against senior workers		
	However, this legislation has been poorly enforced and often unable to make a significant impact in the workplace. It has remained primarily a declaration in name only, without any substantial influence		

Yamada et al., 2006	Government revised the pension system in mid-1980s and raised the eligibility age. As a result, the eligibility age will rise gradually from 60 to 65 in the coming decade.....Many older adults face several employment barriers, including inability to apply their skills and/or experiences and age restrictions in hiring processes		
Grossman, 2005	Employer-sponsored programs for older employees... had significant relationships to organizational commitment		
	Compared to its sister statutes aimed at race, religion, gender, and disability, the ADEA offers less protection. Court interpretations have proven to be less rigorous and more employer-friendly, ceding to employers the right to make bonafide business decisions even when age is linked. In practice, instead of preventing discrimination, the law serves as a roadmap for employers, enabling all but the obtuse to avoid liability and shield all but the most egregious ageist actions from public scrutiny.		
	Whatever the claim and whomever the claimant, few gamblers would bet on the probability of prevailing in an ADEA suit. EEOC data reveals that for most claimants, the filing with the EEOC is a dead-end. Last year, of the cases before it, the agency found reasonable cause only 4.3% of the time, no reasonable cause 52% of the time, and closed cases for administrative reasons 33.5% of the time. Only 6.5% of cases were eventually settled. In contrast, for claimants charging all types of discrimination, age included, the EEOC found reasonable cause 7.2% of the time, found no reasonable cause 59.3% of the time, and closed cases for administrative reasons 26% For plaintiffs who win at trial, damages are legally limited to reinstatement, loss of pay, or, where there is a finding of willful discrimination, double the lost salary. In contrast, race and gender plaintiffs have the opportunity to be awarded more lucrative punitive damages		

Coulon et al., 2025	Consistent with predictions, stereotype threat was associated with all the workplace outcomes examined. Specifically, participants who experienced greater stereotype threat reported lower job satisfaction, job engagement, workplace wellbeing, organizational commitment, and greater intentions to quit.	Effects on Work Engagement, Performance and Well-being	Outcomes & Effects of Ageism
Wang and Shi, 2024	This study explores the impact of age stereotypes on the job performance of older employees in the workplace. The results of two studies support that positive age stereotypes have a significant positive impact on job performance, while negative age stereotypes have a significant negative impact on job performance.		
	Secondly, older employees who hold positive stereotypes have strong self-actualization motivation, attach importance to learning and development, and are proactive in learning new technologies and methods [5], while learning goals can significantly motivate employees to innovate. Conversely, older employees who hold negative stereotypes doubt the value of older workers in the organization, develop job burnout, and lack motivation to learn new technologies and skills, which can result in knowledge-based older workers' increasingly outdated knowledge and declining workplace performance with increasing age		
	he study found that positive age stereotypes significantly positively affect older employees' work performance and intergenerational knowledge transfer intention. This means that to achieve successful workplace aging for older workers, employees must be helped to establish positive age stereotypes		
Mazzetti et al., 2022	The obtained results indicate that the average levels of perceived age discrimination were positively related to emotional exhaustion. In line with the health impairment process of the JD-R model, our findings revealed a mediating role played by emotional exhaustion (i.e., the core dimension of burnout) in the relationship between workplace age discrimination and impaired job performance.		
	to be specific, the perceptions of age discrimination within schools produce a condition of chronic emotional exhaustion among teachers that, in turn, jeopardizes their ability to perform adequately in classroom activities		

	Moreover, the current findings agree with the evidence that emotional exhaustion among teachers may reduce the ability to provide instructional support and limit commitment to student achievements		
McConatha et al., 2022	individuals who reported more age-related discrimination and age-related meta-stereotypes expressed lower life satisfaction		
	experiencing discrimination in the workplace had a negative significant correlation with life satisfaction ($r = -0.205$, $p < 0.028$), indicating that those who reported higher levels of discrimination at work were more likely to report lower levels of life satisfaction		
	It increases stress, negatively impacts self-worth, and can lead to the alienation and isolation of older workers		
Manzi et al., 2021	Tests to examine whether authenticity and organizational identification mediated the relationship between POS and involvement revealed an indirect effect through authenticity ($\beta = 0.02$, 95% bootstrap CI: [0.018, 0.022]) and an indirect effect through organizational identification ($\beta = 0.13$, 95% bootstrap CI: [0.091, 0.170]). Results of this model confirm our first and second hypotheses: POS is significantly associated with organizational involvement, and this association is partially mediated by organizational identification (Hypothesis 1) and authenticity (Hypothesis 2).		
	Results of the first model where organization identification was the mediator showed that there was a significant moderation of age discrimination in the relationship between POS and organizational identification ($\beta = -0.058$, 95% bootstrap CI: [-0.087, -0.028]) and in the relationships between POS and organizational involvement ($\beta = -0.036$, 95% bootstrap CI: [-0.059, -0.019]). Specifically, as shown in Figure 2, the direct effect of POS on organizational identification, the direct effect of POS on organizational involvement, and indirect effects of POS on organizational involvement were lower at high levels of age discrimination		

	We then tested our second moderation-moderated model where authenticity was the mediator. In this model, age discrimination did not significantly moderate the relationship between POS and authenticity. As in the previous model, we found a significant moderation of age discrimination in the relationship between POS and organizational involvement ($\beta = -0.072$, 95% bootstrap CI: $[-0.099, -0.044]$)		
Yeung et al., 2021	When middle-aged and older workers are not treated fairly in their organizations, such as unequal opportunity to receive training and promotion, they tend to perceive limited support from their supervisors and coworkers, less freedom and autonomy at work, and need to devote extra physical and mental energies to their work tasks		
	PAD indirectly influenced work-related outcomes through affecting the workers' perceived JR and JD. In particular, when older workers perceived biased treatments at work partly because of their chronological age, they were more likely to report lower work engagement and intention to stay, and greater work strain due to less support or greater emotional demand and workload		
	PAD in the workplace exacerbates already stressful work environments, imposing more pressures on the employees who have received unfair treatments relative to other coworkers		
Deng et al., 2020	Perceived everyday discrimination among aging workers suppresses positive affect and increases negative affect, which is of great practical significance. Policymakers should be made aware of the adverse impact of discrimination on affect. Policies that require fair treatment of aging workers in enterprises should be encouraged, to decrease negative affects in this population		
	Perceived everyday discrimination is associated with lower job satisfaction, lower work engagement, and lower organizational commitment, which directly lead to decreased working ability among older employees		

	Another key contribution of this paper is the discovery of a positive relationship between discrimination and presenteeism, a potential counterproductive behavior		
	Discrimination increased presenteeism by reinforcing negative affect among aging workers and reduced presenteeism by increasing positive affect		
	At a macro level, presenteeism caused by ageism can generate significant economic costs, limiting labor force participation and hampering national productivity growth		
Harada et al., 2019	Perceived age discrimination functions as a workplace stressor, reducing job satisfaction among older employees		
	Age discrimination had a negative relationship with job satisfaction when social support from coworkers was either average or low		
	Social support from supervisors and coworkers buffered the negative effects of perceived age discrimination on job satisfaction		
	Job control and workload did not mitigate the detrimental effect of ageism		
Marchiondo et al., 2019	Importantly, this study highlights the negative consequences of perceived age discrimination. Increases in perceived age discrimination were related to increases in older employees' depressive symptoms and decreases in their job satisfaction and overall self-rated health. These results provide empirical support for the "wear and tear" effects		
	although older adults are adept at drawing on constructive emotion regulation and coping strategies, prolonged discriminatory stressors appear to overwhelm their ability to do so, ultimately undermining numerous facets of their health.		

	This study demonstrates that perceptions of workplace age discrimination often constitute a chronic stressor, with 29%–32% of older workers experiencing increases over time.		
Bayl-Smith and Griffin, 2017	Experiences of age discrimination will prevent or discourage continued development and adaptation, thereby leading to decreases in P-E fit		
	Age discrimination appears to have a relatively immediate effect upon P-E fit, but also an effect that continues over the longer term		
	An employee may be engaged in a negative feedback loop where increases in age discrimination lead to declines in P-E fit, which prevent the employee from effectively engaging in their work, thereby creating a situation where the employee becomes predisposed to further age discrimination		
	Empirical evidence demonstrates that perceived age discrimination significantly undermines work engagement, operating through both direct and identity-mediated pathways. According to the proposed model, discrimination functions not only as a workplace stressor but also as a factor shaping employees' self-concept as late-career workers.		
Thorsen et al., 2016	We tested the effect of perceived age discrimination on retirement. Age discrimination predicted early retirement in our study	early exit	
	Older employees with high job satisfaction, influence, possibilities for development, positive management relations, and jobs with no age discrimination remained longer at the labor market.		
	Jobs with possibilities for development and high influence may maintain senior employees in jobs with no age discrimination		
Thorsen et al., 2012	Finally, we found that poor workability was a strong predictor of plans for early retirement for both men and women.		

	In this representative study of older Danish employees, 58% planned to retire before the age of 65		
	But even after the adjustments, four out of six psychosocial factors (i.e. 'ageism', 'recognition', 'possibilities for development' and 'predictability') remained significant at the 0.05 level.		
	The gender difference cannot be explained by a different prevalence of poor psychosocial work environment at men's and women's workplaces, since only small gender differences were seen for the psychosocial work environment. Finally, we found that poor workability was a strong predictor of plans for early retirement for both men and women.		
Desmette and Gaillard, 2008	Early retirement intentions were significantly predicted by cognitive identification with older workers... participants were more likely to retire early when they categorized themselves as older workers ($b = 0.169, p < 0.001$)		
	"Our results on early retirement intentions revealed that cognitive identification with age-related peers increased the wish to retire as soon as possible... total early retirement seems to be a prototypical behavior that reflects the retirement norms associated with the fact of being an "older worker"		

Interviews

Interview 1

Demographic question

Current role: Chief executive officer

Age: 65

Gender: male

Year of experience: 40

Educational level: Master's Degree

Industry: Metallurgy Sector

Have you ever experienced or observed any form of age-based discrimination in your company? (For example, being excluded from training or reskilling opportunities, not being considered for certain projects, or feeling left out of informal gatherings or networking moments)

Personally, I have never experienced anything directly myself. However, I have seen several situations involving other people. In particular, some individuals who, once they reached a certain age, were gradually pushed aside within the organization, with the more or less explicit idea of accompanying them out of the company. Some of them accepted early-retirement schemes, shorter or longer, and agreed on a severance package to leave.

I also know people who, after an internal restructuring, found themselves downgraded in their role. Usually these were employees already around sixty years old and, when faced with such a major change, either they had reached retirement age or they tried to find a way out, such as negotiating an exit package

Thinking about the situation you mentioned, what do you think led to that experience? (For instance, was it related to team dynamics, organizational culture, personal attitudes, or other contextual factors)

In my opinion each story has different reasons, but one situation I know quite well involved a marketing manager. During a restructuring of the department, the company decided that it no longer needed a person with the seniority she had reached over the years. They eliminated her position, and she was reassigned to a lower-level role, which didn't match her experience anymore. After about a year, maybe a year and a half, she accepted an early-retirement scheme and left the company. I believe the main motivation was the salary cost: having someone with high seniority means higher costs, while from the company's point of view the job could be done by someone who cost much less. I don't think it was related to new technologies or difficulties in adapting; at least from what I know, there was nothing suggesting a problem with technological skills

How did you respond to that situation? (For example, did you talk to your manager or HR, share your feelings with colleagues, or prefer not to take any action and move on)

She decided to consult a labour lawyer, who supported and advised her on the steps she should take to protect herself as much as possible. I don't think it ever turned into a formal complaint in court, but she definitely wanted professional support to understand the possible options and how to move in that context. She wanted to make sure she was taking the most appropriate steps

How were you personally or professionally affected by that experience? (For example, did it influence your motivation, confidence, wellbeing, stress level or relationships with colleagues and managers, performance, willingness to take initiative in projects)

In the beginning, the situation affected her a lot, because she took it very badly. It was a sudden and significant change, and of course she experienced it emotionally. But over time she managed to process the situation, accept it and move on. Today she seems not to suffer from it anymore and even says she feels calmer, as if she has regained a sort of 'positive pressure', a sense of serenity that she didn't have at the beginning

Are you aware of any company policies or diversity programs that aim to prevent age discrimination? (For example, initiatives related to inclusion, equal opportunity, or age diversity management) Have you ever seen these policies actually applied in practice within your project team or department?

In our company, definitely not, and I would know, especially because I am the oldest employee in the company and I would be the first to reflect on such things. In our organization there are absolutely no programs or initiatives related to age or generational diversity management. However, I know that in other companies, especially in larger multinationals, these situations happen quite often. Another person I know, for example, in a German multinational, received an early-retirement package of four or five years before reaching pension age. These are reliable pieces of information.

I believe the main motivation is almost always the same: highly experienced managers usually have a high economic cost, and companies often decide to replace them with younger employees who cost significantly less

No, absolutely not. In our company there is no program related to generational diversity, so I have never seen any concrete application of such policies, neither in my team nor in any other department

Interview 2

Demographic question

Current role: Senior Project Manager

Age: 52

Gender: male

Year of experience: 30

Educational level: MBA

Industry: Information Technology & Services

Have you ever experienced or observed any form of age-based discrimination in your company? (For example, being excluded from training or reskilling opportunities, not being considered for certain projects, or feeling left out of informal gatherings or networking moments)

I wouldn't describe what I've seen as explicit age-based discrimination, but there are definitely dynamics that create distinctions between younger employees and more senior ones. In my regional structure, every year there is an event dedicated to early talents. Officially, it isn't an age-related initiative, but if you fall into that category you are automatically invited; if you don't, you need to push a bit, make yourself visible, or simply hope that the invitation comes your way.

Last year I had been invited, although I couldn't attend due to work commitments. This year I was completely available, but I wasn't invited. Instead, newer and younger colleagues were selected. Of course, places are limited, and I understand the logic of wanting to motivate newer generations. I don't take it personally, and it doesn't particularly bother me, but the dynamic is there.

Regarding dismissals or restructurings, in a company with 120,000 employees it is almost inevitable that reorganisations take place regularly. Officially, these decisions are never linked to age, but from what I've observed, those who have outdated skills or higher labour costs tend to be more exposed. Very often these are people with many years of experience who may not have kept pace with technological change.

Thinking about the situation you mentioned, what do you think led to that experience? (For instance, was it related to team dynamics, organizational culture, personal attitudes, or other contextual factors)

In my opinion, the main reason lies in the very nature of the IT sector. It is an extremely competitive environment, with intense competition for talent. I have colleagues, even relatively young ones, who leave to join other major tech companies. To retain younger people, organisations create initiatives and dedicated programmes. From this perspective, the opportunities reserved for early talents don't surprise me; they align with the company's retention and employer branding strategy.

As for restructurings, I believe the root cause is technological evolution. Technology changes very rapidly, and with the rise of AI, many tasks that were manual years ago now look completely different. Some people haven't kept up, either because they struggled to or because they didn't want to leave their comfort zone. Technology moves forward, but the person remains still – and at some point this becomes a problem.

There is also an economic aspect. People who have been in the company for many years often have higher salaries and more rigid or costly contracts. When downsizing happens, these aspects become decisive. So, I

wouldn't say people are dismissed because they are older, but rather because they cost more and have less updated skills. It's a combination of technological, economic, and cultural factors.

How did you respond to that situation? (For example, did you talk to your manager or HR, share your feelings with colleagues, or prefer not to take any action and move on)

Regarding the event, I wouldn't say it affected my performance or motivation, but I did feel some frustration. What bothered me the most was the lack of transparency. There was no clear communication about who would be invited and why. Information spread through hallway conversations, Teams chats, and indirect comments. In the end, I found out through rumours, and I believe this is always worse than receiving a straightforward communication.

I spoke about it with some colleagues, who are not exactly young either, around 35–37 years old. They perhaps felt a stronger sense of frustration, because they are in that intermediate stage: they are no longer early talents, but they are not considered senior either. We joked about it together, trying to lighten the situation.

What surprised me most was that even my manager was unaware of the invitations. Some of his team members were selected, others were not, and he was just as confused. This creates misalignment and frustration. In my view, transparent communication would have prevented many misunderstandings.

How were you personally or professionally affected by that experience? (For example, did it influence your motivation, confidence, wellbeing, stress level, or relationships with colleagues and managers, performance, willingness to take initiative in projects)

Honestly, I don't think it had a significant impact on my motivation. I've always been a very active and proactive person: I'm over fifty, but I still work as a researcher, and I am responsible for coordinating a professional association in Northern Italy. I'm used to continuously updating my skills, taking on new challenges, and staying engaged in different projects. It's part of my personality—I don't get discouraged easily, and I tend to interpret situations with a certain level of detachment.

That said, I'm fully aware that for others the situation can be more challenging. When opportunities are offered primarily to younger colleagues, those who are a bit older may perceive it as a sign of being overlooked or no longer central. This is especially true for people who already feel they're in an "in-between" phase—not beginners anymore, but not considered fully senior either. In these cases, frustration can accumulate, even if no explicit discrimination is involved.

In my view, what weighs the most is not the event itself but the lack of clarity surrounding it. When communication is vague or informal, people tend to fill the gaps with assumptions, doubts, or comparisons with colleagues

Are you aware of any company policies or diversity programs that aim to prevent age discrimination? (For example, initiatives related to inclusion, equal opportunity, or age diversity management) Have you ever seen these policies actually applied in practice within your project team or department?

As far as policies specifically addressing age diversity, I am not aware of any. The organisation offers a wide range of courses and opportunities for technological reskilling, and we are often encouraged to take part in them. However, I have never seen a programme explicitly designed for senior employees or aimed at addressing generational diversity in a structured way.

Training opportunities certainly exist and are extensive, but they are offered to everyone in the same manner and are not specifically tailored to support those who might struggle more with new technologies

No, I have never seen a concrete or targeted programme for senior workers. There are many internal training paths, but none specifically dedicated to this issue.

If anything, when voluntary exit programmes are proposed, factors such as age, years in the company, and even the number of children often play a role. These elements sometimes become incentives for encouraging people to leave the organisation rather than supporting them. In practice, this means that instead of seeing inclusion policies for older employees, I often see mechanisms that make them more exposed.

From my experience, I can say that there are no concrete policies aimed at preventing or mitigating age-based discrimination. If such policies existed, many situations would likely be experienced more positively, and the organisation would feel more balanced.

Interview 3

Demographic question

Current role: Quality & Operations Manager

Age: 52

Gender: female

Years of experience: 27

educational level: Master's degree

Industry: manufacturing

Have you ever experienced or observed any form of age-based discrimination in your company? (For example, being excluded from training or reskilling opportunities, not being considered for certain projects, or feeling left out of informal gatherings or networking moments)

I would not say that I have personally experienced explicit or intentional age-based discrimination, but over the years, I have observed several dynamics that can be interpreted through an age-related perspective. For instance, when the company introduced new digital systems, the training was naturally directed towards younger employees. They were automatically added to training groups, while I had to actively request to be included. It wasn't exclusion in a formal sense, but rather an implicit assumption that certain topics were "meant" for the younger generation.

A similar dynamic emerged during the creation of cross-functional innovation teams. These teams were often composed primarily of early-career professionals, almost as if innovation required youth by definition. As a senior woman, I felt that my expertise was appreciated, yet not instinctively associated with innovation unless I explicitly volunteered. Even during informal gatherings or after-work networking moments, I noticed that the atmosphere tended to be shaped around the preferences of younger employees, which created a natural generational gap without deliberate exclusion.

Thinking about the situation you mentioned, what do you think led to that experience? (For instance, was it related to team dynamics, organizational culture, personal attitudes, or other contextual factors)

When I reflect on the origins of these dynamics, I believe they stem from a combination of unconscious stereotypes and organisational habits rather than explicit intent. There is a widely shared assumption that younger professionals are naturally more digital, more flexible, and quicker to adapt to new tools or methodologies. This doesn't come from a discriminatory mindset, but from a kind of automatic association between youth and innovation. As a result, highly visible or fast-paced projects are often assigned to younger colleagues simply because they are perceived as the "obvious" fit.

Organisational culture also plays a significant role. Many initiatives — especially those linked to innovation, employer branding, and talent retention — tend to target the younger segments of the workforce. This inherently shifts resources and attention towards them. On top of that, personal attitudes matter: some younger managers feel more comfortable involving peers rather than senior colleagues, possibly out of insecurity or simply because they assume that we are less in touch with emerging trends.

How did you respond to that situation? (For example, did you talk to your manager or HR, share your feelings with colleagues, or prefer not to take any action and move on)

At first, I reacted emotionally and took some of these situations personally. I felt that my long experience wasn't being fully valued, and that I was being perceived as less suited for innovation-related activities. With time, however, I learned to respond differently. I began expressing my interest proactively, asking directly to participate in specific projects, and making it clear that I wanted to be involved in developments affecting the company. When I noticed that trainings were mainly offered to younger employees, I openly requested access and explained the importance of keeping senior staff up to date as well.

I also had constructive conversations with my manager whenever I felt decisions weren't balanced. These were not confrontational discussions but opportunities to highlight the value of having different age groups represented in key initiatives. Over time, I developed a more assertive and confident approach, which allowed me to regain control over my professional trajectory.

How were you personally or professionally affected by that experience? (For example, did it influence your motivation, confidence, wellbeing, stress level or relationships with colleagues and managers, performance, willingness to take initiative in projects)

These situations affected me in different ways over time. Initially my motivation decreased, because I had the feeling that certain opportunities were directed almost automatically toward younger colleagues. My confidence also wavered for a period, especially when I saw how quickly they adapted to digital tools that were new to me. This sometimes led to moments of stress and self-doubt.

Gradually, however, things changed. As I became more proactive, my motivation rose again. I invested time in learning new systems and improving my digital competencies, and this effort allowed me to regain confidence and even surpass expectations. My wellbeing improved once I stopped interpreting every organisational choice as a judgement of my abilities. My relationships with colleagues remained positive, although at times I felt I had to work harder than younger women to gain the trust of certain teams.

Interestingly, these experiences made me more willing to take initiative. Rather than stepping back, I became more vocal in asking for opportunities and more present in cross-functional activities. This had a positive impact on my performance, as once I mastered the new tools I was able to combine updated digital skills with decades of experience — a combination that turned out to be very valuable.

Are you aware of any company policies or diversity programs that aim to prevent age discrimination? (For example, initiatives related to inclusion, equal opportunity, or age diversity management) Have you ever seen these policies actually applied in practice within your project team or department?

Yes, I am aware of several inclusion and equal opportunity policies within the organisation, although they are not specifically focused on age. These policies generally address fairness, respect, equal treatment and non-discrimination, and they apply to everyone regardless of personal characteristics. They are part of the company's code of conduct and are regularly communicated through training sessions and internal initiatives. I have seen these policies applied, especially regarding issues such as harassment, gender equality and respectful behaviour. However, when it comes specifically to age, I believe there is still room for improvement. There are no programmes tailored for senior employees, nor specific initiatives aimed at generational inclusion. The approach is intended to be neutral, which is positive in principle, but in practice it often means that the particular needs of older workers are not addressed explicitly. Strengthening support for senior professionals, especially regarding training for new technologies, would make the application of these policies more complete.

Interview 4**Demographic questions**

Current role: Technical Manager

Age: 54

Gender: male

Years of experience: 36

Education level: High school

Sector/industry: Manufacturing

Have you ever experienced or observed any form of age-based discrimination in your company or in a company where you have worked? (For example: being excluded from training or reskilling opportunities, not being considered for certain projects, or feeling excluded from informal moments or networking activities)

Yes, I've noticed it. I've seen it very little in this company, but I've still observed it to some extent, especially when a person does not have a high level of specialization: in those cases, you are more exposed to forms of discrimination. In other companies, however, I know for sure—also because some friends of mine work there—that they even consider laying off people of a certain age just to replace them with younger professionals who know new work tools better, who can handle new technologies more easily, and who have a more “user-friendly” relationship with these systems.

From my point of view, since I work in design, I have always been in close contact with new technologies and therefore I've always been trained; for this reason, I feel it less. But I know that this difficulty exists, and many companies take advantage of it. Yes, many companies really take advantage of it, because it costs less to hire a younger person who may also have more skills related to certain types of activities.

In my job it's a bit different, because experience matters a lot, and this somehow “protects” you. However, there are organisations where no one truly understands the broader context, and decisions are made purely based on numbers: in those situations, you can see how things may become problematic for people of a certain age, especially when they implement linear cuts and nothing more. And I think that with the rise of artificial intelligence, this situation will only get worse.

Thinking about the situation you mentioned, what do you think led to that experience? (For instance, was it related to team dynamics, organizational culture, personal attitudes, or other contextual factors)

I think the main causes are mostly linked to stereotypes. When things go “well,” companies tend to replace older people with younger ones who know new work tools better, who can handle new technologies better, and who have a more “user-friendly” approach to this way of working. So I'd say that stereotypes have a big impact: if a person doesn't stay updated and informed, they are immediately seen as a “dinosaur,” and this heavily affects how others perceive them. On the other hand, managers also influence these dynamics, because some of them look only at the numbers. As I told you, they reason with the “one equals one” principle, which is absurd but unfortunately very common. Keep in mind that there are tasks where experience may not matter, because they are routine activities, very guided, where it makes little difference whether the person performing them is experienced or not. What really matters is practicality in using certain programs and dynamism, and you can see that the comparison with a younger person doesn't hold: they are much more advantaged compared to an older person. And, if we're honest, they also cost less.

How did you respond to that situation? (For example, did you talk to your manager or HR, share your feelings with colleagues, or prefer not to take any action and move on)

He resigned immediately. Yes, he left right away because, for him, working in a company like that didn't make sense anymore. He said that he had worked for many years, had practically given his blood to the company,

and being treated that way in the last few years was just too much. He preferred not to stay there feeling like a victim, or being mocked, or being treated badly. He said: “No, I’m leaving. I still have my professionalism, and I’ll make it count in another company.” So this affected him immediately in a negative way: it didn’t gradually impact his performance or self-esteem, but instead led him to a very clear decision to cut ties right away. He didn’t even try to start a dialogue; he said clearly that the situation was absolutely unacceptable for him and he ended everything. Exactly that: he completely ended it, because he said that if the company thought something like that, it meant that the relationship was already broken, and it was better to cut it off completely.

How were you personally or professionally affected by that experience?

(For example, did it influence your motivation, confidence, wellbeing, stress level or relationships with colleagues and managers, performance, willingness to take initiative in projects)

The situation influenced him in an immediate and drastic way, to the point that he resigned. He didn’t even try to have a dialogue: he said that, for him, that situation was absolutely unacceptable, and he closed everything. He decided to completely end the relationship, because he believed that if the company had reached the point of thinking something like that, it meant that the relationship of trust was already broken and that it was better to cut ties right away. Keep in mind that there are companies that are doing well, and burnout is something that can happen; and there are companies that are not doing well and take the opportunity to cut, obviously

Are you aware of any company policies or diversity programs that aim to prevent age discrimination?

(For example, initiatives related to inclusion, equal opportunity, or age diversity management) Have you ever seen these policies actually applied in practice within your project team or department?

Absolutely not, I am not aware of any specific corporate policies or structured programs related to diversity to prevent age-based discrimination. I am aware that none exist. We always run internal surveys and the company is very attentive to the theme of inclusivity, but I can tell you they are just proclamations. In its policy, the company invites all employees to include people with their differences and particularities, but there is no specific program to address the issue of age. Honestly, I don’t know of any companies that are truly addressing this topic. And it is a problem that, in my opinion, should also be addressed politically. I agree that, to increase youth employment, it may make sense to incentivize early exit for people close to retirement age, and that can be acceptable. The real problem is when these situations happen long before retirement age: in those cases, finding a new job becomes extremely difficult for someone of a certain age.

Interview 5

Demographic question

Current role: Team Coordinator and Customer Service

Age: 60

Gender: male

Year of experience: 35

Educational level: Technical High School

Industry: Manufacturing

Have you ever experienced or observed any form of age-based discrimination in your company? (For example, being excluded from training or reskilling opportunities, not being considered for certain projects, or feeling left out of informal gatherings or networking moments)

Personally, I have never experienced any form of age-based discrimination within my company. My long experience and deep knowledge of our products have always worked in my favor, and I have never felt excluded or penalized because of my age. Even when I look at my colleagues, especially in the service department, I have never noticed situations of this kind; in fact, older technicians are generally valued because of the expertise they bring.

However, the situation has been different outside the company. In the last few months, due to the economic downturn and lack of work, I started applying for jobs elsewhere. Several organisations replied that my profile was interesting, but they were looking for younger candidates. This happened multiple times, and it confirmed that this kind of discrimination is present in the job market. A very clear example was a selection process in which, after completing a virtual interview along with some assessment tests, I was still told that they were looking for a younger profile. This made it evident that some companies systematically prefer younger applicants, even when the required skills are fully aligned

Thinking about the situation you mentioned, what do you think led to that experience? (For instance, was it related to team dynamics, organizational culture, personal attitudes, or other contextual factors)

Reflecting on what may have caused those situations, I believe many companies today prefer to hire young people so they can shape them according to their own rules, culture, and mindset. When someone with many years of experience joins—like in my case—it's harder for the organisation to “mold” that person into its way of working. After forty years of experience, you inevitably carry your own views, habits, and approaches, and this can make a senior profile appear less flexible or less adaptable.

There is also an economic aspect, which is equally important: the salary expected by a senior worker is naturally higher and much less negotiable compared to that of a younger candidate. For companies, especially during financially difficult periods, this heavily influences hiring decisions.

Finally, availability for travel can also play a role. In the past, I used to travel up to 60% of my time for work. Today, with a family and different responsibilities, I can no longer offer that same level of flexibility. In some roles, this can become a disadvantage and contributes to the preference for younger profiles.

How did you respond to that situation? (For example, did you talk to your manager or HR, share your feelings with colleagues, or prefer not to take any action and move on)

When I started receiving feedback that hinted at a preference for younger candidates, I discussed the situation with colleagues who are roughly my age. They confirmed that, in several contexts, age is indeed taken into account for certain positions. Knowing that others with similar experience were going through the same thing helped me understand that my situation wasn't isolated. Despite this, I decided to continue sending out applications, because you never know — there might still be a company interested in someone with my background. My attitude has remained positive, also because in my current company I feel appreciated and recognized. This helped me live the situation without getting discouraged or losing confidence in my abilities.

How were you personally or professionally affected by that experience? (For example, did it influence your motivation, confidence, wellbeing, stress level or relationships with colleagues and managers, performance, willingness to take initiative in projects)

This experience did not weigh on me personally. I remain motivated and I continue to submit applications whenever I believe it might be worthwhile. Sending out CVs is my way of keeping opportunities open without ruling anything out.

At the same time, feeling valued in my current company plays a big role in maintaining my balance and wellbeing. Knowing that I am appreciated and that my experience is recognized has helped me a lot. Of course, after spending twenty years in the same company, fully starting over somewhere else is inevitably more

challenging than it would be for a younger worker, but I cannot say that this situation has negatively affected my motivation or my confidence.

Are you aware of any company policies or diversity programs that aim to prevent age discrimination? (For example, initiatives related to inclusion, equal opportunity, or age diversity management) Have you ever seen these policies actually applied in practice within your project team or department?

Yes, I am aware of them. We are part of a large multinational group, and on these topics the approach is very strict. The inclusion policies are extremely clear and explicitly aim to prevent any form of discrimination — whether related to age, religion, background, or any other personal factor. The corporate culture behind these policies is very rigorous in this regard. In practice, I have never witnessed anything that went against any worker based on age or other characteristics. This contributes to creating a work environment that is, at least formally, fair and respectful.

Yes, I have seen these policies applied, especially in the last year, when the organisation had to face a significant decline in production. We went through an entire year of furlough, and management launched a voluntary exit programme aimed mainly at workers close to retirement. It wasn't mandatory — because by law it cannot be — but financial incentives were offered to those interested in leaving.

Naturally, the application of these measures was not uniform for everyone. With some people considered less essential, the organisation pushed more insistently for them to accept the offer. With others, who were deemed crucial for the business, requests to join the programme were refused because the company wanted to retain those profiles. When organisations implement these processes, they already know very clearly which employees they aim to encourage to leave and which they intend to keep.

Since I am also part of the workers' union committee, I was directly involved in the negotiations, so I personally witnessed how these decisions were discussed and applied. It was a concrete example of how formal policies are translated into real organisational choices.

Interview 6

Demographic question

Current role: Sales Representative & Customer Service

Age: 58

Gender: man

Year of experience: 36

Educational level: Technical High School specializing

Industry: Manufacturing

Have you ever experienced or observed any form of age-based discrimination in your company? (For example, being excluded from training or reskilling opportunities, not being considered for certain projects, or feeling left out of informal gatherings or networking moments)

So, I would say no, not directly: I have never personally experienced any situations of age-based discrimination. The organisation has always tried to maintain a certain level of inclusion, and overall I have always felt treated with consideration. I've consistently received respect for what I have done throughout my career, and there have never been moments where I felt discriminated against or intentionally set aside, not even in a subtle or indirect way.

And, to be completely honest, last year we also carried out an internal survey regarding the key figures within the organisation. Employees were asked to indicate which person they would recommend as a reference point for the company. I can say that I was selected: within my division I was ranked first, and—quite unexpectedly—even at a global level, across all regions, I ended up among the top three. This was something I truly didn't anticipate and it made me realise that, from the organisation's perspective, my contribution has always been recognised and appreciated.

On the other hand, I also realise there are some areas where companies, in my opinion, could invest more in training. I'm thinking particularly of training on systems and tools that people of my age or generation sometimes find more challenging—not due to a lack of willingness, but simply because technology evolves very quickly. Strengthening support in this area would help ensure that everyone, regardless of age, can remain aligned with the tools required in today's work environment.

Thinking about the situation you mentioned, what do you think led to that experience? (For instance, was it related to team dynamics, organizational culture, personal attitudes, or other contextual factors)

I believe it's something completely unintentional, in the sense that nowadays many things are simply taken for granted. It often happens that a young person, with a background like yours, can naturally handle certain tools with a lot of ease and practicality, simply because they come from an environment where these skills are part of the normal training path. For them, it feels almost automatic.

Someone like me, instead — and I can see the same happening among colleagues of my age — inevitably struggles a bit more. It's clear that people coming from design, software, or other technical fields are more inclined and therefore manage these situations much better, especially when digital tools or analytical systems are involved.

Those who, like me, come from the field with a completely different kind of training definitely face more difficulty. I'll give you a concrete example: when we need to extract data or work in Excel at a more advanced level, I really have to sit down and start from scratch, step by step. Also because, in my role, I've always taken care more of the managerial side, while the more "bureaucratic" or technical tasks were handled by others in my team.

As a result, I never really worried about studying those activities or learning them in depth. So that's more or less how it is... imagine.

How did you respond to that situation? (For example, did you talk to your manager or HR, share your feelings with colleagues, or prefer not to take any action and move on) (In this situation, since he stated that he sees a lack in the training program, I asked him whether he has ever told someone about this problem that he recognizes as persistent in the company)

Yes, absolutely. You know, these situations are always taken with a certain level of seriousness and attention, and there is always an effort to do something to improve, to adapt, or to catch up in areas where there is more difficulty. I won't deny that, especially in the past, during a period that unfortunately wasn't as positive as the current one, investing time in training courses or upskilling activities was something that tended to be postponed to "tomorrow." It was a bit of a "I'll do it when I have time," but that time never really came, and that was definitely part of the issue.

As for the relationship with younger colleagues, I've never experienced being looked at negatively or treated poorly just because I asked for help or because I didn't feel particularly comfortable with a certain technology. I would say no, not at all. If anything, we often laugh about it, because we take it lightly: they understand that it's simply a matter of having a different background, not a lack of ability.

And, Riccardo, I can tell you that — and I consider this a bit of good fortune — I have always had a lot of respect from my colleagues, both younger and of my own age. This probably prevents them from adopting certain attitudes or making inappropriate remarks. There is a climate of mutual respect that helps a lot and that, most likely, prevents certain episodes from happening in the first place.

How were you personally or professionally affected by that experience? (For example, did it influence your motivation, confidence, wellbeing, stress level or relationships with colleagues and managers, performance, willingness to take initiative in projects) (Even in this situation, we were talking about his feelings and his thoughts when he perceives that he is less capable of performing some activity compared to other younger colleagues)

It's a situation that, on a personal level, makes me feel a bit inadequate: I really feel like I'm the one who is "behind" compared to the younger colleagues, who are definitely much quicker and more immediate when it comes to handling certain tools or navigating new technologies. This difference in pace and familiarity is noticeable, and inevitably it creates a sort of internal comparison.

When you ask me whether this is a kind of cognitive bias — meaning whether identifying myself as someone who is “less technological” limits me or makes me give up certain opportunities — I would say no. It doesn’t limit me, because in our company you always have the possibility to ask for help when you need it. There is always someone available to support you, and this allows you to manage the situation even when things are more challenging.

At the same time, however, you can understand that there are moments where this weighs a bit more. For example, when you’re working from home, the distance amplifies the difficulty: you miss that immediate contact where you could ask a quick question, have a brief exchange, or get an answer in two minutes. Working remotely, everything becomes slower and more cumbersome, and the feeling of struggle becomes more noticeable.

So yes, we can say that if I were physically working within a team, everything would be easier and faster, simply because I would have someone next to me to ask for quick support. Working remotely and independently, in these cases, requires a bit more effort and makes this gap in technological practicality feel even more evident.

Are you aware of any company policies or diversity programs that aim to prevent age discrimination? (For example, initiatives related to inclusion, equal opportunity, or age diversity management) Have you ever seen these policies actually applied in practice within your project team or department?

No, I would say that I am fully aware that there are no specific policies or programs dedicated to preventing age-related discrimination. To be honest with you, when you sent this request and I started talking about it with several of my colleagues, I quickly realized that none of us had ever heard of any initiatives of this kind within the company. I asked multiple people just to be sure I wasn’t missing something, but the answer was always the same.

And honestly, I myself had no idea that activities like these even existed. Yet, in reality, I think they would be very interesting — both from an inclusion perspective and as a way to understand how people of a certain age can still bring value, experience, and weight to a company. Because I don’t deny that, maybe not in my specific case, but in other contexts, there can be completely different dynamics where the topic of age really matters and deserves attention.

For this reason, I believe it could actually be useful to have tools or programs that help highlight these differences and support people in managing them. But as for our company, I don’t think anything like that exists, and I am not aware of any official initiative in this direction. Exactly, exactly.

Interview 7

Demographic question

Current role: Marketing Manager

Age: 64

Gender: female

Year of experience: 38

Educational level: Master’s Degree

Industry: Consumer Goods Sector

Have you ever experienced or observed any form of age-based discrimination in your company? (For example, being excluded from training or reskilling opportunities, not being considered for certain projects, or feeling left out of informal gatherings or networking moments)

Yes, I did experience what I would describe as age-related discrimination, particularly in the final years of my career and especially within the last company where I worked. At that stage, I had reached a high-level position for the type of organisation it was and for the economic moment it was going through. The company was not performing well, and budgets were tight. In that context, I was explicitly told that I cost too much, that I was above the “average cost bracket,” and that younger employees were less expensive to maintain.

This led to a proposal — essentially an ultimatum — where I was informed that my role as marketing manager no longer existed and that, if I wished to remain in the company, I would need to accept a downgraded role

with significantly reduced responsibilities, the removal of my company car, a substantial salary cut and the loss of various benefits. Even though I was told that this decision was “nothing personal,” it was very clear that the experience and expertise for which I had originally been hired were no longer considered valuable enough to justify my costs. I felt as though I had shifted from being viewed as a strategic contributor to being treated merely as a financial burden.

Beyond my personal experience, I also witnessed similar situations affecting other colleagues, particularly women around the age when maternity typically occurs. Several women who had been promised managerial advancement later found that, upon returning from maternity leave, their positions had been reshaped, downgraded or assigned to someone else. Although these behaviours were not always framed explicitly as age discrimination, they were deeply connected to life stage and to the perception that a person is no longer as flexible or inexpensive as a younger employee.

Regarding training, reskilling, project involvement or networking opportunities, I was not formally excluded from corporate initiatives. However, in the last years, it became increasingly evident that younger employees received more attention and more opportunities for development. I was often told that I had already completed many courses, and that the available training resources needed to be prioritised for newcomers or for younger staff, reinforcing the idea that investment in senior professionals had diminishing returns in the eyes of the organisation.

Thinking about the situation you mentioned, what do you think led to that experience? (For instance, was it related to team dynamics, organizational culture, personal attitudes, or other contextual factors)

Looking back, I believe the situation stemmed from a combination of economic, cultural and interpersonal factors. Financial constraints played a major role: the company had limited resources, and the management consciously decided to allocate training, development and salary budgets toward younger employees who had lower salary expectations. The underlying logic seemed to be that investing in senior employees was less worthwhile, either because they were perceived as less adaptable or simply because their cost was higher.

Culturally, I moved from organisations with a strong emphasis on structured training, transparent performance evaluations and long-term career paths to an environment where managerial professionalism and communication were considerably weaker. Many decisions were communicated vaguely or indirectly, and employees often learned about organisational changes informally rather than through clear, official channels. This created a climate of uncertainty and mistrust, where changes felt arbitrary rather than strategic. There was also a noticeable element of interpersonal bias. I observed clear differences in how male and female employees were treated, and how younger employees were favoured over older ones. The director tended to align himself more with male colleagues, often involving them in informal activities outside work, which strengthened their visibility and influence. Women—especially senior women—were sometimes treated with condescension or viewed as less suitable for high-visibility opportunities. This created an atmosphere where gender and age stereotypes shaped daily interactions and decisions.

The rapid evolution of digital technology added another layer. Digital-native employees in their twenties and thirties were naturally quicker with social media and digital tools, and this was sometimes used as justification for not investing in training for older employees. Even though I had strong communication skills and decades of experience working with traditional media, learning new tools would have required only reasonable training. Yet the assumption seemed to be that older employees could not or should not be expected to adapt. This attitude further reinforced the stereotype that technological change is the domain of younger workers alone.

Overall, the combination of financial pressures, a non-inclusive organisational culture, implicit biases linked to gender and age, and a lack of long-term vision in valuing senior expertise all contributed to the experience I lived.

How did you respond to that situation? (For example, did you talk to your manager or HR, share your feelings with colleagues, or prefer not to take any action and move on)

When I was told about the demotion, the removal of benefits and the drastic salary reduction, my initial reaction was very strong. I felt deeply wronged and seriously considered taking legal action. I consulted a lawyer, who told me clearly that I had a strong case and that we would likely win if we pursued it in court.

However, the legal route would have meant years of proceedings, significant emotional strain and financial costs that I was not sure I wanted to take on.

At nearly 55 years old, I was also aware of the reality of the job market in my field. I had already seen many colleagues of my age struggling to find new roles, despite having strong experience and qualifications. The idea of leaving the company without the guarantee of finding another job weighed heavily on me. I discussed the situation extensively with my family, but I did not talk about it with colleagues. There was a sense of embarrassment and vulnerability: overnight I no longer had a company car, I no longer attended management meetings and a new manager—who did not have my background or expertise—was placed above me.

Ultimately, after weighing all options, I decided to remain in the company and accept the demotion. It was a pragmatic choice, driven by the need for financial stability, continued pension contributions and the desire to avoid a long, exhausting legal battle. I chose to focus on maintaining my professionalism and performing my job well, even though I was acutely aware of the injustice of the situation. For almost ten years afterward, I continued working in a lower formal role while doing my best to preserve my dignity and motivation.

How were you personally or professionally affected by that experience? (For example, did it influence your motivation, confidence, wellbeing, stress level or relationships with colleagues and managers, performance, willingness to take initiative in projects)

The impact was profound and multifaceted. Emotionally, it was a painful experience. At the beginning, I felt extremely hurt, discouraged and even depressed. I had dedicated years to building a meaningful and successful career, and seeing it abruptly diminished was deeply upsetting. There is a particular kind of humiliation that comes from being undervalued after giving so much to your profession. It shakes your confidence and forces you to re-evaluate your professional identity.

The blow to my self-esteem was significant. Moving from a position of visibility and responsibility to a lower role with less influence felt like a step backward, not only professionally but personally. At the same time, I was determined not to let my performance decline, so I worked just as diligently as before, partly to protect my reputation and partly because I believed in doing my job well regardless of the circumstances.

My relationships at work remained cordial, but my trust in management was damaged. I gradually learned to distance myself emotionally, creating a sort of protective shell. I no longer invested myself with the same enthusiasm or initiative, because the lack of recognition made it clear that going the extra mile would not change my situation. This is a subtle yet powerful shift: you remain professional, but your internal motivation changes because you no longer feel valued.

Financially, the consequences were significant. A lower salary not only affected my income during those years but also had long-term implications for my pension. Since pension calculations depend heavily on final earnings, the demotion created a negative effect that I still feel today. It was a costly experience both in the short and long term.

Over time, however, I learned to put things in perspective. Eventually, the opportunity for early retirement offered a way to step out of a situation that no longer aligned with my values or wellbeing. Even though the experience left a mark on me, it also helped me understand when it is time to close a chapter and prioritise my own health and quality of life.

Are you aware of any company policies or diversity programs that aim to prevent age discrimination? (For example, initiatives related to inclusion, equal opportunity, or age diversity management) Have you ever seen these policies actually applied in practice within your project team or department?

On paper, the company insisted that it supported inclusion and equal opportunities. There were training sessions, corporate meetings and internal communications emphasising equality. However, the lived reality was quite different. The environment was strongly male-oriented, and younger male employees tended to receive more visibility and developmental opportunities.

There was a theoretical option to report discriminatory behaviour to an internal consultant, but this person was part of the organisation rather than an external authority. This created a strong sense of vulnerability. Writing an email to report something inappropriate—such as a discriminatory comment or an unfair

decision—meant exposing yourself, because it would be easy to identify who had filed the complaint. Instead of offering protection, the system risked putting the complainant in an even more precarious position.

Consequently, although certain policies existed formally, they were not experienced as truly supportive or protective, particularly regarding sensitive issues such as age discrimination, gender bias or maternity-related disadvantage.

I did not see those policies applied in a meaningful or consistent way within my team or department. The official narrative around diversity and inclusion remained mostly theoretical, while the day-to-day reality reflected ingrained biases and long-standing cultural patterns. The company environment continued to operate in a male-dominated manner, where access to opportunities was influenced by personal affinities, gender and age rather than objective merit or clear organisational processes.

Several younger female colleagues experienced uncomfortable situations, especially when issues of maternity or traditional gender roles were involved. The mechanisms that were supposedly in place to support equal treatment were not perceived as safe or effective. Employees were reluctant to use them because the risk of retaliation or negative consequences felt too high.

Overall, there was a clear discrepancy between what the company declared in its official statements and what actually happened in daily practice. The lack of concrete implementation made the stated policies feel largely symbolic rather than truly operational.

Interview 8

Demographic questions

Current role: Project Planning & Control Specialist

Age: 52.

Gender: female

Years of experience: 27 years in the sector.

Educational level: Master's degree

Industry: Engineering and complex infrastructure projects.

Have you ever experienced or observed any form of age-based discrimination in your company? (For example, being excluded from training or reskilling opportunities, not being considered for certain projects, or feeling left out of informal gatherings or networking moments)

Yes, several times. The most significant episode happened when a team was being assembled for a very innovative project involving digital twin technologies, intelligent modelling, and IoT-based monitoring systems. It was a high-visibility initiative internally, meant to showcase the company's digital transformation capabilities.

Despite my long-standing experience in coordinating complex projects, I was not involved at all.

I actually discovered that the team had already been formed almost by chance: a younger colleague, while we were getting coffee, casually told me: "Oh, you didn't know about the project? I thought they had already informed you." That comment made me realise the decision had been made days earlier. The confirmation came shortly after, when I saw an internal email presenting the members of the new working group. Two of the main tasks listed were activities I had been managing for years, yet I hadn't even been consulted.

When I asked informally about the selection criteria, the explanation was vague and superficial: "For this initiative we need young people, faster, more used to working with new technologies." It was said lightly, but the message was clear: age had been used as an exclusion criterion.

I've noticed similar patterns in other situations as well. Younger colleagues often use side chats to exchange information about new digital tools—chats where senior profiles are simply not included, not out of hostility but by default. Training opportunities on new software are sometimes communicated at the very last minute—emails sent the night before or early in the morning—which tends to favor those with more flexible schedules, often the younger employees.

Finally, when it comes to informal events or short business trips, invitations almost always go to the same younger group. It's never said explicitly that senior staff are unnecessary, but the feeling is that our presence is seen as less relevant or less aligned with the "image" the company wants to project.

Thinking about the situation you mentioned, what do you think led to that experience? (For instance, was it related to team dynamics, organizational culture, personal attitudes, or other contextual factors)

I believe it stems from a combination of organizational culture, implicit stereotypes, and a natural tendency for managers to surround themselves with people similar to them. On one side, innovation, speed, and digital readiness are strongly emphasized. Even though these qualities have nothing to do with age, they're often automatically associated with younger employees. It's a deeply rooted stereotype: the idea that younger workers are "born into digital," whereas senior ones must constantly catch up.

On the other hand, project managers often build generationally homogeneous teams. I don't think there is an explicit intention to exclude senior profiles, but there is a spontaneous preference for working with people who share similar backgrounds, age brackets, or communication styles.

Another aspect relates to external image. For innovative projects, there is a tendency to showcase "fresh-looking" teams, as if this automatically conveyed modernity to clients. It's not something people say openly, but you can feel it influencing decisions.

And then there is the subtle but persistent assumption that senior employees are less flexible, less willing to learn or to invest time in new technologies. In reality, based on my experience, many senior colleagues are the ones who devote the most energy to staying updated, exactly because they know how quickly things evolve.

How did you respond to that situation? (For example, did you talk to your manager or HR, share your feelings with colleagues, or prefer not to take any action and move on)

At first, I didn't react. I was quite hurt and needed time to process the situation. I didn't want it to be perceived as a personal issue—or worse, as emotional oversensitivity.

After a couple of weeks, I decided to ask for an informal meeting with my manager. During the conversation I sensed a bit of discomfort. He clearly didn't expect me to bring up the issue and he repeated several times: "It wasn't a choice against you," without really addressing the actual motivation. He ended the meeting with "We'll speak about it again later," which, in reality, never happened.

I did notice a slight change afterwards: I was included in preliminary discussions on some digital initiatives, even if only to share my perspective.

Meanwhile, I decided to take back some control and enrolled in an external course related to digital technologies applied to project environments. It helped me update my skills but also regain confidence. In a recent project, a younger colleague who was leading a portion of the digital activities privately admitted he didn't understand why I hadn't been appointed as the reference person, considering the nature of the tasks involved.

How were you personally or professionally affected by that experience?

(For example, did it influence your motivation, confidence, wellbeing, stress level or relationships with colleagues and managers, performance, willingness to take initiative in projects)

On a personal level, the situation affected me—not because I necessarily wanted to join that specific team, but because of the underlying message. The idea that age could become the primary filter through which my value was assessed made me question how my contribution was being perceived. There were evenings when I went home wondering whether internal perceptions of my role had changed compared to previous years. It created stress and a sense of uncertainty.

Professionally, I believe I missed out on growth opportunities. Innovative projects are the ones that build internal visibility and often open the door to more strategic roles. Not being part of them means risking being sidelined from certain career trajectories.

I also noticed subtle changes in my own behavior: I became more attentive to team dynamics, more selective about when to volunteer for initiatives, and more aware that, for senior employees, sometimes you need to "prove twice as much" to obtain the same level of visibility.

There were even a couple of occasions where long-standing clients asked me why I wasn't involved in specific internal initiatives. It was always a bit awkward, as I didn't have a clear answer.

Are you aware of any company policies or diversity programs that aim to prevent age discrimination? (For example, initiatives related to inclusion, equal opportunity, or age diversity management) Have you ever seen these policies actually applied in practice within your project team or department?

Formally yes. There are internal documents that mention diversity & inclusion and that, at least theoretically, consider age as one of the dimensions of diversity. However, in practice, I've never seen any concrete initiative specifically aimed at generational inclusion.

There are no structured reskilling programs for senior profiles, nor mandatory guidelines that managers must follow when composing project teams. There are broader D&I initiatives, but age remains a marginal theme, often overlooked. The real implementation depends almost entirely on individual managers' sensitivity, which results in significant differences from one project to another.

Interview 9

Demographic question

Current role: Senior Project Integration & Risk Management Coordinator

Age: 55

Gender: female

Year of experience: 28

Educational level: Master's Degree

Industry: Industrial Plant Engineering

Have you ever experienced or observed any form of age-based discrimination in your company? (For example, being excluded from training or reskilling opportunities, not being considered for certain projects, or feeling left out of informal gatherings or networking moments)

Yes, I have experienced age-based discrimination on several occasions, sometimes in subtle ways and other times more openly. One particularly significant episode happened during the launch of a pilot initiative on agile project governance. This initiative was internally promoted as a crucial step in the company's digital transformation journey, with the objective of testing hybrid planning tools and new methodologies before expanding them to broader teams.

I learned about the project only after the team had already been selected. A younger colleague casually asked me if I was attending the agile workshop later that week, and that was the moment I realized I had not been included or even informed. When I asked my manager why I had been excluded, the explanation I received was vague: he mentioned the need for people who were "quicker" and "more familiar with fast-paced iterations," implying that age was associated with slower adaptability.

Beyond this specific case, I have noticed recurring patterns. Informal brainstorming sessions often circulate within younger groups, and last-minute training notifications tend to be shared at times that are easier for younger professionals to accommodate. Digital conversations frequently flow through informal Teams channels where senior profiles are not purposely excluded, but simply not thought of. There is also a noticeable tendency to select younger colleagues for short business trips or quick client demos, creating a disparity in visibility and exposure.

Thinking about the situation you mentioned, what do you think led to that experience? (For instance, was it related to team dynamics, organizational culture, personal attitudes, or other contextual factors)

I believe these experiences stem from a combination of deeply rooted cultural assumptions and practical organizational habits. Over the years, the company has placed a strong emphasis on innovation and digital transformation. This has unintentionally created an association between technological enthusiasm and younger age groups, even though capability and interest are not age-dependent. Managers may subconsciously equate "new" with "young," simplifying their decision-making but reinforcing stereotypes.

Team dynamics also play a significant role. Managers often select project members from the group of people with whom they interact most frequently on a daily basis. These individuals tend to be younger professionals involved in operational tasks, making them more visible and therefore more likely to be chosen for experimental initiatives.

There is also the issue of external image. When the company wants to present a modern or agile profile to clients, it often showcases younger staff members. While not explicitly stated, this underlying preference influences many decisions. Another contributing factor is what I would call a “protective instinct”: some managers believe they are sparing senior employees from chaotic or time-consuming innovation projects. Although well-intentioned, such assumptions lead to exclusion rather than support.

How did you respond to that situation? (For example, did you talk to your manager or HR, share your feelings with colleagues, or prefer not to take any action and move on)

Initially, I chose to stay quiet and observe. I wanted to determine whether the exclusion was an isolated incident or part of a broader pattern. After giving myself time to reflect, I scheduled a conversation with my manager. I presented concrete examples of situations in which I had successfully managed complexity, rapid change, and high-pressure environments. I wanted to challenge the assumption that age and adaptability were linked.

Although my manager was polite, his responses remained superficial, repeating statements such as “It wasn’t a choice against you” or “The team was already formed.” He did not delve into the underlying reasoning. However, after our conversation, I noticed a small shift: he began involving me earlier in the preliminary phases of other projects, as if he had realized he had underestimated my potential contribution.

At the same time, I took independent action. I enrolled in a professional course on agile methodologies and digital project management tools to reinforce my position and demonstrate concretely that interest in innovation is not bound to age. I also spoke with a few trusted colleagues, particularly those with seniority similar to mine, and found that several had experienced similar forms of exclusion. This helped me contextualize my experience as part of a broader organizational pattern rather than as a personal shortcoming.

How were you personally or professionally affected by that experience? (For example, did it influence your motivation, confidence, wellbeing, stress level or relationships with colleagues and managers, performance, willingness to take initiative in projects)

The experience had an impact on me, though in a nuanced way. Personally, I initially felt overlooked, not because that specific assignment was essential to me, but because of the symbolic message behind my exclusion. It made me question how my expertise was perceived after decades of consistent contributions. For a short period, I became more cautious in how I positioned myself, hesitating slightly when opportunities related to innovation were mentioned.

However, as I reflected more deeply, I realized that withdrawing would only reinforce the age-related assumptions I wanted to counter. This turning point pushed me to be more intentional and strategic. I started expressing my interest in innovation-related projects more proactively and became more vocal during kickoff meetings and cross-functional discussions.

Professionally, the situation motivated me to strengthen my visibility. I emphasized the integration of my risk management expertise with newer digital methodologies, positioning myself as someone capable of bridging traditional and emerging practices. This dual competence improved the recognition I received and enhanced my collaboration with younger colleagues, many of whom appreciated my openness to their tools and approaches.

In the end, the experience did not diminish my motivation; rather, it helped me redefine my professional identity with greater clarity, encouraging a more active and assertive approach to my own development.

Are you aware of any company policies or diversity programs that aim to prevent age discrimination? (For example, initiatives related to inclusion, equal opportunity, or age diversity management) Have you ever seen these policies actually applied in practice within your project team or department?

I know that the company has broad Diversity & Inclusion guidelines, but I am not entirely certain whether these policies explicitly address age as a standalone dimension. The materials I have seen tend to emphasize

gender representation, cultural diversity, and general principles of equal opportunity. Age might be mentioned indirectly within these broader frameworks, but I have never encountered a clearly defined initiative or program devoted specifically to generational diversity.

As for practical application, I have not observed structured mechanisms aimed at ensuring fair access to training, reskilling, or project opportunities across different age groups. Team composition decisions are rarely formalized, and there is no system in place to monitor the distribution of opportunities. This means that inclusive behavior depends largely on individual managers' awareness and personal values, resulting in significant variability between departments. In my own area, I have not seen any explicit effort to promote intergenerational collaboration or to mitigate age-related biases.

Interview 10

Demographic question

Current role: Project Manager

Age: 50

Gender: male

Year of experience: 18

Educational level: Master's Degree

Industry: Oil & Gas

Have you ever experienced or observed any form of age-based discrimination in your company? (For example, being excluded from training or reskilling opportunities, not being considered for certain projects, or feeling left out of informal gatherings or networking moments)

So far, fortunately, I have never experienced any direct discrimination related to my age, nor have I seen it clearly applied to colleagues. The difficulties or tensions I faced in my career were always linked to other factors: people's personalities, how the organisation was managed, or the general level of professionalism — but never to ageism.

Since I have spent most of my career in the Oil & Gas sector, which is very technical and quite niche, seniority is often considered an advantage rather than a barrier. In fact, my experience has frequently played in my favour: I regularly receive offers from head-hunters precisely because the combination of my role (project manager/project engineer) and nearly twenty years of experience in this field is considered rare and valuable. Even when conflicts occurred, they were never caused by my age but rather by character differences, professional disagreements, or complex organisational situations.

Thinking about the situation you mentioned, what do you think led to that experience? (For instance, was it related to team dynamics, organizational culture, personal attitudes, or other contextual factors)

Since I don't have a specific age-related discrimination case to recall, I can only reflect on the challenges I've experienced and what I've observed. In the contexts where I struggled, the cause was never age, but rather the organisational culture, the quality of the management, and the overall level of professionalism.

In some small family-run companies, for example, I witnessed a lack of transparency, people shouting, poor communication, and decisions driven more by personal preferences than by objective criteria. In these environments, people were sidelined not because they were too young or too old, but because their personality didn't fit, because they disagreed with certain decisions, or because they weren't good at "selling themselves." In my industry specifically, the main differentiator is not age but the ability to understand the sector's technicalities and "language": terminology, implicit rules, derating of motors, design parameters, and technical standards. Those who can't keep up with this language fall behind, regardless of age. So, I would say that the most relevant factors are organisational culture, management style, professionalism, and the ability to stay aligned with the required competences.

How did you respond to that situation? (For example, did you talk to your manager or HR, share your feelings with colleagues, or prefer not to take any action and move on)

In the difficult situations I experienced — again, not age-related but linked to internal conflicts or unprofessional environments — my reactions changed a lot over the years. When I was younger, I tended to react more impulsively. I was more fiery, more confrontational, and more willing to fight if I felt something was unfair, even if it meant creating tension or making enemies.

With time, experience, and yes, age, my way of responding changed significantly. Today I am much more selective about the battles I choose to fight. I try to remain professional, focus on doing my job well, and I only get annoyed when mistakes depend on me. I no longer allow every dynamic to affect me as it once did. You could say I developed a kind of selective indifference: if something does not touch my values or my integrity, I simply let it go.

When necessary, I have still spoken to managers or colleagues, sharing feedback and my perspective, but never interpreting situations as age-related. Now I try to protect my energy and my time — especially outside of work — and concentrate on what truly matters.

How were you personally or professionally affected by that experience? (For example, did it influence your motivation, confidence, wellbeing, stress level or relationships with colleagues and managers, performance, willingness to take initiative in projects)

Rather than a single negative experience, it was a combination of many professional situations that shaped me. The evolution of my career — including both positive and challenging moments — influenced the way I prioritise things. I didn't experience age-based discrimination, but I went through several organisational difficulties that changed how I look at work today.

Now, at this stage in life, I value my time much more than before. Professionally, I always try to perform at my best; I get genuinely upset if I make even a small mistake, like forgetting to inform a colleague properly. But at the same time, I no longer chase every possible career step. I've turned down opportunities that might have advanced my career because they would have taken too much time away from my family or significantly increased my stress.

In terms of relationships, experience has made me less reactive and more pragmatic. I know I cannot control everything or everyone, so I focus on maintaining professionalism and respect. This approach has helped me find a healthier balance between work and personal life.

Are you aware of any company policies or diversity programs that aim to prevent age discrimination? (For example, initiatives related to inclusion, equal opportunity, or age diversity management) Have you ever seen these policies being applied concretely in your project team or department?

Yes, throughout my career I've worked in organisations where diversity and inclusion policies were very structured, although not always specifically aimed at age. In one of my previous roles, for example, there was a very strong culture centred on integrity and diversity. There were anonymous reporting channels, strict rules about professional behaviour, and zero tolerance for any form of discrimination — whether related to age, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

These policies were not just words on paper: they were applied consistently. You couldn't accept even small gifts from suppliers — not even pens or notebooks — to avoid any potential moral compromise. The philosophy was clear: technical mistakes could be tolerated within certain limits, but ethical mistakes were unacceptable.

In my current organisation, especially after a recent acquisition by a larger industrial group, I've noticed an increasing focus on integrity, anti-violence initiatives, diversity, and inclusion. These initiatives are not

specifically targeted at older employees, but they are aimed at everyone and contribute to creating a more respectful and professional working environment.

Yes, especially in large multinational contexts, I have seen these policies applied in practice. In one of my previous roles, the rules on diversity and inclusion were very clear and genuinely enforced. Offensive comments, discriminatory behaviour, or ethically questionable actions were treated as extremely serious matters.

In my current organisation, a recent acquisition by a larger industrial group is bringing a more structured approach to these themes. I see more communication, more awareness initiatives, and a stronger emphasis on respect and integrity. These are not age-specific programmes, but they help build a neutral and professional environment where discrimination is less likely to occur.

My impression is that when these policies are truly supported by leadership — not just written down — they make a real difference. They help ensure that differences, including age differences, are managed in a respectful and professional way.

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