

## Mind Your Language: Promoting An Age-Inclusive Workforce

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Can words reveal your age? Some years ago, I was lecturing to undergraduate students and when I used the word 'disco', raucous laughter from the audience followed, with one student calling out, 'what's that word'? I explained that a disco was at a club where you dance to pop music. Then another student called out – 'so pop music, like in the 1980's? oh, you are sooo old!' Indeed, researchers from the Perspectus Global Research Agency, found that there are a range of words that younger Millennials (1980-1994) and Generation Z (1995-2010) have never heard of and are deemed to be outdated. And guess what? 'disco' was one of those words!

So, if words are associated with different ages, how do organisations communicate to different groups of people in the workforce at the same time? In other words, with an unprecedented up to [five generations](#) working together, how do organisations get the same message across to Baby Boomers (1946 – 1964), Generation X (1965- 1979), Millennials/Generation Y (1980-1994), Generation Z (1995-2010)? This article offers some insights on how organisations can promote an age-inclusive workforce.

Language is a powerful tool for building inclusion at work. Inclusive language enables everyone in your organisation to feel valued and respected and able to contribute their talents to drive organisational performance ([Diversity Council Australia](#)). However, the Australian Human Resources Institute (AHRI)/ Australian Human Rights Commission (AHR) 2021 report on Employing and Retaining Older Workers 2021, revealed that 69.5% of organisations do not offer line management training on how to manage different generations.

While [research](#) has found relatively small generational differences in preferences and values at work, it is many people's belief that differences between generations exist, and that adds fuel to generational bias and stereotypes. The irony is that using generational labels are in itself stereotyping people based on age. The term [age meta-stereotypes](#) looks at what we think others believe about us based on our age group and as a consequence, can have critical workplace implications. For example, stereotypes about older people's ability to learn new tasks can interfere with the training they will receive, and at worst, prohibit any training being offered at all. So as [ageing is a loaded term](#) that holds negative connotations, it begs the question as to how organisations can promote age-inclusive workforces.

A starting point for organisations to promote age-inclusive workforces is to address age discrimination and bias that often occurs during the selection and recruitment process. Just scrolling through the language used on job-seeking sites, it's not uncommon to see words such as 'energetic person required for young company' or 'five to seven years' experience, that are [ageist phrases](#), as it deters older applicants from applying. The AHRI/AHR 2021 report, found that over two thirds of respondents' organisations seldom or never offer unconscious bias training to their line managers. Of those who do offer such training, half say it does not address the age-related biases that are pervasive in many of our workplaces. In fact, the State of the (Older) Nation 2021 report released in June 2021, revealed that age-related discrimination continues to be an issue for more than a third of older Australians (aged 50 years and over), with 37% having experienced some form of age-related discrimination and 26% experiencing employment-related discrimination since turning 50. Yet, living standards across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) would be improved substantially by increased participation of older workers in employment – extending working lives could boost gross domestic product (GDP) per capita by 19% in 2050 on average in OECD countries ([OECD, 2020](#)).

An array of resources are available to promote an age-inclusive workforce such as:

The OECD 2020 report, [Promoting an Age-Inclusive Workforce – Living, Learning and Earning Longer](#), presents a business case for greater age diversity at the workplace and debunks several myths about generational differences in work performance, attitudes and motivations towards work. In this report there are practical examples to help organisations develop all-age and life-stage policies covering the full span of workers careers, as well as the promotion of life-long learning and good health at work.

The Australian Government has a [style manual](#) for inclusive language, specifically in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, age diversity, cultural and linguistic diversity, gender and sexual diversity and people with disability. With the age diversity style manual, there are examples on how to use respectful and consistent language if age is relevant. For example, the term 'older people' is acceptable. However, the term 'old people' is unacceptable and disrespectful.

The Diversity Council Australia's [# Words at Work Report](#), suggest five steps to inclusive language:

1. **Keep an open mind:** Be open to changing what you have always thought is 'normal', respectful and appropriate to say.
2. **Focus on the person first**, rather than the demographic group they belong to. For example: Instead of saying, it's great having Charles in our team, being a Baby Boomer he knows so much. Why not try saying, it's great having Charles in our team, as we have much to learn from his extensive knowledge.
3. **Consider context:** language that may be fine outside of work can be non-inclusive at work. For example, the term [digital native](#) used in job advertisements, is an ageist phrase, as it reinforces the myth that older people aren't comfortable with technology. A more age-neutral approach is to refer to the capabilities required for the job.
4. **If in doubt ask:** You don't need to know all the answers. If you're not sure what terminology someone prefers, just ask them.
5. **Keep calm and respond:** Sometimes our unconscious biases mean we can say things that exclude others – even when we do not intend to.

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the importance of meaningful language for communication, connection and productivity, particularly working remotely. According to a recent [McKinsey report on overcoming pandemic fatigue](#), organisations are waking up to the need for greater empathy and compassion to create a workplace that can unleash the full potential of their people even beyond the crisis. Undeniably, the [disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic](#) is an opportunity to re-imagine the well-being of an inclusive workforce and by doing so, embrace channels of open and inclusive communication.

In closing, communication in an organisation must work for **everyone** to maintain strong working relationships and which can help build an age-inclusive workforce – organisational productivity and sustainability depend on this. If you have time, have a look at [40 words that will reveal your true age](#) – it'll make riveting conversation over lunch with your multigenerational colleagues!



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