

Occupational Hazards

April 10, 2008

Ageist Language Affects Workplace Productivity, Profits

By Laura Walter

According to an analysis of age-discrimination lawsuits, using even subtle ageist language with older workers has a negative impact on employee productivity and company profits.

Demographic trends point to a growing number of seniors in the workplace, with workers coming out of retirement or remaining in their jobs past their expected retirement age. Despite the increased presence of older employees, researchers discovered that ageist language still exists in many workplaces – and it can have damaging effects for both companies and workers.

“Our research has clearly shown links between ageist language and reported health outcomes as broad as reduced life satisfaction, lowered self-esteem and even depression,” said Bob McCann, an associate professor of management communication at University of Southern California’s Marshall School of Business.

McCann studied the role ageist language plays in age-discrimination lawsuits and unearthed hundreds of age-related comments mentioned in such lawsuits, including “too long on the job,” “that old woman,” “that old goat,” “a sleepy kind of guy with no pizzazz,” “old fart” and “he has bags under his eyes.”

Other comments that indicate a preference for a younger work force also affect older workers. Remarks such as “We need some young blood around here,” “Let’s bring in the young guns” or “Let’s make some room for some MBAs” represent the type of “young blood” ageist language that has become common, the researchers say.

This type of communication appeared in numerous cases, including one where a company president said he wanted a “young line of command” and a case where management expressed its wish to “get rid of the good old Joes.”

The Price of Ageism

McCann points out that the workplace can be a fertile, problematic area for ageist communication, especially since people derive so much of their identity from work.

“It is quite plausible that retirement decisions may be hastened and work satisfaction affected by intergenerational talk at work,” he said.

Furthermore, age discrimination can lead to significant expenses for corporation. In FY 2006, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission received nearly 17,000 charges of age discrimination, resolving more than 14,000 and recovering \$51.5 million in monetary benefits.

Costs from ageism lawsuit settlements and judgments can run into the millions. The California Public Employees’ Retirement System, for example, paid a \$250 million settlement agreement in 2003. In

that case, disabled public safety officers said their disability retirement benefits were based on their age when they were hired.

McCann hopes that as the presence of older employees in the workplace increases, management and younger workers can better appreciate the value of their experienced counterparts.

“Then,” he said, “maybe ageist comments can be put out to pasture for good.”