

From gray to white: Older workers and ageism in the 21st century

As a 61 year-old executive coach, employee relations consultant and former employment law attorney, ageism hits home.

Like me, numerous older workers don't want to retire. They want to leave a mark. They want to be part of an organization. They want more money. Or, in today's feast or famine economy, they *need* more money.

The stereotype that we're "past our prime", "over the hill", "can't learn new tricks" simply isn't true. Most of us are or can add real value to organizations. And there's a need for our labor.

Marci Alboher is a vice president at Encore.org, and author of *The Encore Career Handbook: How to Make a Living and a Difference in the Second Half of Life*. She talks about the need to fight ageism while "at the same time, we, as individuals, can take steps to try to stay relevant, needed, and on the job longer." She recommends the following:

1. Connect with younger people. If you're going to stay in the workplace, chances are you'll be working with



Marci Alboher talks about the need to fight ageism while "at the same time, we, as individuals, can take steps to try to stay relevant, needed, and on the job longer." younger colleagues, perhaps even reporting to a younger boss. Find some younger mentors who can teach you a thing or two. And offer your time to younger colleagues who might welcome your perspective.

2. Embrace learning. The best investment you can make as you age is in your own skills. Get comfortable being a lifelong learner. Young people realize that work is about constantly learning new things -- they also realize that it's not always about getting a degree. While some shifts will require finishing or getting a new degree, learning today often means watching YouTube videos or LinkedIn Learning courses on a lunch break, listening to a podcast while you commute home, or spending your weekends working on a certificate that will enhance your qualifications for something you want to do next.
3. Cultivate a side gig, or two. Whether you have a job or are self-employed, it's handy to have a few different ways to earn some income, especially during times of career transition or turbulence. Even freelancers may want to think about adding a different kind of gig to the mix, both to add some variety or use a different skillset, and to be prepared for unanticipated slowdowns in your area of focus. There are countless areas to consider: website design, consulting, training, facilitating, coaching, counseling, and driving, just to give a few ideas.

4. Consider an internship program. Google.org recently made headlines by offering its employees the opportunity to get paid while doing full-time pro bono work for nonprofit partners for up to six months. A few months earlier, Starbucks announced a pilot program allowing 36 employees to work 20 hours per week at a nonprofit partner organization and 20 hours per week at the coffee shop, while collecting full-time pay. Look for opportunities for yourself – or talk with your employer about offering one. It's a great way for a company to donate experience to the community.
5. Become an anti-ageism advocate. If you feel comfortable using your voice, find ways to encourage your workplace and your field to be more welcoming to older employees. You can get smart about ageism at OldSchool.info, a great resource created by anti-ageism activist Ashton Applewhite.
6. Volunteer. Give your professional skills to causes you care about or offer your time one-on-one as a mentor, tutor or coach. Find a program that knows how to use volunteers well and where you'll be making a difference. As a volunteer, you can immerse in a new area, make valuable contacts, and learn new skills – all of which can lead you to a new kind of work. Plus, you can do it while still keeping your day job or during times of transition.

Combatting Age Discrimination

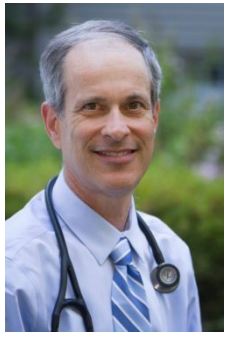


Dana Sullivan of Buchanan Angeli Altschul & Sullivan LLP.

If you believe you are being discriminated against based on age, plaintiffs' attorney Dana Sullivan of Buchanan Angeli Altschul & Sullivan LLP in Portland OR, has three suggestions:

1. Do what you can to find out the reason for the decision you believe to be discriminatory. Using a professional tone, ask the manager making the decision for feedback about the basis for his or her decision. If you've been fired, consult an attorney to learn whether you have legal rights entitling you to information about the reason for your termination. For example, Oregon has a law entitling employees and former employees to a copy of their personnel records. In Washington, an employer is obligated to provide a written statement of the reasons for discharge upon request.
2. If you have been subject to some adverse action short of termination and you have reason to believe the decision was due to your age, bring the matter to the attention of a manager or human resources representative following the complaint procedure established by your employer. Employers are generally vigilant about ensuring that employees are not subject to retaliation because the risk of liability is high. It is generally understood that retaliation claims are easier to prove than discrimination claims and jurors tend to more readily award high verdicts for retaliation.
3. Note any comments you hear others in the workplace make equating old age with lower levels of energy or competence. I am constantly surprised by how freely many people still joke about old age, when similar comments about race or gender would never be tolerated. Such comments could prove to be useful evidence in support of a claim of age discrimination.

Taking Care of Our Health as We Age



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Charles Elder, M.D.

For older folks like us, the body obviously is not as adaptable as in youth. To stay in top form, we seniors must exercise vigilance in attending to our health. Among the most important health tips for working seniors to remember is to stay on a good routine. From a practical standpoint, what does this mean?

According to Charles Elder, M.D., who specializes in both Eastern and Western medicine in Portland, OR, "Our bodies function most optimally on a daily 'circadian' rhythm, in synchrony with the sun.

"When and how we eat is as important as what we eat. Your digestive fire is naturally strongest in the middle of the day, when the sun is highest in the sky. Be sure to take the time to have a good, well balanced, nutritious hot lunch every day. Dinner should be lighter. Digestion isn't as strong later in the evening. If we eat our main meal too late, the toxic by-products of improper or incomplete digestion can accumulate in the physiology, setting the stage for chronic disease. Eating heavily in the evening is thus an under-recognized contributor to chronic pain, fatigue, obesity, depression, and many other chronic health problems."

What about snacking between meals? Dr. Elder says it's okay as long as we "don't graze! In other words, when you eat, allow what you have eaten to digest before you eat again, which usually takes about three hours. And unless your physician has specifically instructed you otherwise, you should NEVER snack after dinner!"

Dr. Elder recommends generally getting to bed by 10 pm, and out of bed by 6 am. "In addition, be sure to get some exercise first thing in the morning every day. Bear in mind that exercise should remove stress from, not create stress for, the body. You don't have to train for a decathlon, unless you want to. A brisk walk counts as exercise, and is good for just about everyone."

Finally, Dr. Elder shares a bonus tip. "Try doing a 24-hour liquid fast once a week, from lunch to lunch. Periodic fasting promotes the body's inherent repair mechanisms and enhances longevity and health. Have a normal lunch, then only liquids until lunch the next day.

"I'm not saying no calories for 24 hours, just nothing solid. Dinner might be some tea, or broth, while breakfast could be some fresh squeezed juice, or a smoothie. Then when lunch the next day rolls around, it's back to your usual diet."

I don't know about the rest of you, but after hearing Dr. Elder's advice, I realize I've got to step up my health game!

Older Workers in Action

Francesca Vollaro



"I don't need to be the largest personality in the room. I'm here to support the team and build trust." - Francesca Vollaro

Francesca Vollaro had recently left a corporate career. Her new life afforded her time to focus on her passion for mentoring women and young people. One day at church, a friend said, "Francesca, you're doing so much volunteering. Why not work for a nonprofit?"

That comment sent her to the Encore.org website where Francesca learned about the Encore Fellowship program, which matches seasoned professionals with high-impact roles in social sector organizations.

Subsequently, she heard from Janet Shaw, an Encore.org staff member, about an opportunity to be an Encore Fellow with the Girl Scouts.

Francesca's entire career had been focused on change management. The Girl Scouts needed someone with her background to lead a project that would help the staff work more collaboratively on major initiatives. Before long, the role turned into a full-time job – Senior Director, Process Improvement and Change Management. "I was in love with the mission and the team," she says.

Despite her years of experience, Francesca embraced the new role with a sense of humility. "I don't need to be the largest personality in the room. I'm here to support the team and build trust," she said.

"Young people are very vocal about speaking out and making their opinions known," she said. "That's not the way I was taught. We were taught you had to pay your dues and prove yourself."

Given that her role involves communication, she had to figure out ways to allow everyone's voices to be heard. There were other adjustments – making decisions more quickly, doing more work via the phone or text rather than in email or on a computer. "I am much more savvy at using technology now," she says.

The salary is lower than what Francesca earned as a senior executive in the for-profit sector, but it works for her. "I'm older," she explained. "I have a 401k. I'm living a simpler life. And I'm not striving as much. I no longer feel bound to work weekends. Yet I still earn a livable wage and have great vacations and benefits."

At 61, she has found herself beginning a whole new chapter. "This work is an amazing intersection of all that I care about. Our mission is to develop girls of passion, courage and leadership, and I see what they are empowered to do through the opportunities we bring them."

Frank Wagner



Frank Wagner

Frank Wagner started his career as an Assistant Professor of Management at a California university. After a few years, he switched to independent consulting by providing leadership training, primarily to corporations. After a few decades in leadership development, he started coaching using the methodology developed by his good friend and recognized thought leader Marshall Goldsmith.

Now 71, Frank is busier than he's ever been. Why not retire? Because he loves two things about his work: 1) helping others in ways that make a positive difference to them; and 2) he has a lot of fun doing it.

Frank says, "My wife used to tell me I never had a real job. Now she tells me I work too much. However, making a positive difference while enjoying the process is hard to retire from."

Maria Greco Danaher

Maria Greco Danaher is a shareholder in the labor and employment law firm Ogletree Deakins in Pittsburgh. However, she didn't follow a traditional path to the practice of law.

After finishing an undergraduate degree in music, Maria worked as a Middle School band director while teaching 30 to 40 private piano students each week.

Maria decided that a career in the law was what she wanted to do next. Litigation seemed to be the natural role for the oldest of six siblings, and who was always in some sort of negotiation (or out-and-out argument!) That decision led to a 30+ year career in state and federal trial work, both as an in-house and outside lawyer.

After raising three children (and spoiling seven grandchildren!), Maria started to look more closely at the world of trials and courtroom arguments, and began to realize that mindful and measured communication was resolving more cases than the winning-and-losing strategy employed in most litigation. That insight led to mindfulness training and a 40-hour mediation class.

At 68, Maria now spends much of her time handling informal but productive settlement sessions with opposing counsel, leading formal mediations as a neutral, and conducting Mindful Communication technique classes for clients and other lawyers. Maria has found that moving toward a less judgmental approach helps people understand that there's more than one way to solve a problem, and that using less energy to fight can be more productive in the long run. "Age is not a factor in becoming a more mindful communicator," she says.

Before you think Maria's gone soft, let me inform you that she holds a fourth-degree black belt in karate, and continues to teach self-defense to women. "Strength builds confidence," she says, "and confidence in yourself adds wisdom at any age."

Dave Dahl



"One of these days," Dave Dahl jokes, "I need to retire from my 'retirement'."

After Dave's Killer Bread was sold in 2015, Dave Dahl could have gone into a comfortable retirement. However, rather than focusing on his golf game or getting a suntan on a beach, Dave threw himself into several activities.

He turned his passion for collecting African art into a business with a philanthropic bent. "The art I collect and sell is called 'tourist art,'" he says, "meaning they're copies of original works." Through a network of representatives in several African countries, he ensures that members of poor African tribes do the work and that the money goes to them.

Dave's passion to create second chance employment opportunities for the formerly incarcerated continues. He hosts a podcast where he interviews ex-felons who have become entrepreneurs. He also supports organizations such as Constructing Hope, which helps people with criminal pasts develop careers in the construction trades.

In partnership with a radio station, Dave is launching a new podcast called "Against the Grain," which will profile people who have overcome extraordinary challenges or setbacks to become positive, productive citizens.

Finally, there's his work as front man for the band, the Killer Granddaddies.

Between business, philanthropy and rock 'n' roll, he's busier than ever. "One of these days," Dave jokes, "I need to retire from my 'retirement'."