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Hong Kong must end age discrimination in the workplace

York Chow says the government should raise public awareness and implement training programmes for older workers, while employers must do more to engage mature employees

Some say age is just a number. Yet many will contend that it is a number that matters a great deal in the Hong Kong workplace, including in the decision on whether a person should be hired, promoted or made redundant. The Equal Opportunities Commission has just released the findings of our exploratory study on age discrimination in employment, which was launched in response to the growing public attention on this issue.

The results, based on a phone survey with 401 respondents as well as qualitative in-depth interviews with key stakeholders such as employers and legislators, reveal that age discrimination is occurring in employment.

More than one in three employed respondents have faced some form of age discrimination at work over the past five years, including by being paid lower salaries, denied advancement opportunities and targeted for redundancy in organisational restructuring exercises.

Mature workers, especially those aged 50 and above, report being particularly susceptible to age-discriminatory treatments.

Nearly one in four said they had been denied a promotion due to their age, compared with only 8 per cent of employed respondents below the age of 30 who made the same assertion.

Workers across other age groups agreed: more than two-thirds of employed respondents felt that workers aged 50 and above were vulnerable to age discrimination.

This is a worrying trend, given our rapidly ageing population. According to government projections, nearly one-third of Hong Kong's population will be aged 65 or above by 2041, with 52 being the median age.

Concurrently, we are facing a shrinking labour force, down from 3.6 million in 2014 to 3.11 million over the next five decades. This demographic shift will have a serious impact on Hong Kong's future as a business centre, from the ability of employers to find sufficient manpower to the increased family care responsibilities likely to fall upon our working population.

A key step to addressing this must be a mindset shift about mature workers and shedding old stereotypes about different ages, such as thinking of older people as frail or unable to learn new skills.

Indeed, our people are living longer than ever before, and they are doing so with better health and vitality while also maintaining their social and professional networks.

In 2014, the life expectancy at birth for Hong Kong's men and women was 81.2 years and 86.7 years respectively, and these numbers are projected to steadily increase.

Not surprisingly then, many wish to continue working past the traditional retirement age, which helps to keep them active and engaged.

According to the Commission's study, more than 60 per cent of the employed respondents did not agree that there should be a mandatory retirement age in Hong Kong, and around two-thirds disagreed that employers should have the right to decide their employees' retirement age.

Clearly, one can no longer rely on age as an indicator of capability, performance or productivity. As a matter of fact, it would be to the benefit of employers to proactively engage mature workers, tap into a ready pool of talent, and leverage their experience, skills and enthusiasm.

For instance, over three-quarters of the respondents in the study would like to re-employed in a higher or equivalent position after retirement, such as in a freelance or part-time capacity. But currently, many mature workers still face negative stereotypes which pose barriers to their re-employment. And, contrary to developments in other ageing societies around the world, age-friendly initiatives remain rare in the Hong Kong workplace, including few structured re-employment programmes which target older workers.

So what more can be done to address this situation? In our study, the Commission made a number of recommendations. It is worth highlighting a few here.

First, the Government should monitor public views and developments on the prevalence of age discrimination through regular, large-scale surveys.

This will help to stir public dialogues and educate, so as to start discussion on legislating against age discrimination as soon as possible. Indeed, the study showed clear support for legislation, with 70 per cent of employed respondents across all age groups and educational levels agreeing that wider legal protection in this area is necessary.

To facilitate the re-employment of mature workers, relevant government bureaus and departments can also work with regulatory authorities and other bodies, both public and private, to ensure that existing practices do not inadvertently discriminate or deter mature workers from re-entering the workforce, such as cooperating with the insurance industry to tackle the high premiums for hiring mature workers.

It can also set an example in hiring mature workers in part-time capacities into relevant civil service posts by creating a pilot scheme for this purpose.

There continues to be a need for public education to eliminate ageist stereotypes in the workplace, which the government should lead.

This applies not only to older age groups, but also to younger workers, many of whom are frequently unfairly characterised as unreliable. Such misperceptions not only limit the equal employment opportunities for all workers, which restricts

their ability to contribute to society, but also shrinks the pool of available talent for employers.

Employers should also consider instituting age-friendly workplace initiatives to engage mature workers, such as age-friendly employment policy statements, two-way mentoring programmes, continuous skills development training, as well as flexible work arrangements. These would benefit not only older employees, but all staff.

Ageist stereotypes and the subsequent discriminatory treatment hurt all of us. With the reality of our rapidly ageing population, it is imperative that we work together to ensure that Hong Kong is an age-inclusive society.

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