

Review

The Case Study: High Time to Quit?

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In this paper, the practitioner-researchers talk about how one can be treated ethically, and how one ages positively in a caring society; they are asking questions or raising issues to find out more on an important subject for bioethics and sociology regarding ageism and the associated ethical implications. The methodology employed is the case study approach in which it can promote discussions, allowing the students or decision makers to see things from different perspectives, broadening their minds as well as applying it as a tool for studying decisional behavior and human resource management or more specifically, hiring and firing.

Keywords: Ageism, age discrimination, ethics, positive ageing, case study.

INTRODUCTION

Ageing in humans refers to a multidimensional process of physical, psychological, and social change. Some dimensions of ageing grow and expand over time, while others decline. Take, for example, reaction time of a person may slow down with age, while knowledge of world events, wisdom and insights may expand as one ages. Research shows that even late in life, potential exists for physical, mental, and social growth and development. One thinks positive about ageing and live longer (Stilbich, 2009). Ageing is an important part of all human societies reflecting the biological changes that occur, but also reflecting cultural and societal conventions. Low's survey in 2011 shows that 95 per cent or 171 respondents (a total of 180 respondents in Brunei, Malaysia, and Singapore over a period of 3 months from 1 January to 31 March 2011) conveyed the view that the old consists of people reaching the age of 60 years and above and that generally, "they are retired or that they are not working, and their incomes are based on savings, pensions, provident funds or government support" (respondents' input).

Population ageing occurs when the median age of the country or region rises. It is when people live longer and have fewer children. Population ageing is a shift in the

distribution of a country's population towards older ages. This is usually reflected in an increase in the population's mean and median ages, a decline in the proportion of the population composed of children, and a rise in the proportion of the population that is elderly. Population ageing is widespread across the world. Among the countries currently classified by the United Nations as more developed (with a total population of 1.2 billion in 2005), the overall median age rose from 29.0 in 1950 to 37.3 in 2000, and is forecast to rise to 45.5 by 2050. The corresponding figures for the world as a whole are 23.9 in 1950, 26.8 in 2000, and 37.8 in 2050. This meant that the older population is growing at a considerably faster rate than that of the world's total population. In absolute terms, the number of older persons has tripled over the last 50 years and will more than triple again over the next 50 years. In relative terms, the percentage of older persons is projected to more than double worldwide over the next half century (United Nation, 2004).

Ageism or Age Discrimination

Ageism, also called age discrimination is the discrimination against individuals or groups because of their age. It is a set of beliefs, attitudes, norms, and values used to justify age based prejudice, discrimination, and subordination (Kirpatrick et al., 1987). Ageism is defined

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as a combination of three connected elements. The first element is the harmful attitudes towards older people, old age, and the aging process. The second element is the discriminatory practices against older people. And the third element is the institutional practices and policies that perpetuate stereotypes about older people. The term was coined in 1968 by Robert Neil Butler (1927-2010), a physician, gerontologist and psychiatrist to describe discrimination against seniors (Wilkinson and Ferraro, 2002). The term has also been used to describe prejudice and discrimination against adolescent and children, including ignoring their ideas because they are too young, or expecting and assuming that they should behave in certain ways because of their age (Dominic and Ebrahimi, 2005). In a nutshell, ageism is a stereotyping of and discrimination against seniors at the one end and young people (including children) at the other end of the human spectrum.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A case study is defined as the intensive study of a single case where the purpose of that study is – at least in part – to shed light on a larger class of cases (a population) (Gerring, 2007:20). When studying decisional behavior, case study research may offer insight(s) into the intentions, the reasoning capabilities, and the information-processing procedures of the actors involved in a given setting. It is worthy to note that a case study is a useful approach and is particularly helpful to stimulate discussions among students, more so, when being helped or facilitated by the instructor. After going through a series of interviews, syndicate work and talking to several individuals and groups in a classroom setting, the authors here have come up and now present a case study. It is reckoned that the case study can be used to promote class discussions, allowing the students to look things from different perspectives, widening their minds as well as applying it as a tool or resource for human resource management teaching (Lim and Low, 2011). It is hoped that this case study also provides ideas and techniques to enhancing education, learning and awareness of ageism. The enhancement may mean development of deeper understanding and greater insights – or maybe it could mean that learning about the old and ageism is made more enjoyable and overall, it encourages readers towards life-long learning. Additionally, this case can be used to promote change in attitude towards the old. “If *the case study* or a story can engage us, take us from current reality into story reality and return us to the here and now, then it is possible that it can promote change in the sense that learning is change.

- a teller hears her story and makes greater sense of something (*in this case of the old and ageism*) – and changes

- a story told becomes an object for reflection with others and further sense is made for change
- telling a story (or a case) is cathartic – resulting in change
- the act of telling to a listener facilitates a positive change in level of self-esteem
- the act of telling a story brings about emotional insight and change happens”. (Moon, 2010: 132, *italics authors*).

Case Background

Nonetheless, the key point to note is what Claude Denson Pepper (1900 – 1989), an American politician and a spokesman for the elderly, has once said or indeed highlighted, “Ageism is as odious as racism and sexism.” Ageism is a discrimination against persons of a certain age group and a tendency to regard older persons as debilitated, unworthy of attention, or unsuitable for employment. At workplace, age discrimination occurs most often in hiring, usually because younger supervisors are afraid to manage more experienced older workers. It is important to realize that supervisors are not to be intimidated by the expertise of older subordinates, but to collaborate with them instead. It is the job of the supervisors to structure the relationship and to work together with the older workers. Some other negative perceptions of the older workers such as older workers do not keep up with technology and that such workers also cause health care costs to rise, can make it harder for older individuals to find work. Older individuals frequently faced or observed age discrimination on the job or during the hiring process (Capelli, 2010; Capelli and Novelli, 2010).

Mr. Tan is 62 years old and has been working for his organization for already 25 years. He has worked in many departments, and overtime he has obtained various skills and abilities. Mr. Tan is quite fixed or set in his ways and can perhaps be classified as eccentric. He is still physically healthy but most of the time, he is not well dressed. And because of his attire, people might have the perceived impressions that he is older and shabby. His supervisor and other senior managers would like to see him retire or let him go, but his performance meets the organization’s standards in most areas, and he likes to continue working. No one has been able to identify any shortcomings or deficiencies that would deserve him to be discharged of his duties. However, the younger workers and even his staff felt that Mr. Tan should quit. They felt that Mr. Tan has overstayed and he has already reached his retirement age. Some of them have indeed expressed, “We feel that he can retire and enjoy his retirement; otherwise, he is not allowing us to grow.” Moreover, in wanting to expand and grow its profits, the company also needs new blood and fresh perspectives to

fill the job. The senior manager in Mr. Tan's department recently decided to create a work environment for Tan that would be so uncomfortable that it would ultimately cause Tan to resign. He presented the idea to Tan's immediate supervisor who accepted the idea readily.

Both of them began to give Mr. Tan difficult or unappreciated assignments and assigning him to the graveyard shift. Even younger employees with less experience and service were given better assignments and shifts. There is no union or employee problem-solving process, and Mr. Tan appealed to the manager. However, his manager told him, "The tasks/ schedule have all been made; if you don't like yours, you can look elsewhere".

Questions for Discussion

1. Should you always listen and accept your manager's decision?
2. What would you have done it differently?
3. What are the ethical implications of this manager's approach to working with people?
4. What do you think are the ethical factors here?
5. How would you have handled this situation if you were the immediate supervisor?
6. If you were Mr. Tan, what would you have done?
7. What would you – of whatever age you are – on your part, do to reduce ageism?

DISCUSSION

Age discrimination is widespread because age is difficult to conceal, easy to check and age limits are simple to administer. Age limits exist in every field of society and there are also unwritten prejudices about age, which affect the way people are treated. (Decock, 2005). Reasons for the imposition of age limits are varied. They may be used to protect a particular age group, for reasons of cost-effectiveness or to limit risks. Such limits fail to take into account differences between older people and their life expectancy. Many age limits are based on the assumptions that there is a standard course of life, but the fact is that ageing is a very individual process.

Being young when looking for a job has its advantages. It is very common that young people have lots to offer to an employer. Young people are creative and have fresh ideas. Flexible, young people are often curious, eager and ready to learn new things and they can do just about anything. They are enthusiastic when given a new job and are full of energy to learn and do the job. Young people are also participative and can work in a team readily. In this way, they work hard and enable the organization to attain high productivity with increase work efficiency while helping the factory to meet production and delivery targets.

However, one should appreciate that older workers

bring a lifetime of skills to their jobs and can be highly motivated and productive members of the workplace as well. The young professionals can tap on the old; ask the aged workers who have been there for their experience/age of wisdom/higher skill levels in order for them to perform better. Employers who accommodate older workers can find a ready pool of talent for jobs that might otherwise go unfilled. The companies can also benefit from the older workers by putting them in the HR (Human Resource function) to craft a mentoring system/programmes in the training of young professionals. Henceforth, employers need to create environments to leverage the skills and competency of older workers. Organizations in general pay attention to the early career development of young employees, but most organizations take their eye off the ball for older workers in their later careers.

With the help of this case study, we would want to create or raise awareness of the people on ageism and its associated ethical implications. With the advance in science and technology, we are having better medical and health care services to improve our lives. We are living longer and healthier lives than our previous generations. There are real opportunities for current and future seniors to enjoy an improved quality of life. However, there are some challenges that we have to face in order to attain positive ageing. Take for example, community attitudes to ageing all too often focus on loss of abilities rather than maximising older people's capacities. One should accept the fact that older people have skills, knowledge and experience to contribute to our society and that the government should have an interest in ensuring that they are able to remain active participants in society for as long as possible. Therefore, by taking a positive attitude towards ageing people and by improving seniors' daily activities and social life, we would change our seniors' ways of isolated life (Low, 2011). This means that we all need to be better prepared for ageing. Our communities need to be more aged-friendly. The society should encourage seniors to participate fully in our community. Seniors should be welcomed to participate in cultural activities and community life and be supported to remain in the workforce, if that is their choice. Nowadays, it is interesting to note that Australia and New Zealand are active in promoting positive ageing since 2008 because of their ageing population. In China, the "Silver-age Mission", a public welfare activity initiated by the CNCA (China National Committee on Aging) employs retired scientists and technicians in developed areas of central and eastern China to provide intellectual support to underdeveloped areas in western China. According to director of "Silver-age Mission" office, Wang Qing, currently China has more than 5 million retired scientists and technicians, including 3.5 million below the age of seventy. About 70 percent of them hold middle-level and senior professional titles and are in a state of health that

permits them to continue working. These retired intellectuals are a valuable asset to the country. The “Silver-age Mission” was launched nationwide in 2003 so people with expertise are able to continue to contribute to China's development. Over the past three years, thousands of silver-age volunteers from medical, cultural, educational and agricultural backgrounds have brought their technical know-how and experience to western China. While providing technical support and working out solutions for these less developed areas, they have found new meaning in retired life (Liu, 2007) which, to the authors, this is really critical to life and living for the seniors.

CONCLUSION

Getting old is natural and at whatever age, living is good. The reason why companies need to be ethical, moral and do good for their people is because they also help to boost morale; employees like working for companies that care about people, not just profits. The authors hope that this case study would help to create awareness, promote discussions and allowing business leaders and employees to see things from different perspectives, broadening their minds when making decisions that have ethical implications.

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