Why is age discrimination still so prevalent in tech companies?

A landmark age discrimination case being brought against IBM in the US in which older workers were dismissively referred to as 'dino-babies' has hit the headlines. Depending on the outcome of this case, the fall-out across the tech sector could be significant. The prejudice against older heads in tech, which I have experienced, is real and is holding back many fast-growing businesses.

Temps de lecture : minute

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Right now companies across the world are experiencing an acute _skills crisis_ and coupled with the _Great Resignation_, it's never been more important to retain or attract employees who have the knowledge, expertise and acumen that you only get with experience and years served.

Tech companies, for so long associated with the young, need to cast their net wider. If every person is a potential customer, then potentially they could be an employee too. Older workers have more than just experience to offer: they also bring with them values and principles that they've acquired over years, which can help root a startup in a firm foundation.

There are also a lot of them available. In the UK, for instance, since the start of the pandemic, the number of 50 to 64 year olds who are neither working nor looking for a job in the UK _has risen by almost 250,000_, according to the office responsible for collecting statistics on employment.

Having reached a stage in their life where they have perfected balancing multiple responsibilities – skills that are essential in a high-growth environment, or when managing teams spread across continents – older workers may not look or talk like your other employees, but often they have a lot more to give. Frankly, older workers are also less likely to be lured away by another business offering a short-term increase in salary because they know how hard it is to jump ship and start somewhere new.

Yet as the IBM case underlines, ageism in tech persists. A report by *CWJobs* at the end of 2019 revealed that the average UK tech worker starts experiencing age discrimination at the tender age of 29, nearly a decade earlier than the national average. I know this all too well, from past jobs in the sector. I've seen the surprise on people's faces when they realise I am far from a Millennial.

In a society with a growing generational divide, where inter-generational mixing is becoming rarer, combining young and old at the workplace is even more important and can have benefits far beyond just the company balance sheet.

Technology is synonymous with innovation and change, yet the problems that can sink a business are just the same now as they were 10, 20 or 30 years ago. Older workers have had the benefit of seeing cycles of growth and decline, and can spot pitfalls in advance because they have been there before.

There are persistent stereotypes that those who are older are less capable, less able to adapt and less willing to roll up their sleeves and try something new. But in my experience, the opposite can be the case. I know from firsthand experience that if you want to build a product that is going to be used by billions of people, you have to make sure it works for every section of the population. If you're 25, you're going to think like a 25-year-old and that often means you'll miss something that a 55-year-

old sees immediately. Companies must cherish this difference and hire people with diverse experiences, all genders, races and ages.

By 2025 it's expected 25% of workers in the US and the UK will be over the age of 55, so the companies that invest in policies and conditions to make older people feel welcome now will surely benefit in the long run.

Similarly the older workforce should not be too quick to rule out tech companies as potential employers. These are significant global businesses that have the capability to make an impact where legacy industries and traditional companies have failed.

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For example, we at Voi want to revolutionise how we move around cities. We want to fix a problem that affects people at all life stages, rather than simply disrupt for the sake of it.

Admittedly being in a high-growth company can be a challenge for some older workers: you need to be comfortable with working quickly and with a degree of uncertainty at all times. My workplace is also non-hierarchical, and that can be daunting for people who have been in business for 20 or 30 years.

The upside is that ideas are our currency. Whatever their age, people are taken on merit here. They earn their stripes and make a full contribution, whether they're 25 or 65.

This is an environment where taking risks is encouraged and I'm excited to be leading the charge – at the age of 52 – rather than pushing papers around and doing things as they've always been done. Yes it's been scary at times, but the challenge has made me feel more alive than any other professional role.

Having belief in myself and the value I bring to Voi, I don't think I could ever go back to a more traditional company, where everything runs slower or is stale. If you are a little bit older and looking at starting a new career post-pandemic, widen your horizons and look at the tech sector: you won't regret it and you could even change society for the better.

To those who are in a position to hire an older worker, what on earth are you waiting for? Companies that fail to understand the value of older workers are the real dinosaurs.

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