

The flaws of age discrimination

<http://archive.gulfnews.com/articles/08/10/28/10254905.html>

10/28/2008 05:46 PM | By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News

London: The British employment laws which prohibit age discrimination, have improved staff security and peace of mind.

They have encouraged younger people to value the wisdom that age and experience brings - often confounding their prejudices and establishing a new respect and friendship that bridge the age-gap.

There is also a measurable change in the recognition of age-linked capability. "60 is the new 40" people are fond of saying. And it's true. Given better health, education and opportunity, the middle-aged are far more ambitious, adaptable and teachable than they used to be, just a generation ago.

In the case of ageism, there must be very few who would want to return to that old workplace atmosphere, in the UK, where the over 40's lived in permanent fear of redundancy, just because their boss might feel one morning that they were past their 'sell by date'. That was a type of institutionalised, bullying behaviour, and was certainly a stress factor to the employee involved. Also fear itself is known to inhibit performance out of all proportion to the actual risk and a constant mood of apprehension would certainly impact upon both team and individual productivity.

News presenters

But if the UK can claim to be at the forefront of anti-ageism, I can assure you that some profoundly mixed messages can come out of the whole ageism agenda.

Take the selection of TV news presenters. The television stations have to achieve ratings based on viewer choice, so it is possible to argue that the bias in favour of young, female newscasters is justified, as it's clearly an appearance-based role.

Nevertheless, some of these young, professional women still complain that their hair-style attracts more comment than the important economic or political happenings of the hour. Just a few days ago, an attractive newscaster on CNN told us of Madonna's impending divorce from husband, Guy Ritchie, which triviality managed to grab the headline news in front of the Dow Jones index collapse! The point being that 'young and attractive' beats 'professionalism and experience' in the attention-demanding stakes.

Recently in the UK, there was a protest about a new kind of road-sign placed near the entrance to a care-home for elderly people, which showed an arthritic-looking couple, bent forward on sticks. Some pressure-groups thought it was ageist. However it was undoubtedly a very clear indicator of a genuine local risk, and after discussion, the protest was dismissed and the sign was allowed to stand.

Sometimes it appears that it may soon become an offence to remunerate people in respect of their valuable experience and qualification! I certainly hope not. A job should be given on the person's ability to do it - whether the applicant is 20 or 60, a slim young female with a pretty face or a middle-aged man with a moustache. The person specification should relate closely to the criteria of the job specification.

- The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.