

## HOW TO ... CHALLENGE STEREOTYPES

# Wrestling with change

Youth or experience? Age has been an issue in the workplace for, well, ages. **Clare Dight** asks the experts how to successfully challenge the stereotypes and change the corporate culture

THE grey ceiling has replaced the glass ceiling as a business concern thanks to the prospect of yet more litigation from disgruntled employees. But how should managers go about challenging the social stereotypes that surround youth and old age? Here's how to crack the problem, according to the experts:

**1. More than the minimum.** Letting employment lawyers loose on the company handbook won't be enough to effect change. "Ending age discrimination can be achieved only through training and the way a company conducts itself," says Tony Bourne, head of employment law at Glovers solicitors.

**2. Start at the top.** "Make sure you get senior management to buy in. Without it, you won't get people to feel that age discrimination is something that they have to take seriously," says Paul Fegan, the chief executive of Absolutely Training. "A good way to do it is to open the training session with a message from the chief executive."

**3. It could be you.** Age discrimination can affect anyone at any stage of his or her career. "The first thing that turns people off is when they look at something and say 'this doesn't apply to me'," Fegan says. "We use case studies and examples to put issues in context. It's about giving people as much information as possible."

**4. It's personal.** Pernicious offenders discriminate at their peril and could be held personally liable for hurt feelings, Bourne says. Pointing out the personal dangers might help to focus people's minds on the issue.

**5. Crunch the numbers.** "Set challenges for the organisation," says Paul Cushing, the managing director of RP Cushing Recruitment. "Set targets the same way you do for equal opportunities."

**6. Spin the positive.** "People should think about what is missing from their organisational make-up," Cushing says. It may be that you have legions of young executives, but could the business benefit from the addition of older workers, for example?

**7. Go back to the boardroom.** Pull apart assumptions about the business at boardroom level, says Emma Kirk, an occupational psychologist at Pearn Kandola. "Credibility might be deemed important," she says. "But what do you actually associate it with? If it translates into

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When deciding whose turn it was to make tea the age difference became irrelevant

people of a certain age, you need to challenge that with managers and promotion boards."

**8. Create a flexible culture.** Flexible work schemes allow people with family and care commitments to take a full part in organisational life. "It's about allowing people to fit in whatever their age," Cushing says.

**9. Encourage self-scrutiny.** Team leaders must know their own prejudices, Kirk says. "Stereotypes can influence behaviour. Managers should think about each [team member], their skills and characteristics, then ask: 'Why do I think that? Is it to do with their age?'"

**10. Don't go overboard.** Tribunals are grown-up bodies that make considered judgments, Bourne says. In our compensation culture it may be tempting to ban ageist birthday cards from the workplace but, he says, "if people laugh at legislation, how can they buy into it?"

## FIND OUT MORE

■ Get the facts about the new Employment Equality (Age) Regulations at [www.agepositive.gov.uk](http://www.agepositive.gov.uk). This government website has a checklist to help you to determine whether your business has tackled ageism.

■ The Employers Forum on Age has produced an insider's guide to the legislation and a policy-review toolkit with case studies. For more information see [www.efa.org.uk/policy/toolkit.asp](http://www.efa.org.uk/policy/toolkit.asp)

■ Find guidance for employers and individuals from Acas, the advice and arbitration service, at [www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/r/j/Age\\_and\\_the\\_Workplace.pdf](http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/r/j/Age_and_the_Workplace.pdf)