

ADVOCATING YOUR VALUE AT WORK THROUGH THE “PRISM OF AGE”

by Phyllis Weiss Haserot.

Generational Myths & Contradictions

Critical Thinking on Truths and Stereotypes

How old are you really?

Have you ever been shocked when managers or co-workers took you for older – or younger - than you think of yourself? Boomers have been around long enough to know that age is a tricky thing and not what it may seem. Whether or not 60 is the new 40 or 30 is the new 20, age perceptions are confusing and not aligned with the perceptions and realities of decades ago. Not only do many Boomers have no perception of themselves as “old,” but also age has become a multi-faceted concept.

Assumptions about members of any of the generations may be unreliable for managers or colleagues to anticipate their value as workers and collaborators. Increasingly the old rules, assumptions and expectations don’t make sense for members of any generation. We need a new framework.

Age can be defined in various ways, all of which have valid meaning and add to the richness of a multi-generational environment. How old are co-workers, managers and employees beyond just chronological age? What defines a person’s age? A thoughtful list of defining categories, “The Prism of Age,” was presented by the [Sloan Center on Aging and Work](#) in 2010. I found this concept so intriguing then and potentially valuable that I have developed the “Authentic Age” assessment tool to help describe one’s more realistic and meaningful age. It is referenced in my book, “You Can’t Google It!”

This article suggests **how workers of any chronological age can use the various definitions of age to help themselves and colleagues understand, explain and advocate their value to other generations and to an organization when negotiating for a promotion, a raise, new job – or are in danger of a layoff.**

We can define **Chronological Age** as *the time in years since birth along with the connotations of age related human development (physical, social emotional, etc.)* But let's explore beyond that. Here are some examples and arguments to advocate for your value if you are a Boomer to illustrate, and the actual assessment works for any generation. (Contact pwhaserot@pdounsel.com for examples applying to the other generations at work.)

Career Stage or Occupational Age [*Experiences that represent the accumulation of knowledge, competence, skills and social capital related to a type of career or line of work*] – Boomers have valuable knowledge, competencies, skills and social capital that would be a serious loss to a team or employer, particularly the social capital, not easily replaced. Or they may be into an encore career with exceptional enthusiasm to put forth and few competing family responsibilities. In many industries people in their 50s and 60s are in the prime career stage with solid client/customer relationships that are the focal point of the business.

Organizational Age/Tenure [*The number of years an individual has been with a particular employer or in a particular job or profession*] – In addition to the assets of Occupational Age, Boomers are recognized as more loyal than younger generations in both [scholarly](#) and [consultant studies](#). Further, employee loyalty has been linked to customer loyalty and serve as cultural glue for the organization. Many organizations are trying to lure back their recently retired Boomers at least part time. They are valuable for knowledge transfer and mentoring as well as their ongoing competencies.

Life Events Age [*Development stage as an individual moves through life cycle experiences such as marriage, birth of children and other life events/transitions*] - Boomers have experience to advise younger colleagues (possibly including senior management) how to navigate events and transitions, including childrearing, in calmer fashion. And in turn, [Millennials and Gen Zers are being tapped to mentor Boomers and Gen Xers](#) on technology and market vision. This can reduce stress and tension among age cohorts and levels of tenure. Also, many customers feel more comfortable with peers in age they have been dealing with or who share similar life experiences.

Generational Age [*The economic, social, political and cultural influences that have a sustained impact on the way large groups of people see the world and make meaning of experiences*] – Boomers have a long perspective to see the continuum of economic, social, political and cultural influences and how that history is likely to affect the future, for example dealing with business and world problems. Also, younger generational peers better understand the needs of their large generation, which has significant economic and political impact for developing new products and services. They provide valuable input and understand the worldviews of younger clients and other stakeholders.

Physical Age [*Relative to health impact on ability to carry out daily work and personal tasks*] – Many Boomers are very fit, having been working out for years, and are much stronger than the stereotypical perception of their chronological age - often more fit than younger colleagues who don't exercise as much. You can mention your fitness routine

and sports activities in casual conversation with bosses or co-workers, or volunteer for company sports teams or coaching to demonstrate your stamina and combat misperceptions. Many can still be sports team members, and competitiveness is a typical Boomer generation attribute. They have more experience playing the game (business or sports) by wits if not maximum strength or velocity. Just think of older star major league pitchers.

The other descriptors of age are a matter of mindset:

Relative Age – *How old a person feels comparatively in a group or team setting*

Social Age – *How old “society” perceives a person to be*

Subjective Age – *An individual’s sense of his or her own age*

Realistically, Boomers may have to be prepared to re-think traditional compensation progression schemes as well as positioning, role shifts and titles for longevity in the workplace. Batons have to be passed (to younger or sometimes older colleagues) at the same time talent of any age must be retained to have sustainable organizations.

Resistance can come not only from employers, but also from how individuals see their Subjective Age and Relative Age. *They may be discounting their own potential longer term more than others do.*

My advice: Develop and show confidence in your abilities and value. Convey energy, enthusiasm and flexible, agile thinking to dispel possible preconceived notions of age.

The authentic age dialogue is well worth mounting in order to maintain economic and individual needs, the strength of organizations, and the benefits of a multi-generational environment. A candid and careful assessment of what I am calling “authentic age” is valuable ammunition for anyone eager to stay relevant and happily employed.

Contact pwhaserot@pdccounsel.com for analysis of your “authentic age” and support to maximize your self-advocacy.

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A version of this article was published previously on Next Avenue, Forbes.com, and Huffington Post.

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