NMRT April Discussion: Responding to Ageism in the Workplace

Thank you to everyone who participated the the April NMRT Discussion on *Responding to Ageism in the Workplace*. Please enjoy this discussion summary as well as the original conversation below. This was a wonderfully prolific discussion that covered the a wide range of issues. Some participants discussed:

- Being mistaken as a volunteer/student and needing to explain their credentials
- Feeling like one is "too young" to be taken seriously or land a job
- Feeling as though one is disrupting the status quo of the workplace with new ideas
- Difficulties in finding employment across different age groups

Participants also discussed ideas for combating ageism like:
- Dressing professionally and wearing nametag to identify you as library staff
- Interacting positively with coworkers and building rapport
- Being confident in your skills
- Attending relevant diversity workshops

A good article to check out was shared as well: *Baby Face In the Workplace* which can be accessed here:http://inalj.com/?p=90871

Check out the original discussion thread below! Thanks to all who participated!

Turner, Elayna <eturner@gcls.org>

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I know I've had quite a few experience with ageism. At one of my jobs, we had two librarians staffing the reference desk. I was on one end and an older coworker of mine was on the other. A man approached the desk needing help with his laptop and my older coworker offered to help him. He looked at her and said, "Actually, I'll take this to her. (Pointing to me) She's younger, so she probably knows how to fix my laptop." Needless to say, we were both taken aback by how up front he was with choosing me to help over my coworker simply because he thought my age would make me better with technology.

I had the opposite situation about a year ago where I was helping a patron with our computers and I was trying to explain that files saved to the public computers get deleted, so we wouldn't still have a copy of her work from days ago. She huffed at me and said, "I want you to go get someone more experienced. You're too young and you don't know what you're doing." Of course, my coworker only wound up telling her the same thing I told her.

I usually try to explain to patrons during situations like this that I have been trained the same way all of the other librarians have. While we have our strengths and weaknesses, we are all are capable librarians. Sometimes this logic works with people and other times it doesn't.

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Casey McCoy

When I worked at a branch library I was often mistaken as a volunteer. Patrons would ask me if I got paid for being at the library or would ask to speak to a librarian. One time I grabbed one of my pages (who was in his last semester of college) to help setup our program room and the lady leading the program (SAT practice test) asked what high schools we attended. We both politely responded with our credentials and kept going about our business. I'm not sure if there is a better way to handle these situations, but I really do hate having to say "I have a master's degree" in order to prove I can help people with a variety of tasks.

Kate S. Lewallen

When I worked at a college, I would occasionally have people walk into my office and ask how a student got an office. I'm not sure if there's a better way to handle it than just politely explaining that we are in fact professionals with great credentials. I made it a habit to dress very professionally to stand out from my students and tried to always wear my official name tag, which wasn't required. I think it helped somewhat, or at least made me feel better, but my older colleagues, while dressed professionally for our workplace, were not as "fancy" as I was and didn't feel the need to be.

Another issue I had was that professors would introduce me to their students by my first name (Class this is Kate and she's here ...) but my older colleagues as Ms. so-and-so. Like because I was younger, I didn't deserve the same respect as my colleagues.

Kate

Sent from my iPhone

Hannah Chapman

I work at an academic library reference desk, and students often think I'm a peer because I look younger. I even get inquiries from students that I am interviewing, for a student job at the library, as to whether I am a student. Shouldn't it be a positive to see young people in the workforce? I think this is also reinforced by the fact that a majority of my colleagues in my department are later in their careers.

-Hannah

Anderson, Freya N (EED)

I love the anonymous quote, "Never ascribe to malice that which is adequately explained by incompetence." I know that the latter is much more common with me.
It's possible that the distinction between "Kate" and "Ms. Lewallen" was respect, but also that it was a mistaken understanding of preferences. A lot of people presume that younger people (or those who seem younger, whether because of looks or attitude) prefer to be less formal, while older ones were raised in a more formal time and preferred that. I know that I've often been confused as to what's appropriate in different situations, perhaps due to my unorthodox childhood, and I'm just as likely to mess up by being too informal as too formal, with people of any age. Once upon a time (before I was around), rules of formality were supposedly clear and followed pretty consistently. The United States has been gradually mixing this up more and more, and now it's just confusing.

Ingrid Thompson

Good morning,

I struggled with responding to this month's discussion. But, respectful discussion is how we bring about change. :-)

Librarianship is transition career for me (probably a 3rd career if I am to be honest). So, in my short time working at my current branch, I have experienced ageism and racism from patrons and fellow staff members (of all ages) without going into details that are too hurtful to re-tell.

I try to combat these biases by dressing professionally but "modern", wearing my name tag to identify myself as library staff, and interacting with co-workers to show that I am relatable and "current".

So, I am responding with this post to say that there is still work to done with regard to patrons' personal biases and within libraries themselves. :-)

As always, I appreciate our monthly discussions. And, I apologize in advance if my post offends any other NMRT members. It is not my intention to do so; I am only sharing my experiences and perspective.

Leigh Milligan

Hello,

I struggle with this quite a bit, because I have a young face and I am so new in the library field. My search for a full-time library job has been extremely tough for me. I feel I have missed out on a lot of jobs due to lack of experience and my age. They always seem to choose someone older. I also feel that people don't take me seriously because they think I am still in school. I have been out of library school since 2011 so it's pretty heartbreaking. The best I can say is to be confident in yourself and your skill. If you are confident it will show and us young people need to be the up and coming faces in the library world :)

Leigh Milligan, 2016-2017 ALA NMRT Online Discussion Forum Committee Chair

Megan Rupe

I think taking charge/showing confidence and dressing professionally (which others have mentioned) can certainly help control people's impressions of you, but I think it is harder to change workplace and general culture. I know I am lucky in that my manager and many of my colleagues treat me respectfully and demonstrate trust in my skills, and I think that also helps me in interactions with patrons. Has anyone taken steps to address ageism in their library or community? I would be curious to know if anyone's tried anything that they thought helped combat ageism.

Sierra Laddusaw

I attended a (non-library) workshop titled "The Multigenerational Workforce" that discussed ageism in the workplace, among other topics. I sit on the diversity committee at the library I work at and recommended we have the workshop given in the library for our employees, the committee agreed and we hosted the event. It was well attended, however most of the people who came were the folks you already "got it" and weren't the real problem in our library. It did help attendees by providing ideas on how to combat ageism and tools to be better communicators. So in the end it was worthwhile to do.
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Julie Wendorf

Librarianship is a second career for me; I was an English teacher at High School and Middle School level before I took a break to stay home with my children for a number of years. I'm in my late 40's, but I have experienced some difficultly with ageism in my professional librarian career. I went back to grad school to get my MLS in my mid 40's after working part-time at my library for about 3 years. After graduating I was able to obtain one of the few full-time positions at my library. I'm not sure that my difficultly is due to my age or my enthusiasm. Most of the other full-time staff are either close to my age or within 5-10 years, but they have been in their positions for a long time (one for 30 years). I have found that they "look down" at me for a number of reasons, despite the fact that in our organizational chart I'm their equal. First, I'm a pesky part-timer that got "too big for her britches". Second, my eagerness to try new things in my role of Program/Outreach librarian seems to be challenging for those who would rather keep the same programming and services we've had for the past 30-40 years, despite moving into a much larger building serving a growing community. I guess I'm trying to say that I'm not sure it is actual age that is the problem sometime, but new ideas and new people that seem to cause the problem. I'd also include that I did not return to teaching,in part, to the realization that my age would play against me in trying to return to teaching due to the hiring preference of many school districts for young, cheap, newly-minted teachers straight out of college.

Jeannine Berroteran

Hello,

My problem has been that, even with a varied amount of previous library employment experience (in a number of different areas of librarianship), I was finding that interviewers seemed to think that I didn't have enough experience in one specific area of librarianship (I worked as both an undergraduate and a graduate student in several different areas of librarianship, especially academic librarianship). I've noticed that a lot of job descriptions specifically request "post-MLIS experience" or, my favorite flag phrase, "professional experience." I read that as since my experience as a student in the academic library environment wasn't "relevant", then neither would be my references. While this may not have anything to do with ageism in the way others have discussed here, I have found that my difficulties finding employment in librarianship really go across age groups. While I am now in records management and it's in the private sector, I would say that the work environment can really make a Gen Xer like myself feel invisible, especially since the management are (mostly) Baby Boomers and the co-workers are (mostly) both Gen Y and Gen Z. I have felt more than my share of disrespect from co-workers and management.

~Jeannine

Leigh

Hello,

Here's a link to an article that INAJ published about this topic http://inalj.com/?p=90871

Thanks!

-Leigh

Sent from my iPhone