You’re How Old? We’ll Be in Touch

By ASHTON APPLEWHITE    SEPT. 3, 2016

It might not seem that Hillary Clinton and Donald J. Trump have much in common. But they share something important with each other and with a whole lot of their fellow citizens. Both are job seekers. And at ages 68 and 70, respectively, they’re part of a large group of Americans who are radically upending the concept of retirement.

In 2016, almost 20 percent of Americans 65 and older are working. Some of them want to; many need to. The demise of traditional pensions means that many people have to keep earning in their 60s and 70s to maintain a decent standard of living.

These older people represent a vast well of productive and creative potential. Veteran workers can bring deep knowledge to the table, as well as well-honed interpersonal skills, better judgment than the less experienced and a
more balanced perspective. They embody a natural resource that’s increasing: the social capital of millions of healthy, educated adults.

Why, then, are well over a million and a half Americans over 50, people with decades of life ahead of them, unable to find work? The underlying reason isn’t personal, it’s structural. It’s the result of a network of attitudes and institutional practices that we can no longer ignore.

The problem is ageism — discrimination on the basis of age. A dumb and destructive obsession with youth so extreme that experience has become a liability. In Silicon Valley, engineers are getting Botox and hair transplants before interviews — and these are skilled, educated, white guys in their 20s, so imagine the effect further down the food chain.

Age discrimination in employment is illegal, but two-thirds of older job seekers report encountering it. At 64, I’m fortunate not to have been one of them, as I work at the American Museum of Natural History, a truly all-age-friendly employer.

I write about ageism, though, so I hear stories all the time. The 51-year-old Uber driver taking me to Los Angeles International Airport at dawn a few weeks ago told me about a marketing position he thought he was eminently qualified for. He did his homework and nailed the interview. On his way out of the building he overheard, “Yeah, he’s perfect, but he’s too old.”

I’m lucky enough to get my tech support from JK Scheinberg, the engineer at Apple who led the effort that moved the Mac to Intel processors. A little restless after retiring in 2008, at 54, he figured he’d be a great fit for a position at an Apple store Genius Bar, despite being twice as old as anyone else at the group interview. “On the way out, all three of the interviewers singled me out and said, ‘We’ll be in touch,’ ” he said. To his disappointment, he
didn’t hear anything immediately, and he says that he called to follow up. Though he did get an email from a recruiter some days later to set up a second interview, he stopped pursuing the opportunity.

Recruiters say people with more than three years of work experience need not apply. Ads call for “digital natives,” as if playing video games as a kid is proof of competence. Résumés go unread, as Christina Economos, a science educator with more than 40 years of experience developing curriculum, has learned. “I don’t even get a reply — or they just say, ‘We’ve found someone more suited,’” she said. “I feel that my experience, skill set, work ethic, are being dismissed just because of my age. It’s really a blow, since I still feel like a vital human being.”

A 2016 study by the National Bureau of Economic Research found “robust” evidence that age discrimination in the workplace starts earlier for women and never relents. The pay gap kicks in early, at age 32, when women start getting passed over for promotion.

Discouraged and diminished, many older Americans stop looking for work entirely. They become economically dependent, contributing to the misperception that older people are a burden to society, but it’s not by choice. How are older people supposed to remain self-sufficient if they’re forced out of the job market?

Not one negative stereotype about older workers holds up under scrutiny. Abundant data show that they’re reliable, handle stress well, master new skills and are the most engaged of all workers when offered the chance to grow and advance on the job. Older people might take longer to accomplish a given task, but they make fewer mistakes. They take longer to recover from injury but hurt themselves less often. It’s a wash. Motivation and effort affect output far more than age does.

Age prejudice — assuming that someone is too old or too young to handle a task or take on a responsibility — cramps prospects for everyone, old or young. Millennials, who are criticized for having “no work ethic” and “needing to have their hands held,” have trouble getting a foothold in the job market. Unless we tackle age bias, they too are
likely to become less employable through no fault of their own, and sooner than they might think. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act kicks in at 40.

The myth that older workers crowd out younger ones is called the “lump of labor” fallacy, and economists have debunked it countless times. When jobs are scarce, this is true in the narrowest sense, but that’s a labor market problem, not a too-many-old-people problem.

A 2012 Pew Charitable Trusts study of employment rates over the last 40 years found rates for younger and older workers to be positively correlated. In other words, as more older workers stayed on the job, the employment rate and number of hours worked also improved for younger people.

Progressive companies know the benefits of workplace diversity. A friend in work force policy calls this the “shoe test”: look under the table, and if everyone’s wearing the same kind of shoes, whether wingtips or flip-flops, you’ve got a problem. It’s blindingly obvious that age belongs alongside race, gender, ability and sexual orientation as a criterion for diversity — not only because it’s the ethical path but also because age discrimination hurts productivity and profits.

Being part of a mixed-age team can be challenging. Betsy Martens was 55 when she landed a job as an information architect at a start-up during the heady days of the tech boom. Decades older than most of the staff, she found it invigorating. “When it came time to talk about the music we loved, the books we’d read, the movies we saw and the life experiences we’d had, we were on different planets, but we were all open-minded enough to find these differences intriguing,” she told me. Things shifted during an argument with her boss, “when he said exasperatedly, ‘You sound just like my mother.’ That was the moment the pin pricked the balloon.”

“Culture fit” gets bandied about in this context — the idea that people in an organization should share attitudes, backgrounds and working styles. That can mean rejecting people who “aren’t like us.” Age, however, is a far less
reliable indicator of shared values or interests than class, gender, race or income level. Discomfort at reaching across an age gap is one of the sorry consequences of living in a profoundly age-segregated society. The Cornell gerontologist Karl Pillemer says that Americans are more likely to have a friend of a different race than one who is 10 years older or younger than they are.

Age segregation impoverishes us, because it cuts us off from most of humanity and because the exchange of skills and stories across generations is the natural order of things. In the United States, ageism has subverted it.

What is achieving age diversity going to take? Nothing less than a mass movement like the women’s movement, which made people aware that “personal problems” — like being perceived as incompetent, or being paid less, or getting passed over for promotion — were actually widely shared political problems that required collective action.

The critical starting point is to acknowledge our own prejudice: internalized bias like “I’m too old for that job,” and that directed at others, like “It’s going to take me forever to bring that old guy up to speed.” Confronting ageism means making friends of all ages. It means pointing out bias when you encounter it (when everyone at a meeting is the same age, for example).

Confronting ageism means joining forces. It means seeing older people not as alien and “other,” but as us — future us, that is.

**Correction: September 11, 2016**

An opinion essay last Sunday included a quotation by JK Scheinberg, a retired Apple engineer, saying he was not contacted after an interview for a job at an Apple store Genius Bar. Mr. Scheinberg and Apple now say that the company did email him asking about a second interview.

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