

AGE OLD PROBLEM

Laurence Lewis asks why ageism should be such a big issue in superyacht recruitment

“Age is something that does not matter unless you're a cheese.”

So said the surrealist genius filmmaker Luis Bunuel... Yachting, where are we at on the topic of ageism? Do captains and crew feel discriminated against for being too old or too young? Does age matter?

I felt it might be interesting to look at how age is perceived in a wider European context before looking at our niche market and in doing so I stumbled upon an interesting survey published by Eurage (European research group on attitude to age) which had been commissioned by Age UK. The survey sought the view of 55,000 people across 28 European countries and it emerges that age discrimination is experienced more often than any other form of discrimination, which came as a surprise to me.

Age discrimination is of course very different from any other discrimination such as sex or race, as our age changes continuously. We go from young to middle age to old and as we age, our perception of age discrimination evolves with time. We can assume that age discrimination is not necessarily deliberate and does not result from negative intentions but is the result of how we perceive and categorise one another, as being young or old.

For example the age at which youth is perceived to end varies considerably from 34 in Sweden to 52 in Greece and across the 28 countries participating in the survey, the mean age that young was perceived to end was 40.

Further studies show that the middle age group is seen as having the highest social status and the old age group the lowest. One can then extrapolate to say that the middle age group is also perceived as being more desirable in a work environment. Not surprisingly, people also feel more positive towards their own age group which again, in a professional environment, can create a bias towards hiring people from the same age group.

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Yachting is a niche market exposed to the same issues as the rest of society and therefore what one needs are tools and solutions to combat this grey ceiling syndrome. "Failure to hire" cases are notoriously hard to prove and litigation is hardly ever the answer.

So we ask what is it? Liz Ryan from the Human Workplace movement has the answer with the 'pain interviewing' technique. It's not a cure for age discrimination but it will shift the attention away from age and in fact, will make the frosty topic of age irrelevant during the interview. The key is to find which business pain the interviewer needs to solve and to position yourself as the solution, as an adviser, a consultant.

This works because it makes sense. Let's face it, most people hate having to recruit. They don't know what questions to ask, they worry about getting it wrong and hiring someone who won't fit, they worry about investing precious time in hiring and training someone who will leave, they are not sure how to assess candidates and differentiate them. If done badly recruiting can be a time consuming exercise employers generally dread and this goes for yacht owners recruiting captains too.

An employer in pain, and unfortunately most are, is good news for a candidate who can take control of the conversation and focus in addressing the pain. It is not about answering questions in a sheep like fashion, like perhaps more inexperienced candidates might do, but more importantly, about positioning yourself as an expert, who has an opinion and solutions. If you can do that, the employer can't afford to care about how old you are because he will have identified you as the solution to his pain.