**South African
General Counsel for
Diversity & Inclusion**

Working group report:
Harnessing Intergenerational Collaboration in the Legal Profession

CONTEXT

The South African legal profession is generationally diverse. Within the same organisation, senior lawyers who began their careers in a paper-based environment now work alongside young professionals who have never known a workplace without artificial intelligence. These differences, shaped by social, political, and technological change, influence how people work, learn, and lead.

This diversity presents both opportunities and challenges. If managed intentionally, it can foster innovation, mentorship, and resilience. If left unchecked, it can entrench bias, hinder collaboration, and drive attrition.

PURPOSE OF THIS RESOURCE

This resource is designed to help legal organisations

- **Recognise** how age and generational diversity can influence collaboration and career progression;

- **Reduce** bias and barriers linked to age in hiring, promotion, and learning opportunities; and

- **Reframe** generational difference as a driver of innovation, learning, and organisational adaptability.

WHO WILL FIND THIS DOCUMENT USEFUL?

It is intended for managing partners, in-house counsel, HR professionals, and people managers who want to strengthen collaboration, inclusion, and client service across generations within their teams and organisations
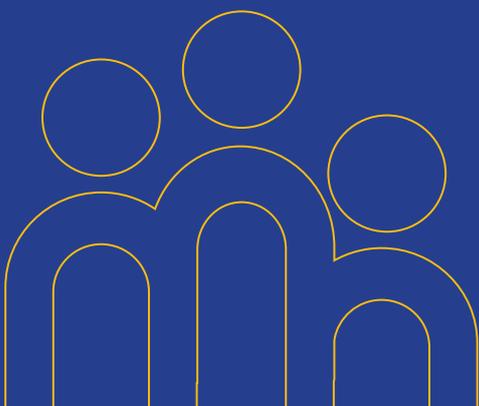
WHY ADDRESSING AGE BIAS AND HARNESSING INTERGENERATIONAL COLLABORATION MATTERS

Creating a workplace where people of all ages feel valued and included is essential to unlocking the benefits of intergenerational diversity and enabling genuine collaboration.

Ageism stands in the way of this goal. Ageism encompasses the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel), and discrimination (how we act) directed at others, or even at ourselves, based solely on age. Unlike many other forms of bias, ageism often goes unnoticed and is frequently normalised, even though it affects professionals at every stage of their careers and includes assumptions about both younger and older lawyers.

Throughout our working group discussions, members shared personal experiences revealing how age bias can surface in both subtle and systemic ways. For example:

- **Hiring and advancement:** Younger professionals are sometimes labelled as "too inexperienced" for responsibility, while older professionals are seen as "past their peak" or "out of touch." Hiring and performance decisions are often guided by perceptions of "readiness" or "gravitas" rather than by evidence of performance and capability.

- **Opportunity and recognition:** Junior professionals are frequently excluded from client exposure or conferences, only to later be criticised for slower business development. Conversely, older professionals may be overlooked in discussions about technology or innovation.

- **Cultural friction:** Participants described a shared frustration with constantly shifting expectations in the profession. As one member put it, "The goalposts keep moving – every few years the rules change, and you have to reinvent yourself to stay relevant." Millennials, now occupying many mid-level leadership roles, felt this tension acutely. They were trained and mentored by one generation, but are now expected to manage and mentor another with very different norms, communication styles, and expectations. Many noted a growing pressure to act as informal "bridges" or mediators between generations, carrying the load of keeping teams functioning and coherent despite these shifts.

- **Technology and competence:** Advances in technology, especially AI, have heightened assumptions about who is "naturally" tech-savvy and who is "falling behind." In some firms, senior lawyers are leading innovation efforts, while in others younger professionals are expected to be default experts, reinforcing age-based stereotypes on both ends. Participants also noted emerging mistrust about how younger professionals acquire skills in the AI era, fuelled by concerns about online qualifications or AI-assisted work, which is creating new forms of implicit bias against recent graduates.

In many firms, ageism is normalised or masked as performance management, leading to an absence of shared language to discuss it. Generational labelling ("Millennials are entitled" or "Boomers are inflexible") can reinforce stereotypes and erode trust across age groups.

[1] WHO. 2025. Ageing: Ageism. Available at: https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/ageing-ageism

THE UNDERPINNING THEORY: GENERATIONAL COHORT THEORY

Generational Cohort Theory is a social science concept which defines a generation as an **identifiable group that shares similar birth years and is shaped by significant historical and social events during their youth**.[2] There is academic support for the theory, including within South Africa, with studies finding statistically significant differences in work values like authority, creativity, and risk across different generations.[3]

While this is a useful theory for thinking about how to bridge generational divides, it should be noted that the scientific community is not in full agreement about the validity of the theory.[4] Additionally, it is important in the South Africa context to consider that the generational labels we often use (Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, Gen Z, Gen Alpha) are **global-north constructs**, mostly developed in the US. South Africa's history has very different **social, political, and economic "generational markers"**.

The tables below sketch out the globally-described generations by birth year and the work values, approach, and behaviours that they characteristically display. While the theory is imperfect and necessarily over-simplistic, it is a useful starting point for recognising how age and generational diversity influences ways of working, collaboration, and career progression in the legal sector.

Generation	Birth Years	Ages in 2025
Gen Z	1996–2012	13–29
Millennials (Gen Y)	1981–1995	30–44
Gen X	1965–1980	45–60
Baby Boomers	1946–1964	61–79

[2] Okros, A. (2020). Generational theory and cohort analyses. In Managing Generational Diversity (pp. 15–40). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25726-2_2
[3] Jonck, P., van der Walt, F., & Sobayeni, N. (2017). A generational perspective on work values in a South African sample. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology,* 43(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v43i0.1393
[4] Rudolph, C. W., Rauvola, R. S., & Zacher, H. (2020). Generations and generational differences: Debunking myths in organizational science and practice and paving new paths forward. J*ournal of Business and Psychology*, 35(6), 945–967. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-019-09679-2
[5] Le Roux, K. (2019). *Generational differences in the work values and work engagement of South African employees* (Master's dissertation). University of Pretoria.
[6] Flick, S. (n.d.). *How leaders can understand and work more effectively with four generations in the workplace. Great Results Team Building*. https://greatresultsteambuilding.net/how-leaders-can-understand-and-work-more-effectively-with-four-generations-in-the-workplace/

Category	Baby Boomers	Gen X	Millennials	Gen Z
Work Values/ Priorities	**Loyalty, stability, long hours** as a sign of commitment. Motivated by career milestones and prestige.	**Independence, self-reliance, no-nonsense** focus on results. Value work-life balance.	**Purpose, growth, and teamwork.** Seek frequent feedback and professional development opportunities. Independence, self-reliance, no-nonsense focus on results. Value work-life balance.	**Flexibility, inclusivity, and purpose-driven** work. Desire financial stability and expect a diverse and equitable environment.
Communication Style	Prefer **face-to-face** meetings or phone calls. Value personal contact.	Comfortable with **email** as a primary tool but also value **in-person** discussion.	**Embrace messaging platforms and collaborative** tools for quick feedback.	**Digital-first. Prefer instant messaging,** texts, and social media. Often avoid confrontational communication.
Technology Use	Adapted later; prefer **reliable, familiar systems.** May take pride in drafting documents from scratch.	Comfortable with technology; **pragmatic users.**	Early social/ mobile adopters. **Expect seamless tech experiences** and use technology to **automate "grudge work".**	True **digital natives.** Expect seamless, **intuitive tech experiences** in the workplace. Common use of AI for assistance.
Work-Life Balance	Often view **long hours as a sign of commitment** and career success; work is a central focus.	Championed the concept of **balancing career with family life.**	**Normalised flexible schedules,** remote work, and wellness programs.	**Draw clear lines between work and personal time.** Actively seek employers who support mental health.

Opportunities for Harnessing Intergenerational Collaboration

Generational diversity can be a source of strength if organisations deliberately create structures and cultures that allow different age groups to thrive together.

Our working group developed the framework below, which outlines practical actions that legal teams and firms can take to build systems, ways of working, and cultural practices that enable people of all ages to thrive together. It focuses on four domains where age dynamics show up most strongly in legal workplaces: organisational structures, day-to-day collaboration, learning and development, and culture. For each, we provide a few simple, actionable steps to embed age-inclusive practices.

1. Inclusive Systems & Structures

Age bias is often unintentionally embedded in recruitment, promotions, performance systems, and other structural processes. These systems shape access to opportunities and career progression. There may be a need to redesign systems and structures so that they evaluate capability based on skill and impact, not age or tenure.

Actions to take:

1.1. Review job descriptions for coded age-related language

Who: HR, Recruitment, Hiring Managers
How:
- Flag phrasing that signals hidden age preferences (young or old).
  - Examples: "energetic," "digital native," "fast-paced environment," "start-up mindset," "seasoned," "mature," "extensive experience," "industry leader."
- Ensure experience requirements are clearly linked to role-specific skills andresponsibilities (for example, "proven ability to…" rather than a generic years-based threshold).
- Provide internal HR guidance on alternative wording.

1.2 Make promotion criteria transparent

Who: HR, Executive Leadership, Practice Group Heads
How:
- Document competencies required at each level.
- Provide these criteria in writing to all staff; integrate them into performance, development, and growth conversations.
- Ensure criteria are based on skills and outcomes, not assumptions about seniority or age.

1.3 Collect and analyse workforce data by age

Who: HR, People Analytics, Payroll
How:
- Analyse employee age data relating to hiring, promotion, movement between pay bands, retirement and resignation, and performance ratings (where used).
- Add "age" as a dimension in all DEI dashboards or diversity indicators.
- Use data to identify trends (e.g., bottlenecks, early exits, inconsistent recognition patterns).

2. Collaboration & Ways of Working

Daily collaboration across generations is shaped by communication preferences, expectations about responsiveness, work-life balance, and technology use. There is a need to align on work styles, communication norms, and feedback practices to harness diversity of approach. Be careful not to assume preference based on individual's ages or other demographic characteristics.

2.1 Establish "Ways of Working" agreements in each team

Who: Team Leads, Project Managers, Practice Heads
How:
- Hold a structured conversation at the start of each project or annually in existing teams.
- Cover:
  - Communication preferences within approved platforms (e.g. email vs Teams);
  - Preferred meeting formats (in-person vs virtual);
  - Feedback preferences; and
  - Responsiveness expectations.
- Create a shared document accessible to all team members, including new joiners, to avoid repeated renegotiation.
- Integrate this into the firm's digital norms policy (which already exists in many firms).
- With the speed of technology movement in mind, be sure to seek inclusion within the boundaries set by firm policies (for example, on the use of virtual platforms or AI). Where policies do not exist, or where they may be out of date, seek guidance internally.

2.2 Introduce structured mentorship AND reverse mentorship programmes

Who: HR, L&D, Transformation/DEI Leads
How:
- Pair colleagues with complementary skills (including AI or digital tools) to support mutual learning. Be cautious not to paid individuals based on demographic characteristics, but rather seek to understand their skills for maximum learning.
- Use a structured matching process where participants are either paired based on informed choices (e.g., selecting from profiles) or rotated through different mentors over time to ensure fairness, diversity, and broader exposure.
- Create light-touch guidance for mentorship sessions.

3. Cross-Generational Learning & Development

Knowledge often flows in only one direction: stereotypically, from older to younger staff. This can result in missed opportunities for learning, especially as technology reshapes the profession. There is a need for bi-directional learning and knowledge exchange to unlock collective strength.

3.1 Reward and recognise people who teach others

Who: HR, Partners, Performance Committees
How:
- Close the gap between "people who know" and "people who teach." This could be achieved by:
  - Treating mentorship hours as billable (where possible), so that individuals with billable hour targets don't have to sacrifice their KPI performance to teach others;
  - Include mentoring, training, or knowledge transfer in performance contracts and
  - Acknowledge trainers or knowledge sharers in internal communication.

3.2 Run internal knowledge-sharing workshops

Who: Subject-Matter Experts, Practice Groups, L&D
How: • Encourage people of all ages to present.
• Build sessions into existing team rhythms rather than hosting one-off events.
• Offer training in presenting or facilitation for younger speakers who may feel less confident.

3.3 Implement an open-door learning policy

Who: Senior Associates, Senior Counsel, Partners
How: • Provide scheduled office hours (in-person or digital) to reduce intimidation barriers.
• Offer digital drop-in sessions for hybrid teams (for example, set up a weekly standing Teams call open to all).
• Reinforce from the top that juniors are welcome, expected, and encouraged to engage with seniors in these time windows.

4. Culture & Mindset Shift

Ageism often operates subtly, in assumptions about competence, readiness, gravitas, or tech skills. When awareness is low, behaviours and norms reinforce generational silos. People are rarely aware of their own age-related biases. There is a need to make age inclusion visible helps normalise intergenerational respect. Embed intergenerational inclusion into leadership behaviours, language, and DEI frameworks.

4.1 Make age diversity visible in marketing and internal communications

Who: Comms, HR, Transformation Leads
How: • Show a range of ages in external materials, client-facing content, and internal newsletters.
• Celebrate achievements of both younger and older colleagues.
• Include age as part of the firm's diversity narrative.

4.2 HR, Partners, Team Leads

Who: HR, Partners, Team Leads
How: • Change norms in job descriptions, CV reviews, and internal discussions.
• Use phrases such as "experienced in X" instead of "10 years' experience."

4.3 Conduct diversity and inclusion workshops with an age lens

Who: HR, DEI Leads, L&D
How: • Include ageism and intergenerational dynamics in existing DEI training.

4.4 Awareness campaigns

Who: HR, Comms, DEI
How: • Share stories of intergenerational collaboration.
• Run short campaigns highlighting myths and facts about age and capability.
• Use "bias awareness prompts" to help individuals reflect on everyday assumptions.

Conclusion

Age diversity is not a liability to manage but an advantage to unlock. By creating structures and practices that value capability, fostering collaboration between generations, and embedding inclusion into daily culture, the legal profession can build stronger, more innovative, and sustainable teams.

The SA GC for D&I Ageism Working Group thanks all members who contributed their time and expertise to shaping this resource. It is intended as a practical tool for firms and legal teams committed to creating workplaces where professionals of all ages can thrive together.

We would like to hear your feedback!

Get in touch with us at
info@sagcdi.co.za