

Discrimination emerging in new forms in the global jobs market

New and more subtle forms of discrimination may be emerging in the global workplace as authorities outlaw earlier forms of prejudice, based around race and gender. Ageism is the new epidemic that's inflicting many organizations and it's become institutionalized in some HR practices at an early phase of the recruitment process.

Introduction

Many countries have taken steps in the last decade or so to help remove discrimination from the workplace but some of these measures have not been as effective as one would think, while new strains of discrimination are emerging.

One of the disturbing trends is that ageism is becoming much more widespread and is replacing other forms of discrimination in many global workplaces.

The findings are the result of an extensive global survey conducted by Kelly Services during 2006.

The Kelly Global Workforce Index sought the views of approximately 70,000 people in 28 countries covering Europe, Asia Pacific and both North and South America.

The survey found that discrimination in the workplace is widespread across many countries, and age has become the biggest hurdle faced by workers trying to find a job.

What the survey found

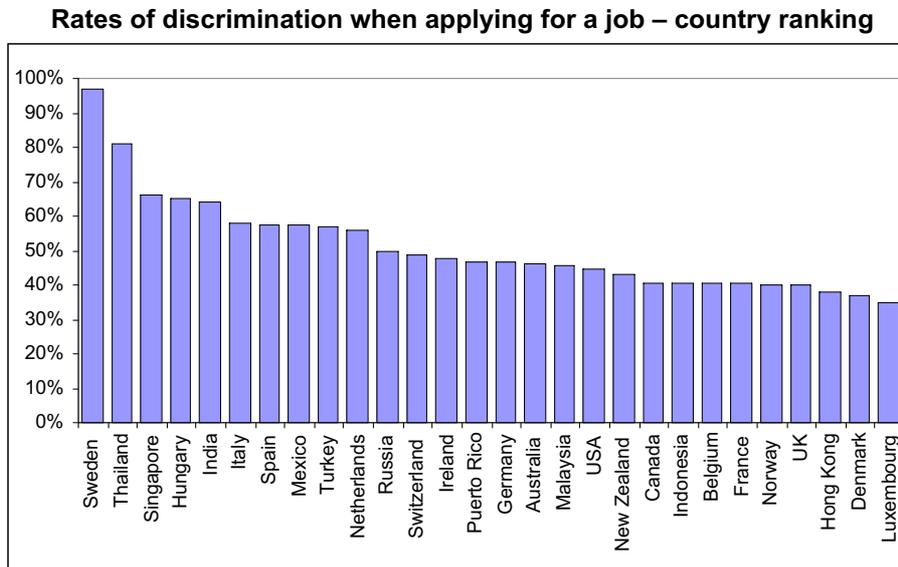
Respondents were asked a series of questions about their experience of discrimination both when applying for a job and while working in their job.

The aim was to identify what level of discrimination was experienced at two important stages – the recruitment process and the daily working life.

Each of these forms of discrimination can be harmful to both organizations and individuals, but they also tell us something about the way obstacles are placed in the way of two different sets of people – those who are entering the workforce or changing jobs, and those who are performing their daily work routine.

In each case, respondents were asked to identify the types of discrimination they had incurred. The choices were racial, gender, age, disability and 'other'. They were asked to identify instances of discrimination they had experienced in the last five years.

On the first question, each of the 28 countries in the survey was ranked according to the percentage of the sample that had experienced discrimination when applying for a job in the last five years.



Overall, the survey found that many employees experienced quite high rates of discrimination in many countries, even in some where very active steps have been in place to discourage institutionalized workplace discrimination.

The highest rates of discrimination when applying for a job were in Sweden (97%), Thailand (81%), Singapore (66%), Hungary (65%), Italy (58%), Spain (57%), Mexico (57%) and Turkey (57%).

The lowest rates were in Luxembourg (35%), Denmark (37%), Hong Kong (38%), UK (40%), Norway (40%), France (40%), Belgium (40%) Indonesia (40%) and Canada (41%).

It is worth emphasizing that the findings are based on a respondents' own perceptions about discrimination so, in effect, people were asked to 'self-assess' as to whether they had been discriminated against by an employer or potential employer.

Clearly, some people may simply suspect instances of discrimination where none exist. But the fact that many actually believe such events to be discriminatory, at the very least, says something about the way important information is communicated to job applicants and employees.

From an HR perspective, it is disturbing that there is a consistent pattern of high levels of discrimination being experienced by people applying for work.

Across the Asia Pacific region, the average was 52%. In Europe it was 48%. In North America it was 43%.

Perhaps surprisingly, the highest level of discrimination was in Sweden, a country recognized for its progressive liberal values, where the rate of reported discrimination was 97%.

Certain industry sectors including engineering and contact centres had relatively high levels of workplace discrimination, both for those applying and for those at work.

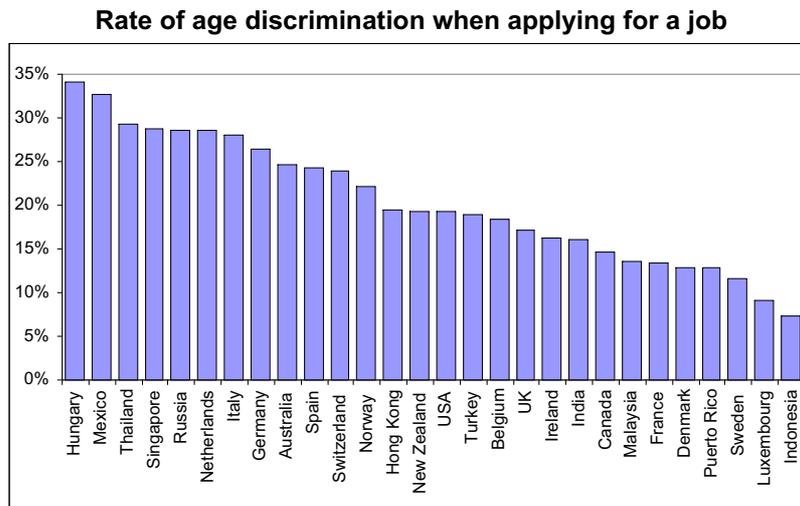
Worldwide, 49% of those applying for Engineering jobs believed they faced discrimination compared with 48% for Call Centres/Customer Service, 47% for IT, 46% Finance & Banking, and 42% in Science.

In the work environment, it was a similar picture with Call Centre/Customer Service and Engineering each at 39%, followed by Finance & Banking and IT (each 37%) and Science (31%).

A Changing Pattern of Discrimination

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the survey is the way discrimination is evolving.

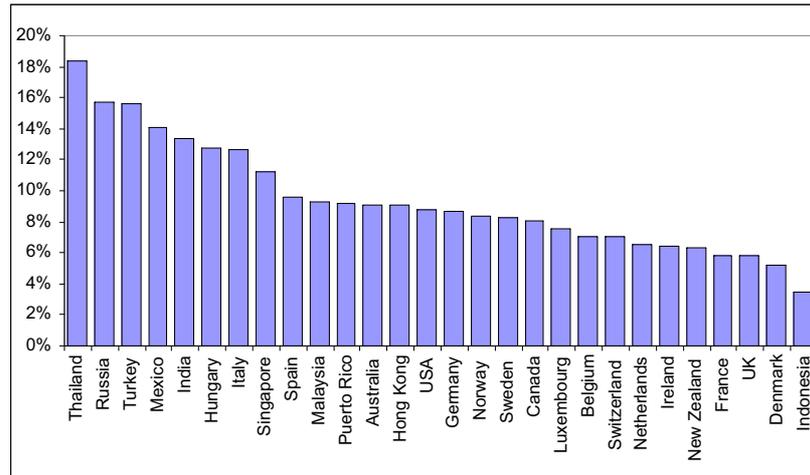
Where once it was gender and racial factors that would have been the biggest cause of prejudice against workers, it is clear that ageism is the newest source of discrimination complaints.



Rates of age-based discrimination ranged from around 30% in countries including Hungary, Mexico, Thailand and Singapore, to a low of around 10% in Indonesia, Luxembourg and Sweden.

By contrast gender discrimination is around half the level of age discrimination worldwide.

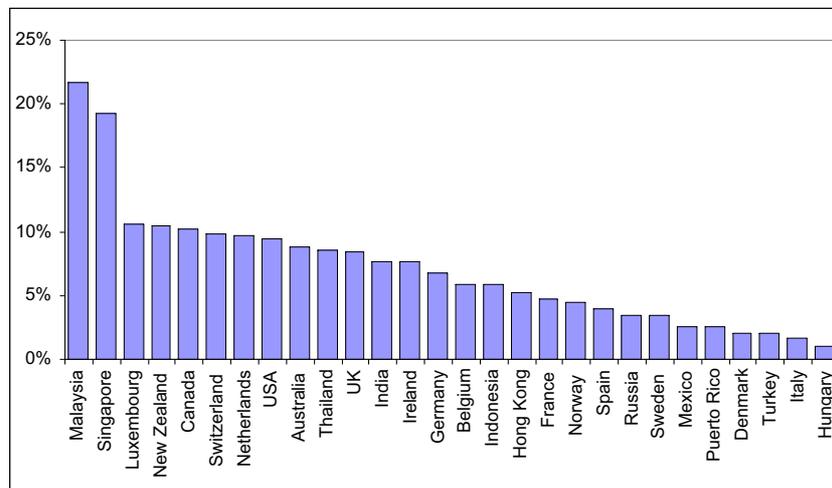
Rate of gender discrimination when applying for a job



The reasons for this are complex but in many countries, governments and employers have put in place measures to address sex discrimination in the workforce and elsewhere. More enlightened attitudes to women in the workforce and improved arrangements for childcare have also assisted in removing barriers to women finding work and gaining promotion on merit.

Likewise racial discrimination has all but disappeared as a significant influence in employment policies in many countries under the weight of racial discrimination laws and programs to promote equality.

Rate of racial discrimination when applying for a job



The highest incidence of reported racial influence on employment was in Malaysia and Singapore. Elsewhere, racial discrimination as reported by employees when applying for a job was generally under 10%.

Why is Ageism on the rise?

The global survey shows that ageism is impacting at both ends of the age spectrum - the youngest workers and those aged 45 and above.

However, the greatest impact is on the older groups.

Workers aged 45 and older are increasingly reporting difficulty in finding work or in seeking to change jobs.

In many countries rates of discrimination amongst workers in the 50+ age bracket of 70% and more are not uncommon, pointing to the real difficulty that some of the most experienced workers face in finding jobs

Why this is the case is not so clear. There are a number of theories that try to explain why age is locking some groups out of work.

Some employers fear that older workers are not sufficiently flexible or that they lack the necessary skills to compete in a rapidly changing environment. It has been claimed that while younger workers can often be molded in the culture of an organization, older workers are more likely to be locked into set operating patterns.

It may be the case that older workers, particularly those that have been out of the workforce for some time, may need training to provide new skills.

It may be possible that some older employees who believe that their skills and experience are considerable, price themselves out of the market with unrealistic pay expectations.

While some of these factors are plausible, it is a little puzzling why so many employers would chose to lock out such an important source of labour.

Many economies in the developed world are experiencing skill shortages and labour bottlenecks as well as the phenomenon of an ageing population.

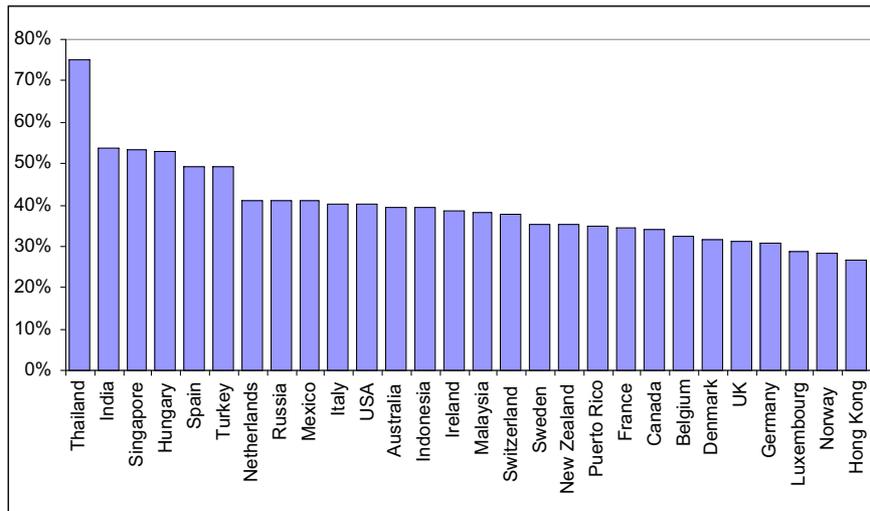
At a time when many economies need skilled workers, closing the door to older workers does not make a lot of sense. It effectively shuts off an important source of talent and diversity. In many instances, older workers have extensive skills and experience that can be harnessed.

Age also a barrier in daily working life

In addition to the question on discrimination when applying for a job, the survey also canvassed the views of employees about the type of discrimination they faced day-to-day in their working life.

The survey found that the overall level of discrimination faced day-to-day in the workplace was less than that suffered by job applicants.

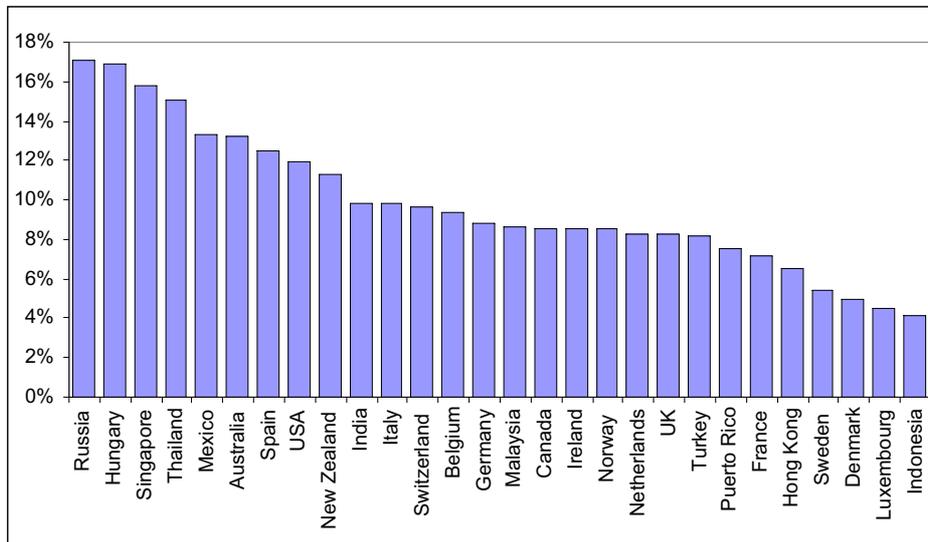
Rate of discrimination while working



The majority of countries experienced routine workplace discrimination on average of about 40%, considerably less than that reported by workers when applying for jobs.

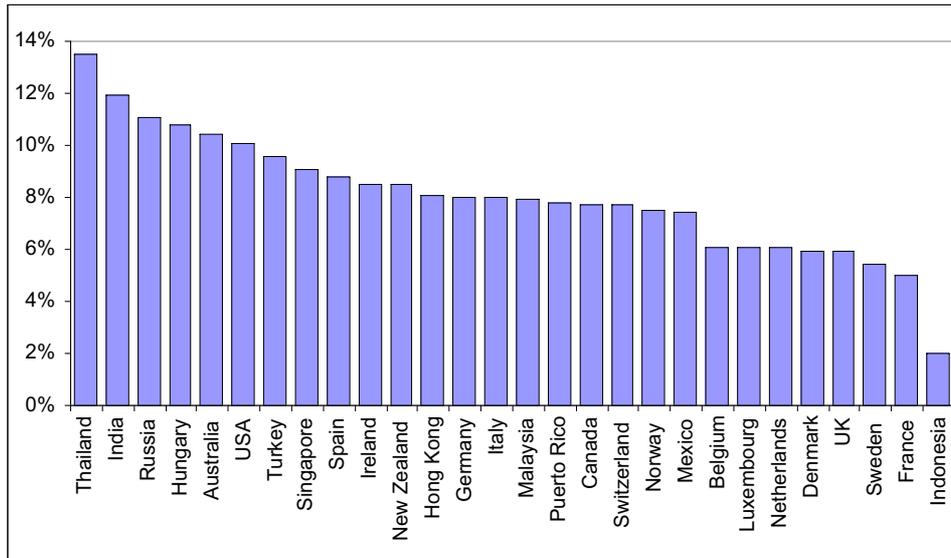
And while the incidence of age-based discrimination was again the dominant source of discrimination, the big difference between ageism and sexism that occurs in the recruitment process was much narrower in the workplace itself.

Rate of age discrimination when working



Rates of age based and gender based discrimination in daily working life are actually quite similar.

Rate of gender discrimination when working



In a broad sense, the survey indicates that discrimination in the workplace itself has probably been reduced but that discriminatory barriers to entry are well entrenched.

It might be easier to gain promotion and advancement within an organization based purely on merit, but there are probably hidden barriers to getting past the front gate.

This raises the question as to whether employment practices embedded in some HR procedures subtly filter out certain job applicants on criteria other than skills and experience. Certainly the findings indicate that many more people feel they are being unfairly treated in the recruitment process than on the shop floor.

It may be easier for an employer or potential employer to get away with prejudicial behavior against someone with less education because people with no university qualifications experienced slightly higher rates of discrimination than those with university degrees.

Equally fascinating is how people react to these alleged instances of discrimination. Most, it seems, see little value in pursuing it with a formal complaint.

The vast majority of those who had experienced discrimination did not bother to lodge any type of written or verbal complaint. Even those that did were largely unsatisfied with the outcome and had simply put it in the background.

This suggests that some organizations probably unwittingly exploit job seekers' naivety or ignorance to weed out people who are seen to be either too old or too young.

This may be a response to more onerous anti discrimination laws, which prevent many forms of recruitment advertising based on age. In some jurisdictions, even descriptions such as 'energetic', 'youthful' and 'mature' are no longer permitted because they are in breach of age discrimination laws.

Discrimination and the costs for business

Discrimination has a cost for both individuals and organizations. For individuals who believe they have been discriminated against, it can impact on their motivation and self esteem.

For organizations, it can have a range of direct and indirect costs. At a basic level, it does not make good business or economic sense to eschew a group of people for no other reason than they do not meet a certain stereotype.

Discrimination can take many forms. It may include discrimination on the grounds of colour, sex, religion, race, political opinion, age, medical record, sexual preference, trade union activity, marital status, nationality, disability (physical, intellectual or psychiatric), or impairment (including HIV/AIDS status).

Organizations that don't address discrimination can experience many issues including high staff turnover, absenteeism, poor morale, low productivity, poor reputation, and also the possibility of civil claims and penalties arising from breach of anti discrimination laws.

Managers should ensure that employees fully understand their rights, and that managers faced with workplace discrimination take immediate steps to remedy the situation.

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There should be an organisational policy on discrimination that is made available to all employees.

Conclusion

Workplace discrimination persists in many workplaces and in many forms. Latest evidence suggests that while some earlier types of discrimination such as gender and racial bias may be in decline, newer forms such as ageism are on the rise.

Both younger and older workers are victims of this new strain of discrimination yet it appears that older workers are the most affected.

From an industry perspective, these are also the workers who possess the greatest skill and experience. Locking these workers out of job opportunities closes off an important source of expertise, knowledge and diversity and can be counterproductive.

It appears that the greatest incidence of discrimination is taking place before most workers even get inside the front gate. The recruitment process itself has become the primary filter where a range of subtle and emotive criteria have the potential to influence employee selection.

Organisations that don't address discrimination in the workplace can suffer a range of costs, both financial and civil.

Many economies are facing skill shortages associated with labour conditions and ageing populations which places greater importance on sourcing recruits from the widest possible pool of talent.

Discrimination in the recruitment process and in the workplace itself diminishes that pool and inflicts unnecessary damage on all parties involved.

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