Help! How can HR handle the new “Ok Boomer” trend in the Workplace?

As memes and words expressed on social media, think "OK Boomer" become a part of our vocabulary, how can HR adapt and create a healthy work environment?

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There is nothing new about intergenerational wars. Since the dawn of time, generations after generations have placed blame on each other for current issues, so there’s nothing foreign about Generation W, also known as the Me Generation or Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1965) blaming current problems on millennials (born between 1980 and 1995) and the newer Generation Z (born between 1996 to present). You have probably seen the headlines: “Millennials have killed the diamond industry” “Millionaire to Millennials: Stop buying avocado toast if you want to buy a home” But have you seen the new “OK Boomer” trend that has recently caused a stir across all social media channels? “OK, Boomer” is a catch-all phrase used by younger generations that is meant to be dismissive of retrograde arguments made by boomers. The “OK, Boomer” meme has become so popular that it has prompted controversy on internet social forums, entrepreneurs are creating “OK Boomer” merchandise, and there are even songs including the phrase. How did the "Ok, Boomer"

meme get started? “OK, Boomer” has been around for a while, but it recently went mainstream when a TikTok video of an older man declaring that millennials and Gen Z have Peter Pan syndrome went viral. As a response, thousands of younger users responded with “OK, Boomer” videos and memes. Even though it started online, this new trend has migrated to the real-world. On November 5, 2019, Chlöe Swarbrick, a New Zealand lawmaker, was giving a speech about the climate crisis before the New Zealand parliament when she was heckled by an older member of the parliament and silenced him by saying, " OK, Boomer". Funny or not, as the term enters real life and the workplace, the question remains...





How should HR professionals respond to it?

When it comes to the workplace, the term “Ok, Boomer” is an age-related problem. Workers that are age 40 or older are protected by the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA), a federal act that prohibits discrimination and harassment against persons 40 years of age or older in the workplace. Based on the EEOC, harassment can include “offensive or derogatory remarks about a person's age... harassment is illegal when it is so frequent or severe that it creates a hostile or offensive work environment or when it results in an adverse employment decision (such as the victim being fired or demoted).” However, simple teasing, offhand comments, or isolated incidents that aren't very serious are not covered or prohibited by the law. Under the ADEA law, types of comments like “Ok, Boomer” can create serious problems in the workplace since workers over 40 tend to be passed over for a promotion because of their age. They often experience more layoffs and find themselves disadvantaged in their efforts to retain employment, and they have exceptional difficulty regaining employment when displaced from their jobs. Someone who had once been the brunt of an “Ok, Boomer” joke or comment may seemingly laugh it off or disregard it at the time. Sometime later though, this individual might be laid off or terminated, and whether they legitimately believe age discrimination was the cause, they could use an instance like this to claim wrongful termination. As

an HR professional, you would hate to find yourself in this situation, especially if it could have been prevented.

What can you do?

If an incident occurs, first assess the situation and severity. If the comment was made between two coworkers that are friends in a teasing manner, then you should not punish or terminate your employee; however, do take the opportunity to educate your employees on the severity and consequences of language, especially when it comes to ageism. If you want a healthy environment at work, make a commitment to build or maintain a positive work culture by banning age-related language and be committed to fighting stereotypes and biases in the workplace. Based on an EEOC Report, the following is recommended to reduce age discrimination:

- **Evaluate** your organization's culture, policies, and practices. By doing so, you can reveal outdated policies that may encourage stereotypes or negative assumptions about older workers.
- **Assess** your recruitment practices. What types of vocabulary are you using in your job descriptions? Language can eliminate older applicants that could bring value to your organization.
- **Are you being inclusive?** If you don't have one already, create a diversity and inclusion program that includes age. Make sure to provide learning and development that offer career counseling and mentorship to all employees.
- **Promote** a workplace culture that recognizes skills regardless of age and bans age-related stereotypes alongside other stereotype bans involving race, disability, national origin, religion, or sex.

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