

TACKLING AGEISM IN COMMUNICATIONS:

Hiring, Leadership & Culture in an Intergenerational Workplace

Insights from

Hanson Search & The Work Crowd

Survey 2026



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Stereotypes. Hiring practices. Workplace cultures. Progression opportunities. Even language and references used in everyday communication.

Ageism in the workplace can take any number of forms beyond direct discrimination - and for many professionals these subtler moments can be harder to experience and tougher to tackle.

The communications industry is no different. As a sector, PR has often emphasised age as a defining factor of a successful professional, despite its ambiguity. Phrases like “lots of energy” or “fresh ideas”, “veteran” or “grey hair” have become implied ways for clients to request certain faces on their account teams.

And everyone is losing out.

For the first time in modern history, the collective workforce spans five generations, each bringing distinct

skills, experiences, perspectives and preferences. When managed effectively, these intergenerational teams can offer significant strategic advantages and play a vital role in breaking down ageism in the workplace.

Hanson Search and sister company, The Work Crowd, have together surveyed more than 200 senior leaders from across the PR and communications industry to gain a deeper understanding of ageism in the sector and how fostering an effective and harmonious intergenerational workplace could be the answer.

Surveying a broad mixture of professionals across corporate communications, B2B and B2C, marketing and digital functions, participants were asked about their views and experience. Here’s what we found.



In a Snapshot:



Over 87% of participants work in or manage intergenerational teams.



Skills and expertise were cited as the most important factors in hiring.



67% of respondents feel their organisation's culture supports intergenerational working.



Yet more than 55% said their company could do more to promote this.



45% reported experiencing stereotyping based on age.

Hiring Talent

The communications industry is fast-paced, changeable and requires high levels of strategic and creative thinking. If talent is going to meet these demands, then hiring needs to source the strongest candidates.

Over 87% of our survey respondents reported working in or managing a intergenerational team - a significant indicator that intergenerational workplaces are firmly here to stay.

In fact, a 2024 survey found that nearly three quarters of senior business leaders in the UK (73%) have multiple generations in their workforce today, with 70% stipulating this new standard has more benefits than drawbacks.

Here's what our network had to say about sourcing, hiring and fostering talent.

Criteria & Priorities

Across survey respondents, those who participated in hiring freelance or permanent talent listed a number of key priorities in interviewing candidates.

- Skills and experiences was ranked as the primary factor by over 54% of respondents;
- 23.6% of respondents said that industry experience was the most important;
- Cultural fit appeared third with ~13% of participants calling it the most critical factor;
- Previous work/portfolio, budget and availability came last on the list respectively.

More than half of respondents (52%) said they were involved in hiring talent occasionally, while around one third (33%) said they were regularly involved in recruitment. Notably, these findings were consistent across both in-house and agencies, inferring that hiring is no longer confined to HR or Talent teams but shared across leadership.

When asked about budget, less than 3% of participants said this was the number one priority when hiring. This implied that, for many leaders, investing in the right professional with the right skills is paramount.

That said, individual responses revealed pressures and requirements vary. Some participants placed budget or availability at the top of their list, suggesting there are notable financial or resource constraints in their organisations. Others gave less importance to cultural fit, meaning that priorities vary depending on organisational pressures or the nature of a role itself.

Skills, Experiences & Qualities

While skills and experience may be natural determinants of candidate suitability for a role - with one participant saying "skills decide the outcome" - the increasing digitisation of the industry suggests certain skills may be prioritised above others.

In a 2024 report from Gartner Communications, how to modernise team skills was a top question asked of comms leaders with an emphasis on needing to prepare for the future of their functions.

While this focus might help an organisation stay competitive, too much emphasis could unintentionally sideline candidates with deep institutional knowledge or non-traditional career paths; talent with high adaptability is well positioned to pivot to changing needs within a business.

"Digital fluency, deep proficiencies of certain tools and platforms and demonstrable experience in a suite of marcomms functions have risen on the list of hiring priorities in recent years.

Businesses want talent who can address the growing need for integrated, data-driven communication strategies and jump on emerging trends and channels. These aren't skills relegated to a certain age group. They require adaptability and strategic thinking - something which talent of any seniority may possess."

Alice Weightman

CEO of Hanson Search & The Work Crowd

Cultures & Opportunities in Intergenerational Workplaces

All workplace cultures are different but there are fundamental values that shape most inclusive and productive workplaces: strong communication, clear expectations, respect and trust.

In an intergenerational team, these qualities are arguably even more critical. Colleagues who've been in the workforce for a number of years will have a vastly different experience to those who've only just begun their career. And as such, cultivating an environment where these core values are prioritised will enable stronger professional relationships.

Cultivating Productive, Inclusive Environments

When asked about their company culture and intergenerational working, responses to our survey were largely positive.

More than two thirds said they "agree" or "strongly agree" that their organisation supported the dynamics that intergenerational workplaces bring. There were, however, a few key differences. In-house participants largely agreed, though a small number responded in the opposite. However, no agency participants felt their organisation lacked support.

In spite of these findings, over 56% agreed that more could be done to promote effective collaboration across intergenerational teams, a sentiment which is echoed in the wider industry.

One study found that over a third (39%) of UK employers found their intergenerational teams had trouble working with and understanding one another. And 61% reported significant differences in workplace preferences.



“Intergenerational teams are the new modus operandi for today’s businesses and organisations - and there are huge strategic, creative and operational benefits to this. But achieving the full potential of a intergenerational team rarely happens on its own.

Businesses need to commit to fostering an environment of inclusivity, productivity and understanding. One where individual strengths are recognised and developed, and the dynamic is fair, collaborative and geared toward shared success.”

*Madeleine Weightman
Co-Founder, The Work Crowd*



Seniority
Traditional promotions based on seniority are in decline.



Hybrid
45% of respondents said their business adopts a hybrid model of seniority and value-led progression based on contribution and impact.



Value-led Progression
A third (34%) has moved fully to value-led progression approaches.

Progression & Opportunities

A key insight gained from our survey was that career progression processes and priorities have evolved away from ‘traditional’ approaches.

Models where promotions are based on seniority are in decline. 45% of respondents said their business adopts a hybrid model of seniority and value-led progression based on contribution and impact, while a third (34%) has moved fully to value-led progression approaches.

The differences between in-house and agency organisations are clear. In-house teams are more likely to adopt the hybrid model (53%), while agencies lean more towards value-led progression (44%).

This largely reflects structural differences with in-house organisations balancing experience with contribution, whereas agencies, driven by fast-paced client demands, tend to prioritise immediate results.

Leadership

Survey respondents stressed the importance of leadership in these scenarios. They reported that leaders who visibly created a culture which valued skills and results over age typically generated real progress across the organisation.

Among agencies, smaller consultancies stood out more than larger firms. Participants noted that these agencies fostered a culture of respect and collaboration where everyone, including senior leaders, contributed equally to the work.

Leadership was repeatedly underlined as critical. In some organisations, younger CEOs working with older directors helped establish cultures where age was not a barrier but a complement to contribution.

“Leadership and mentoring can come from any professional at any age or seniority. And this is a central need for intergenerational teams.

Senior professionals can steer those newly in the workforce on essential practices, industry knowledge, relationship building, strategy, generational context and so much more. Younger professionals can support knowledge on newer trends, technologies, channels and, like their counterparts, generational context. In this way, intergenerational teams can ‘power up’ their capabilities - individually and collectively.”

*Madeleine Weightman
Co-Founder, The Work Crowd*

Intergenerational Workplaces: The Benefits & Challenges

Like any workplace culture, there are pros and cons to certain dynamics, including intergenerational teams. Differences in communication styles, work habits and technological preferences can sometimes create friction or misunderstandings. But that’s not to say these can’t be rectified.

Realising the full benefits means first addressing these challenges so that diverse perspectives are respected and valued, rather than simply sidelined.

Benefits of Intergenerational Teams

When asked about the core strengths of having multiple generations in the workplace at once, our network responded positively. Teams that span age groups were described as more resilient, with a greater ability to withstand pressure and adapt to change.

They cited stronger knowledge exchange between professionals as the top benefit (82%). Better decision-making through diverse perspectives was also listed as a significant strength (74.7%), as was better mentoring - both in the traditional sense and the more modern.

More than 1 in 2 noted that age-diverse teams were more resilient, better able to withstand pressure and adapt to change.

Challenges of Intergenerational Teams

With any number of benefits comes a similar array of challenges and survey respondents provided a few core considerations intergenerational teams will need to overcome.

72% said conflicting expectations around work-life balance often created strain. Unsurprisingly, younger professionals often placed greater emphasis on flexibility and personal time, while more senior colleagues were more accustomed to longer hours and being present in the office.

Nearly two-thirds reported differences in communication styles as a recurring challenge, while 45% reported assumptions based on age. Tensions in reporting structures was also cited as a notable challenge, with a quarter of respondents saying this was an issue.

Central to the intergenerational conversation is the prevalence and impact of ageism in the industry.



Ageism in the Communications Industry

Age bias and discrimination remains a prevalent issue across the modern workforce, despite many organisations boasting teams with three, four or even five different generations.

This can be defined by micro-agressions, minimising the contributions of certain individuals, overlooking team members for projects or promotions, comments or “jokes” or any manner of inappropriate behaviours and attitudes.

According to respondents to a survey conducted by The Work Crowd in March 2025, ageism in the communications industry is “rife” or “absolutely rife” - a sentiment which was echoed across in-house and agency settings.

Respondents say that ageism starts as young as 40.

Some participants called communications one of the most affected industries when it came to age discrimination, with nearly half of all respondents (45%) saying they'd been stereotyped because of their age.

Here's how it manifests for comms professionals.

Older Professionals

- Participants described exceptionally talented peers in their mid-forties struggling to find work.
- Others reported being turned down for roles as “over-qualified” or penalised for supposedly high day rates.
- Women over 35 described the environment as “brutal,” compounded by assumptions about family responsibilities.

Younger Professionals

- Many younger professionals noted the pressure to have achieved career success by 30.
- Credibility may often be questioned by colleagues and clients.
- Some expressed frustrations at not being “taken seriously” despite ability and performance.

The Value of Diverse Generations in the Communications Industry

Understanding the varying views, priorities and challenges at play enables a greater appreciation for the different qualities each generation brings to the communications industry - and the shared value of an age-diverse workforce.

Ultimately, breadth of perspective will drastically amplify the impact of strategy and storytelling. Senior professionals often carry deep institutional knowledge, historical context and long-standing client relationships that help shape credible, trusted messaging.

Younger colleagues can bring immediacy with a strong instinct for new or emerging platforms, evolving behaviours and the agility to experiment with the latest formats. Together, these teams can create campaigns which balance tried-and-tested approaches with bold, contemporary tactics.

Generational diversity also strengthens an organisation's ability to connect with a broad demographic. Having multiple generations within a team provides first-hand insight into these different preferences, making it easier to craft messages that land authentically with diverse publics.

Managed well, intergenerational teams encourage a culture of learning and adaptability within communications functions. Reverse mentoring allows younger staff to share their own knowledge just as experienced professionals can pass on their own. This exchange not only accelerates professional growth but builds resilience within the team, ensuring it can adapt to new technologies and shifting public expectations.

For an industry built on clarity, connection and trust, the fusion of generational strength is essential.

Examples of Effective Intergenerational Management

Contribution over age. This is general sentiment when asked about effective intergenerational management and was frequently cited as a marker of success.

Common features included drawing on the knowledge of long-serving employees, promoting people based on skills and qualities rather than tenure and integrating different generations without relying on stereotypes.

Nearly 30% highlighted mentoring as a key benefit of intergenerational teams while several referenced organisations with established programmes pairing new recruits with experienced professionals.

Teams that brought together long-serving talent with newer colleagues were described as more effective and resilient.

This reflects wider survey findings in which 55% of participants agreed intergenerational teams are more resilient.

Core Characteristics of Successful Intergenerational Teams



Valuing skills and contribution over tenure



Promotions and recognition based on impact, not years of service



Structured mentoring programmes



Senior leaders, including younger CEOs, working with older directors



Mutual respect



Active contribution from senior leaders alongside teams

Fundamentally, the only way for the communications industry to thrive - particularly in today's landscape - is for its leaders and professionals to move past outdated, age-based stereotypes.

We must collectively build workplaces where contribution, knowledge and collaboration are valued above all else. Achieving this requires strong leadership, structured mentoring and open dialogue to help bridge generational divides.

With 82% of professionals calling for greater action, the future of communications will rest on its ability to blend the insight of experience with the innovation of fresh perspectives, creating organisations where opportunity is driven by talent, not age.



About The Work Crowd

The Work Crowd combines award-winning technology with a team of recruitment and sector specialists to deliver a complete recruitment solution. We connect organisations with a trusted, industry-endorsed network of freelance, fractional, interim and advisory experts — enabling teams to scale quickly, manage risk and drive meaningful transformation.

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About Hanson Search

Hanson Search is a globally recognised executive search and talent advisory firm, helping organisations hire leaders who drive revenue growth, protect reputation and manage risk. With over two decades of experience, we recruit across communications, sustainability, marketing and corporate leadership worldwide.

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Let us help you build a strong intergenerational team

If you're looking for quality talent with the right skills, experience and industry insight, we can help with that. With nearly three decades in the talent space, a global network and offices based in US, UK, Europe and the Middle East, Hanson Search and The Work Crowd can identify the ideal candidates for your business and help you build a thriving diverse team.



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