

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work In Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work In Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

The pandemic and recession are hitting all age groups, demographics, and industries. But for the first time in nearly 50 years, workers who are over 55 are experiencing unemployment at a greater level than those younger than them. And according to a recent survey by AARP, 61% of older workers are concerned that they could lose their jobs this year, and age bias could be a contributing factor.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

There are a lot of contributing factors to age bias. Today, we're taking a look at how older adults are portrayed in the media, and what might be the cause of those characterizations. Joining me to discuss is David Gittins, executive director of the nonprofit, Age Inclusion in Media, also known as AIM. David, thanks for joining me on Work In Progress.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

Thanks for having me, Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So David, what is AIM's mission?

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

Our mission is to champion age inclusivity across all media and entertainment platforms through programs that support career craft and growth. And that means we have a vision of seeing a future where talented people of all ages work together to accurately represent age just as a natural part of life. So in other words, we want to see how age is represented in the media to be one that is less routinely, less stereotypical, and dehumanizing.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And that portrayal tends to seep into society just like from any portrayal of any stereotype. It seems that it's important that the people who are writing the characters are reflective of that. And so, that's part of your mission, I would imagine.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

Absolutely. We call it the cycle of ageism. And what that boils down to four elements of write, show, believe, and do. If you don't write it correctly, it's not shown on screen correctly, then we don't believe it correctly. We form stereotypes. And then we behave as though these false perceptions are reality. How we perceive older people in society comes from many ways, from what we see and what we read.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

And so, yes, absolutely. With the figures AARP was publishing this week, and with COVID, it shows you that older workers are the most vulnerable, because the perception is they're expensive, they're not very productive, and they're not very motivated. It transcends the media.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

In that regard, what we do at Age Inclusion is very important, because with the Social Security crisis on the horizon, we need older workers in the workplace. We can't be having this perception of old people as just being drains on society, when the reality is, most older people are very, very productive until their last few year of life. If people are retiring, or being forced to retire in their 50s and 60s, then we're missing out on a great resource.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What do you see when you see an older person on TV or in the movies right now?

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

Well, if we were to believe what we see on screen, or on TV, or reading books, we would believe anybody over the age of 50 is just waiting for retirement, who is totally spent, who is just happy to be here. Anybody who's over the age of 65, frankly, is just waiting for death. That would be if we were aliens and all we saw was TV.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You used a phrase in the conversation earlier that it looks like people are not the central characters of their own lives when they're portrayed on TV. Explain that to me again.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

In TV writers' room, for example, you don't find many writers over the age of 55. If you're over that age, you tend to be a producer level. Below that, people who are actually writing the scripts tend to be younger, and much younger. That means people in their 20s or 30s, their perception of somebody in their 50s or 60s tends to be of somebody who is a parent, or grandparents. They are not the central character themselves. They are somebody who is a support character in their own lives. So when it gets represented on screen, they are portrayed as purely as being support characters.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

40 years ago, you would have a lead character who was like Colombo, or Angela Lansbury in Murder, She Wrote. Through a process of excluding older creatives, we've ended up excluding older portrayals on the screen. So now, all lead characters tend to be in their 20s, or 30s, or early 40s. We very rarely get older characters who are seen as the center, have central lives, who have hopes and fears like everyone else, and who are just not portrayed as supporting or comedy sidekicks. The best thing in their lives is an occasional time spent with their children. It's as though they don't have aspirations for their own lives. They don't live lives independent of their offspring.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

In a workplace, if you had a choice between a younger worker and an older worker, you may go ahead and choose the younger worker because they more resemble you. So, do you think that is because of the portrayals on television?

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

Yeah, absolutely. Because again, it's an easy trope, it's an easy gag. Whereas, the reality is, an older person may be sometimes more reluctant to take on new technology, because the old technology is working fine for them. But they will learn it.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

I know a 97-year-old and a 101-year-old who've got iPhones. They read books now only on the Kindle, because, guess what? They can expand the text, and they can read it better than a physical book. So, they know technology. And so, an idea of somebody who's a bit older not knowing technology is nonsense.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You bring up the fact that in Hollywood, when it comes to creatives, writers, producers, directors, they tend to be younger. They tend to be under a certain age, unless they have achieved an executive level, or a more prominent level in the industry. What impact do you think that's having on what's coming out of the media now?

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

Is the chicken and egg thing, what we call the cycle of ageism. Younger people who are creatives aim at a younger audience. Advertisers obsess over the younger audience, again, due to the stereotype that older people have made all their life decisions at age 49, and once they cross that threshold to 50, they're set in their ways.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

So, what happens when older voices get excluded is, older lives become portrayed as irrelevant. As though it's waiting for death and waiting for retirement, back to those things. Without proper representation in the writers' room, like any other excluded group, it's not going to find itself portrayed on screen correctly.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

How do we address this? If the people who are doing the hiring are younger, and the people they're hiring are younger, how do you break that cycle?

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

One of the ways we're doing it is, we're running a program to train script readers. Because script reading over the past 20, 25 years or so has gone from being a very qualified job to being an entry-level job. And it's given to interns, or people one or two years out of college. That means it's going to skew younger. It also means it's going to skew to people who don't get paid, or get paid minimum wage.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

Those factors would mean that older people won't be going for those jobs. If they think they could even get them, they still wouldn't go for them. The impact of that is, if an older writer wants to have a script considered by a production company, he or she is going to have to have their script read, in the first instance, by the gatekeeper who is maybe 22 years of age.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

If an older writer is writing a story about a 65-year-old having a traumatic life experience, or a great life experience, it may not resonate with the younger reader. That means the script will get passed. And what will get passed on, it'll be scripts that resonate with the 22-year-old.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

We're trying to, I would say, flood the market with older readers, people who are willing and able to take on those gatekeeper positions. And that way, when scripts get read with older stories with older characters, they will get a proper fair read. And so, people can slowly learn to appreciate that part of diversity and inclusivity is age inclusivity.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So you're preparing older readers. Who's hiring them?

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

It's a very slow process. At the first instance, we've just run the Silver Bullet Screenplay Competition, which was aimed at either older writers, or stories portraying older characters. That has opened doors for us with production companies and with management companies for when they're next hiring readers, or they're next looking for scripts.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

It's a very slow process to make people realize that there are very many different stories about age, and different ages. And the idea that all people of a certain age think in a certain way, which is totally wrong. It's, all newborn babies are pretty much the same, or one- or two-year-olds are fairly similar. But the older we get, the more diverse our life experiences become, and the more stories we have to tell.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

So the idea that anybody who is in the protected class is just a homogenous group, again, is nonsense. But again, we don't win people over by yelling at them. How we do win people over is by showing that there are great stories, by great writers, showing great aspects of characters who are just not in their 20s or 30s.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the things about being a writer is that you are really your own business. You're your own entrepreneur. So, how do you encourage writers over the age of 30, over the age of 40, over the age of 50, to present their work? How do you encourage them when there is this big challenge and barrier for them?

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

It used to be writers were very much employees. Whereas now, it's closer to being the gig economy. You take a job for a couple of weeks, and then you move on. And so, we're having to teach people how to be a bit more hustling. And that's a hard thing to learn, because as writers, we tend to be self-effacing, and just hoping that the work will speak for itself.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

The modern-day world, nevermind just the modern-day entertainment business, is very different. We all need to have updated social media profiles. We need to be interacting on social media. One of the ways we teach writers is, have you connected to a producer or a writer on Twitter? Because most of them have 300 followers, and they will answer anybody's question about anything. You don't need us to introduce you to a manager or an agent. You should be doing it yourself, because meeting people who like you and your scripts, it's like dating. You've can't force it. You can't have an arranged marriage over these things.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

The producers and buyers have to come to you, as well. So, they have to know who you are. And the quickest way that people know who someone else is today is, we do a bit of a Google stalk on people. We find out what their LinkedIn is, we find out what their Twitter is, on their Instagram. If we have a connection, then we'll meet them in real life.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

These are things which have been a challenge, and it has been meeting with skepticism. It's often about fear of new. But once we get over that fear of new, we find out that they fall in love again with the business. But most writers, they're in love with writing, never been particularly in love with the business.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the things that we see in the workforce when organizations, industries are trying to bring in underrepresented groups, in this case maybe an underrepresented age group, are mentorship programs. You're doing something like that, correct?

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

Yes. We've started a mentorship program, which is where we have a team of mentors who are experienced writers in film and television. What we offer is, anybody can book one of our mentors to help them with any specific problem to do with writing or the career process.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

So if you want to... For example, we just had somebody, a person who's in their 60s who really keen to be a late-night TV writer for the talk shows. We've teamed him up with somebody who wrote on the Tonight Show. And this person has been honing their craft, building a packet ready to submit to the late-night script editors, or producers who do the hiring.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

And similarly so, it's an open door. It's a paid service because we have to pay the mentors, but it's an open door. If you've been excluded, or if you feel as though you're too old for a film school, or you don't want the expense of a film school, you can go direct to the people who know, who've been there. You can use their experience to shortcut your way to knowing what they know.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the things that I like to point out is that with experience comes knowledge. So, if you were in a particular field, you have knowledge of the history of that, you have an institutional memory of it. You also have the ability to solve problems. And you may even have solutions that someone who's new to

the industry may not have thought of because you've probably had to deal with it. And I think that's undervalued in a lot of workplaces.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

Absolutely. There was a book published, I think nearly 10 years ago, and it's been done as a TED Talk, as well. And it was a guy who decided to build a toaster from scratch. Absolutely from first principles and built a toaster. He made an absolute mess of it, and it's hilariously bad.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

In the workplace, we don't need to start every day as though this is day one. It was Matt Weiner when he was running Mad Men, he always insisted on having a much more experienced writer in the room than him. There was one point, he decided this after trying to solve a story problem for about three months. And then he brought in this guy who fixed it in an hour. And from that point on, he always insisted on having somebody who was way more experienced than he was.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That's excellent. That should be a thought that everybody has in every business and every industry, I think. And one of the things that supports this as well is that, entrepreneurs, the most successful entrepreneurs are those who start their businesses in their 40s. Because they've got 20-plus years of experience in a particular industry, in a particular job, and they know how to turn that into a business.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

That's the thing, because when you're in your 40s, you have a better idea of your strengths and weaknesses. And you know the market, and you know what you can do and you know what you can achieve. Whereas, when we're younger, one of the benefits of being younger is, is we don't. We will dive into many things not knowing good or bad's going to come out the end of them. But when we get a bit older, we can use that experience to improve our odds of success.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the things that AIM talks about is that age inclusion in the workforce is vital to the sustainability of the American economy. How do you see that?

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

If we perceive older people as being drains on health care, drains on Social Security, blocking progress for younger people, then that's how we will start to treat them. And we will start excluding people purely on their age. That means we're going to have a huge pool of unemployed adults, people in their 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s. With an aging population, that pool is going to get bigger and bigger.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

Until we realize, and start treating it as such, that older people are very creative, very productive, and far from being drains on society, they can be very productive to society. They won't be drawing from Social Security, they will be adding to the Social Security pot.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

That's why we fit into a wider circle. It's, if we show, if we write, we show, we believe, we do. So until we start showing that older characters can be very productive, lead very full lives, aren't waiting to go into an adult care facility, then we're not going to believe it, and we won't start treating people who are older as being very creative and very productive, and very useful to be around. If you don't have it as any other way, you've got to treat age inclusivity as being the best business decision you will ever make.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I love the, also part of your manifesto, which is that real, impactful change comes when generations work together to tell a new story. I think the intergenerational workplace, whether it's in a creative field, or it's in a factory, or if it's in an office, is the future. It's limitless, what you can do.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

It's an odd thing how we've become so age segregated. I think many cultures still have it where multigenerations live in the same home. So, we get to see different levels of life experience, and it becomes normalized dealing with people of different ages.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

But when we go to school, and college, and then work, our peers tend to always be the same age. That means older people tend to be our bosses, and younger people tend to be our juniors. It's an odd one because, yes, we can learn all the time from different perspectives, whether that's a gender or ethnicity.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

The most successful corporations are the ones which are inherently inclusive, because anyone that isn't, doesn't innovate. And if you don't innovate in business, then you die. And the crucial part of innovation is cross-pollination, different perspectives. And age perspectives is one of the most crucial ways and the simplest ways we can resolve this.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

David, thank you very much for joining Work In Progress.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media exec. dir.:

It's a pleasure to be here, Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking to David Gittins, executive director of Age Inclusion in Media. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.