

Tracking Changes

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Hey, boomer! Still snagging gigs?

A look at ageism and freelance editing



by Amy Spungen

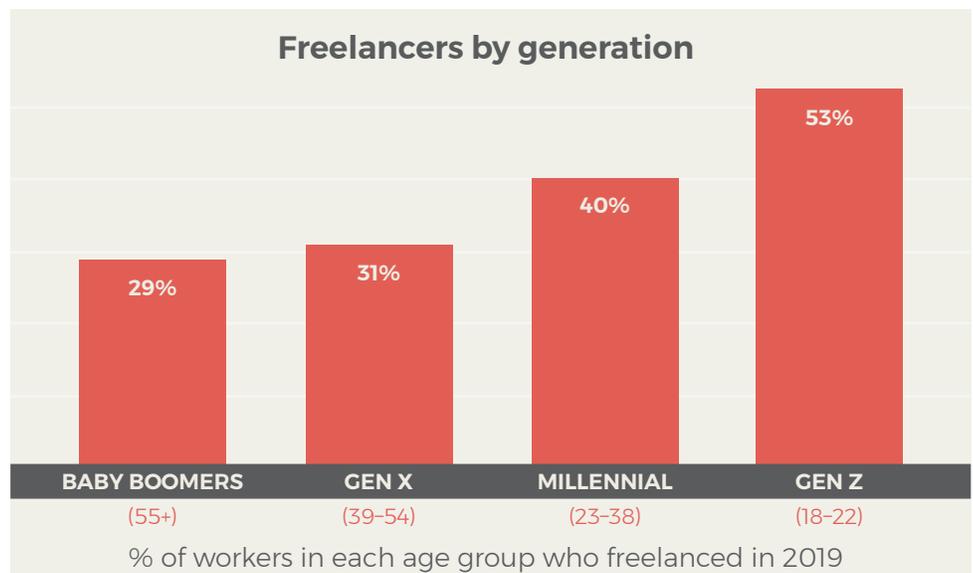
Recently I applied for a freelance editing job that seemed tailor-made for me. After

a couple of positive exchanges, I learned that the company had “decided to head in a new direction.” I visited the organization’s website a final time, noted the millennials

populating it, and decided the direction they referred to was toward younger people. Maybe they simply found a better editor for the job, but I (sulkily) decided it was more likely due to ageism.

I’ll never know, but as I enter my sixties I have started wondering whether ageism affects freelance editors. Recently I asked colleagues age 55 and over to weigh in on the subject. I found that (a) I had hit a

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Source: Adapted from Edelman Intelligence, “Freelancing in America: 2019”

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Ageism and the law

Baby boomers now face the same issue that prompted federal lawmakers to protect the working generation preceding them. As the largest age demographic in history matured,¹ young boomers threatened to flood the job market. In response, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 sought to protect employees 40 years and older from losing their jobs because of age. Contractors and freelance workers, much less common at the time, were not included in this protected group; despite another federal law aimed at ageism in 1975, today freelancers remain largely outside of legal protection from age discrimination.

There is one exception: in 2017, New York City enacted the first law protecting freelancers against discrimination and harassment in the workplace, including on the basis of age. There are roughly 1.3 million freelancers in New York City, out of a total of 57 million nationwide, but it's unclear how many are editors and how many of those editors are baby boomers. Suffice it to say that very few freelance editors overall have any legal recourse when it comes to ageism. The Freelancers Union (a nonprofit advocacy group, not a trade union) encourages other cities to lobby for similar protections and offers a petition and "toolkit" on its website.

¹ The largest age demographic until very recently; millennials now wear that crown.

nerve, and (b) we older freelance editors have strong and differing opinions. Their responses and my research have convinced me that freelance editors face ageism just like any other professional, but as freelancers, our flexibility—in how we stay current and present ourselves—can help us avoid it.

First, let's take a hard look at our aging selves: Are we slowing down? Do real issues related to age make us less able to perform editing tasks? [Carol Saller](#), longtime contributing editor to *The Chicago Manual of Style* and author of *The Subversive Copy Editor*, [blogged frankly on the subject](#) for CMOS Shop Talk and received some furious responses. "That post got me in a lot of trouble! I've wished many times I could rewrite it," said Saller. "People are sensitive when they think you're attacking them with prejudice. But no one can deny that older editors are more likely to have received their training longer ago than younger editors. My point was for us to question whether our skills are up to date."

Freelance writing guru Carol Tice would agree with Saller. Tice suggests that while [older writers may assume it's ageism](#) if they fail to get a freelance gig, more likely it's what she calls "skill-ism"—assumptions about outdated tech skills. She argues that when older freelancers stay current with technology, combined with their decades of experience, they "have a strong offer."

Yet even when boomer editors maintain their tech chops, they may be dismissed by some prospective clients who perceive any older freelancer as a tech dinosaur. "What really makes me angry is the assumption that since I'm a septuagenarian, I'm probably technically inept," said Elliot Linzer. He built his first computer in 1958, when he was in junior high school, then helped write technical manuals for VAX computers in the 1980s. It's safe to say that Linzer remains unfazed by new technologies.

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EDITORS

Christine Ma
Samantha Enslin

EDITOR EMERITAS

Gerri Berendzen

COPY EDITORS

DeAnna Burghart
Sasha Nyary

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christinema@aceseditors.org

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ACES: The Society for Editing
P.O. Box 1090
Gardnerville, NV 89410

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Chris Morton also stays abreast of tech developments, nimbly navigating freelance editing assignments requiring him to work with new software platforms. It's rare for him to encounter ageism, though Morton does suspect it was a factor last year when he was passed over for a full-time job following an in-person "cursory, millennial tag-team interview."

Tech-savvy boomers fighting the assumption that older editors don't "get" technology aren't helped by the fact that some of our cohort fit the stereotype.



Tech-savvy boomers fighting the assumption that older editors don't "get" technology aren't helped by the fact that some of our cohort fit the stereotype. "A lot of freelance editors are still working with near-obsolete apps and are unwilling to or incapable of updating and switching, which is very off-putting to clients," freelancer Sheila Buff—a boomer herself—observed. "I've learned how to work efficiently in Google Docs because so many of my younger clients now use it, but I fear many of my colleagues are falling behind."

Beth Lasser, a Gen X freelance editor, has noticed that some older colleagues resist adapting as tech evolves. "They can seem unprepared to operate in the current environment, technologically speaking. Such people may view what I have to say as ageist, but I view them as inflexible and unwilling to adapt," she said.

Clearly, we older freelancers must prioritize staying current on technology or risk not landing gigs. Tice further suggests aiming at our demographic and avoiding headshots that "look like they were taken 20 years ago in Montgomery Ward."

Freelancer Andrew Huston agrees that boomers marketing to boomers makes sense. "I've found that writers gravitate toward editors in their own age—and therefore experience—group," he said. "I never hide the year I graduated from college or my employment years, and people can easily do the math. I am quite happy if

In their words: freelance editors on ageism

I suspect I have lost some possible clients due to age, and to being a woman who doesn't make an effort to look younger. As with many discrimination things, most people aren't going to say "I don't want to hire you, you're too old"; they'll just go find someone else.

—Vicki Rosenzweig



I'm 60, heading toward 61 this summer, and I'm still going gangbusters. I don't say, though, in my correspondence with researcher-authors, how many years of experience I have or what my age is. I do include a link to my website in my signature, so they can find out more about me and guesstimate my age from dates on my résumé.

—Katharine O'Moore-Klopf

I'm convinced that subtle ageism is the main reason for the drop-off in my job offers, especially in the last couple of years. My website quickly reveals how long I've been kicking around the planet. I suspect that fact may be scaring off writers who think I'm just too darn old to get the job done.

—Nancy Doherty

I'm glad to say that I haven't experienced much in the way of ageism. I do leave my graduation year off my résumé on the rare occasion that anyone asks for it, but I'm proud of my many years of freelancing and prefer to work with clients who respect what I've achieved and want someone with my kind of background.

—Ruth E. Thaler-Carter

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that limits my inquiries to the 74.1 million baby boomers. That's more than a big enough pool for me!"

The reality is that freelance editors often pursue jobs managed by people younger than themselves; many of them see their experience trumping age when it comes to being hired. "I am 68, and I do not hide dates on my résumé. In my 'about' descriptions, I always refer to my 33-plus years of experience," said Fran Fahey. "I have never experienced ageism in my job . . . and my clients' ages run the gamut, from those who are still working on their master's theses to fellow boomers who are writing their memoirs."

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Maggi Kirkbride has worked for more than 50 years, and she also dismisses age as an issue in snagging freelance gigs. "It's about Fit and Fit," she said. "Fit One: there must be a skills match. Fit Two: the person with the right skills match must fit in with the people already working there and/or the image the hiring person has in mind. With age can come experience—that 'wisdom thing'—and often a person's best work."

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 **I rarely send anyone my résumé. I just write a few sentences about my experience and how it is relevant to the assignment that I'm contending for.**

—*Elliot Linzer*

Note how I say "20+ years"? That's all I admit to, though I go back much further.

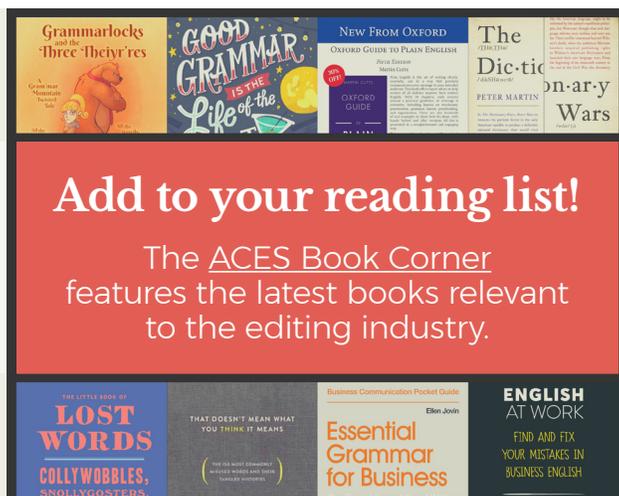
—*Wendy Meyeroff*

At age 73 I am still copyediting, proofreading, and creating indexes for publishers and authors all over the world. I receive many projects through LinkedIn, where they can see my résumé and easily figure out my approximate age. There are several repeat clients and first-time users of my services, and none have ever complained.

—*Jacqueline Brownstein*

Over the years, I've had to learn plenty of new technology that most in-house employees would never have to learn on their own without extensive training. As a seasoned freelancer, I have never felt as relevant as I do today, especially in light of the pandemic.

—*Jo Pitkin*

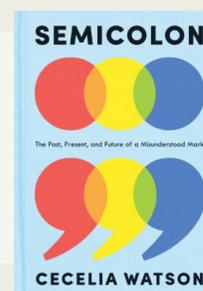
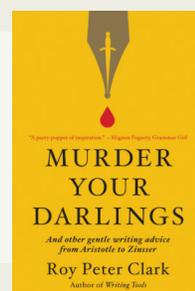


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The takeaway

While ageism exists, some freelance editors don't see it as their problem. For boomers who *are* concerned—and there are plenty of us—these steps will help you snag those freelance gigs. Boom!

- Keep up with technology developments; at its most basic, this includes expanding your editing proficiency to the most recent version of Word and beyond (Google Docs, PDF markup, etc.).
- Emphasize how you meet specific requirements of any job postings you pursue.
- Trim your résumé and portfolio to downplay dates while emphasizing experience; consider pruning work that's more than 10 years old.
- Ditto your website . . . and if you are a committed freelance editor, you should have one.
- Keep your headshot current and, if possible, do it professionally. (Tice suggests shooting outside or in an unusual location as a departure from potentially stodgy studio setups.)
- Make sure your social media presence (you are on social media, right?) is current, relevant, and engaging.

Other freelance boomers are equally sure that strategically trimming their résumé to downplay their age helps them secure new jobs, whatever the hiring demographic. Like many websites related to job hunting, Jobscan recommends against listing experience more than 10 to 15 years old—and freelance editor Barbara Curielle thinks that's sound advice. "I stopped listing my graduation dates on my résumé," she said. "Later, I even stopped listing the dates when I worked in-house, although I still list the jobs."

However we boomers market ourselves, there's no denying that most of us emerged on the editing scene decades ago, just as there's no denying the mental manifestations of aging. A few of us may be en route to "superaging," but most of us will experience some degree of cognitive decline with age. The good news: we can work around these challenges and retain our professional value. (Remember: we have wisdom on our side.)

Saller has some ideas that go back to the basics for keeping your figurative editing pencil sharp: she suggests editors test themselves on grammar, usage, and style through resources like CMOS Online; read relevant blogs; and participate in online editors' groups. (ACES and the Editorial Freelancers Association offer resources to help editors develop, maintain, and grow their skills.) If any age limitations make aspects of editing difficult, Saller advises, focus on others. Fortunately, editing offers an array of

possibilities. Perhaps the unwavering focus required by proofreading and copyediting is becoming more challenging, but you're as sharp as ever in your editorial judgment and ability to evaluate text; in that case, you might consider pivoting to developmental editing.

Another point she makes is that quality varies among editors regardless of age, and we need to take a hard look at ourselves *throughout* our careers. "Anyone—young or old—can be a bad editor, with pockets of ignorance, poor training, or close-mindedness," said Saller. "We should all self-examine now and then with a view to our editing future."

My grudge against the start-up that failed to hire me aside, I clearly have some work to do. Perhaps I'll start by updating my LinkedIn profile. I work with indie writers who don't flock to that social media platform, but I also edit for institutions who are all over it. Come to think of it, I haven't seriously updated my website or tweaked my résumé in years—and both are aging alongside me. *Hey, boomer!* I tell myself. *Time to get to work, to get work.* ●

Amy Spungen worked as a copy editor in Washington, DC, before moving to Chicago with her husband a long time ago. She freelanced there before joining the Chicago Botanic Garden editorial team, eventually serving as its director. Amy returned to freelancing in 2016. For more info, visit her website at SpungenEdits.com.