



# Age and Adaptability:

The Surprising Connection

# Abstract

Age discrimination and ageism are highly prevalent in hiring practices, but are prejudices against older candidates founded in science? This eBook explains CLARA's recent findings on the impact of age on a job candidate's abilities. Our research shows that older candidates demonstrate greater Learning Agility and Distance Traveled scores, indicating that there's a positive link between candidate age and adaptability.

# Age and Adaptability

## Introduction

The American workforce is aging. Between improvements in healthcare, changes in corporate retirement policies, and updates to the Social Security system, many older adults are staying in the workforce well past the traditional U.S. retirement age of 65. As a result, many job searchers are finding themselves competing with peers who are years, if not decades, younger than them. This has set the stage for frequent ageism, **with the majority of job seekers above 40 years old reporting they have experienced age discrimination.**

While age discrimination is illegal, our findings also show that it may also be impractical as older candidates demonstrated higher levels of Learning Agility and Distance Traveled (traits including proactivity, self-efficacy, and antifragility) than their younger peers. These factors have led us to the conclusion that age can be positively correlated with adaptability in the workplace.

# Learning Agility and Distance Traveled, explained

## Learning Agility

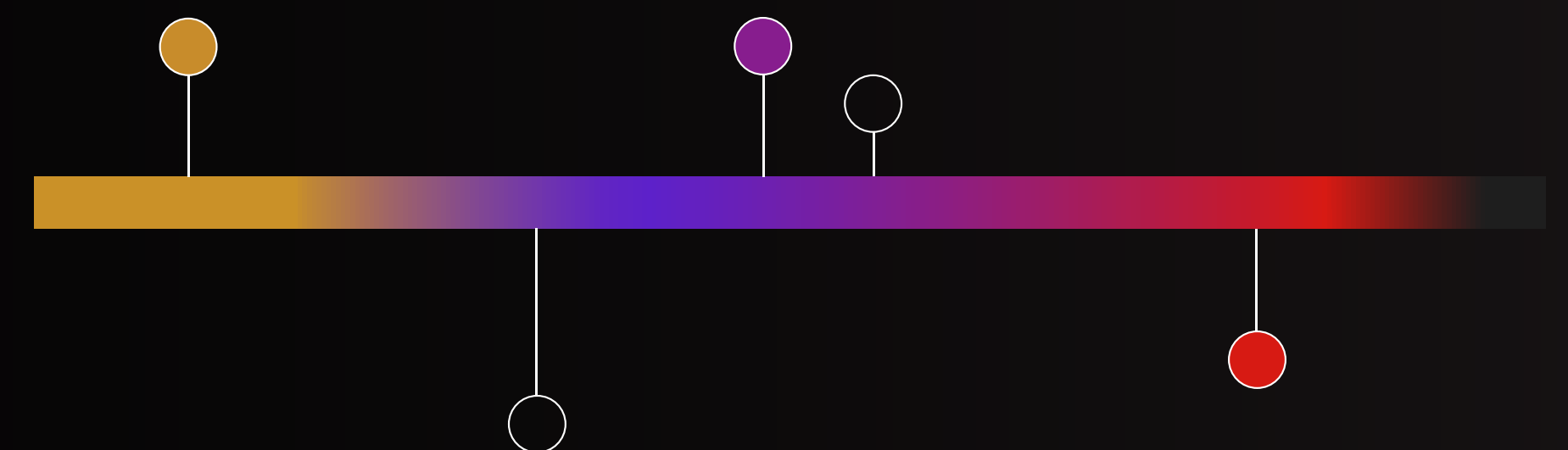
Learning agility is the ability to quickly absorb new information and apply it in different contexts. Those with high learning agility can transfer knowledge across disciplines, adapt to new environments, and respond effectively to challenges. It's a skill that can be enhanced through practice and reflection.

Those with high Learning Agility demonstrate traits like experimentation, self-reflection, continuous improvement, and the ability to connect knowledge from one situation to another.

## Distance Traveled

Distance Traveled measures how much progress someone has made, considering where they started and how far they've come. It focuses on qualities like grit, resilience, and resourcefulness—traits that often don't appear on a resume but are critical in today's workplace. This concept helps uncover these traits in all candidates and can be particularly enlightening regarding those who may have taken unconventional paths to success.

Distance Traveled has always been a meaningful factor in hiring, but the ability to quantify it is fairly new.





# About our study

We partnered with Kylie Goodell King, Ph.D., to conduct a **research study** to validate the efficacy of our new candidate assessment tool. This study involved 373 participants from across the United States. Each participant completed a 37-question assessment designed to evaluate Critical Thinking, Learning Agility, and Distance Traveled. The diverse pool of respondents included an equal mix of men and women. Participant ages ranged from 20 to 79 years old with an average age of 42.

**373**

Participants

**42**

Average Age

**37**

Assesment  
Questions



**"Measuring distance traveled in hiring provides a powerful lens to evaluate candidates' grit, resilience, and adaptability—qualities that can be overlooked by traditional metrics like GPA or alma mater. This research is promising because it highlights how diverse experiences can predict workplace adaptability and success."**

— Kylie Goodell King, *Ph.D*



# How age discrimination impacts older job seekers

A systematic review of correspondence studies and scenario experiments conducted by Lucija Batinovic, Marlon Howe, Samantha Sinclair, and Rickard Carlsson found that age discrimination has a sizable impact on candidate selection. In aggregate, older applicants are 11% to 50% less likely to be being hired compared to younger applicants. Incidences of age discrimination rise with age. Data also indicates that discrimination often occurs at the initial hiring stage, limiting older candidates from having the opportunity to discuss their qualifications with hiring managers.



**Despite their skills and qualifications, older jobseekers' career opportunities are artificially limited by ageism.**





# Age and Distance Traveled

In our pilot study, we noticed a positive correlation between distance traveled and age. This means that distance traveled scores are higher in older participants than in younger participants. Although distance traveled is a relatively new construct, prior research supports this finding.

**We define distance traveled as a measure of an individual's accomplishments and capacities that considers their starting point and trajectory of progress.**

It encompasses grit, resourcefulness, self-efficacy, proactivity, antifragility, and resilience. Previous research demonstrates a positive link between age and these factors.

# Age and Distance Traveled

## Grit

Duckworth and Quinn (2009) found that grit increases with age, noting that older adults might have more life experience and more opportunities to develop a practice of pursuing long-term goals. Similarly, Lucas and colleagues (2015) demonstrate that grit is positively correlated with age and note that this relationship is likely due to perseverance through cumulative life experiences.

## Resourcefulness

Wells and Sweeney (1982) examine how resourcefulness increases with age as individuals develop strategies for coping with life challenges. More recently, Zarit and Pearlin (2018) link resourcefulness and age based on tackling and overcoming cumulative stressors.

## Proactivity

The work of Lang and Carstensen (2002) supports the idea that as individuals age, they become more proactive in the pursuit of personal goals, especially related to career aspirations. Bindl & Parker (2010) also find that proactivity increases with age, especially in professional settings.

## Self-Efficacy

Bandura (1997) found that self-efficacy increases with experience, suggesting a positive correlation with age. Schunk & Pajares (2005) also suggest that self-efficacy grows with age, particularly in individuals who work across different fields.

## Antifragility

Taleb (2012) popularized the concept of antifragility. His work finds that people become more antifragile as they age, enabling them to thrive in chaotic environments or adverse conditions. Bonanno (2004) explored how exposure to adverse events over time can increase individual antifragility, suggesting antifragility increases with age.

## Resilience

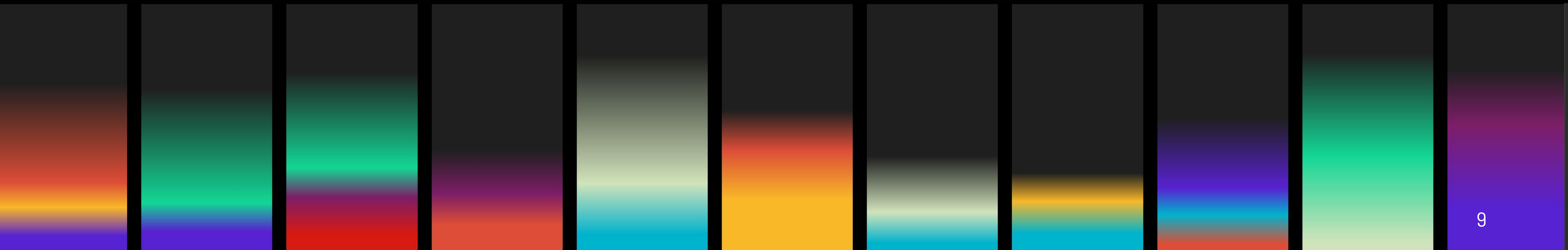
Gooding and colleagues (2012) found that resilience increases with age, as older individuals draw from life experiences to handle new challenges more effectively. Similarly, Martin and Martin (2002) found that resilience increases with age due to cumulative life experience with older adults developing mental and emotional tools to cope with stressors. MacLeod, Musich, et. al. reported similar findings more recently (2016).



# Age and Learning Agility

We describe learning agility as focusing on human behavior, high-level cognitive processing, and the selective transference of lessons learned in one setting and applied in another. It includes experimentation, self-reflection, leveraging individual strengths, continuous improvement, mindfulness, and mentally connecting experiences obtained in one situation to different challenges in another.

Data from our pilot study suggests that learning agility is higher in older respondents. Those aged 42 and older have higher learning agility than those under 42, and there is a small correlation between age and learning agility more generally. There isn't an age when learning agility begins to rapidly increase or decrease; the increase seems to occur gradually throughout a person's career. This contradicts well-worn cultural stereotypes about advancing age and declining mental sharpness.



# Findings from other research

Some previous research suggests that learning agility is positively correlated with professional experience, which often increases with age. Dragoni, Tesluk, Russell, and Oh (2009) argue that accumulated experience over time equips individuals with broader frameworks for learning and adapting, making older professionals potentially more agile in navigating organizational challenges. This view aligns with the idea that experience serves as a reservoir for reflection and pattern recognition, enabling professionals to respond to unfamiliar situations.

Contrary to this perspective, De Meuse and colleagues (2010) report no significant differences in learning agility across age groups. Their findings suggest that learning agility may be a trait-like construct, relatively stable regardless of chronological age or professional tenure. This interpretation implies that learning agility is accessible to professionals at any stage of their career, provided they are supported by environments that encourage adaptability and continuous learning. Regardless of the findings, none of the outside research supports the notion that learning agility declines with age.



# How Distance Traveled and Learning Agility inform adaptability

In the context of the modern workplace, adaptability refers to an individual's ability to adjust to changes, challenges, and new demands in their work environment. It is a critical skill in today's fast-paced world, where employees often face shifting priorities, technological advancements, and unforeseen circumstances.

Employees with higher Distance Traveled demonstrate a greater level of grit, resourcefulness, and resilience, all of which enable an individual to better weather and adjust to changing circumstances and new challenges. Those with higher learning agility have an increased capacity for self-reflection, experimentation, and the transference of previous experiences to present circumstances.

Combined, these two factors paint a portrait of workplace adaptability: someone who has accumulated a wealth of experience, self-knowledge, and determination from previous challenges and is able to seamlessly apply these traits in order to adapt to new challenges as they come up.

# Conclusion

The findings from our research underscore the significant advantages older candidates bring to the workplace in terms of adaptability. With higher levels of Learning Agility and Distance Traveled, older professionals may challenge stereotypes about age and ability, proving that age correlates positively with traits like resilience, resourcefulness, and the capacity to learn and apply knowledge in new contexts. These qualities are essential in today's work environments. By reevaluating biases and embracing the adaptability of older candidates, organizations can unlock untapped potential and build more inclusive, effective teams.



# About



CLARA is an AI-powered applicant screening, scoring, and assessment platform that transforms how organizations discover talent. Unlike traditional systems that filter candidates out, CLARA filters talent in—using ethical AI to measure real-world skills like critical thinking and learning agility while analyzing transferable and adjacent skills that go far beyond keyword matching. This approach ensures every candidate receives a fair evaluation while helping overwhelmed talent teams make smarter, faster hiring decisions.

Organizations using CLARA achieve a 28% increase in qualified candidates, 80% time savings per resume, and 30%+ reduction in time-to-hire. By empowering talent acquisition teams with intelligent technology, CLARA enables them to build stronger, more diverse teams while focusing on what matters most: meaningful relationships that drive business value.

For more information,  
please visit

[getclara.io](https://getclara.io)