With medical and scientific advances pushing life expectancy rates increasingly higher, the resultant “aging world” will undeniably affect all of us. It is not unrealistic, for example, to envision a world twenty years hence where “older individuals” wield considerably more political power, are more active in the workplace and in universities, and have a much greater stake in the world’s economic output. New attitudes on health care and older people’s roles in education will be forged, and questions will be raised about the fairness of social security and other payments that are taken for granted today. This chapter examines one of these developments: changes in the workplace.

Demographic workforce projections for the new millennium paint a mixed picture for older workers. On the positive side, most economists predict future shortages of skilled younger workers (Steinhauser 1998; Walsh and Lloyd 1984), predictions that bode well for older workers who possess advanced job skills. In fact, a recent study by Hall and Mirvis (1994) suggests that the paucity of skilled people in America’s workforce is already a problem for management. In this study, 75 percent of employers interviewed stated that filling jobs for skilled workers was an ongoing problem. Moreover, as the baby boom generation moves into the 50- and 60-year-old age brackets, it is likely that there will be a disproportionate number of younger workers to fill the jobs that these baby boomers vacate. This should serve as yet another positive sign for the older individuals of tomorrow who wish to work during their later years.

Another school of thought on workplace trends paints a bleaker picture. Economists and academics who adhere to this line of thinking point to the imbalance between supply and demand of jobs today and question how these figures can be turned around in a matter of decades. With 1989 survey poll results showing that roughly 5.4 million older people reported being “ready and willing to work but unable to secure a job” (Louis Harris...
and Associates 1989) and labor force projections forecasting that the percentage of people in the workplace aged 55 and above will rise from 27.1 percent in 1990 to 39.1 percent by 2020 (see Williams and Nussbaum 2001), it is not difficult to understand why these economists predict continued difficulties for older workers.

In this chapter, we discuss the role that the particularly problematic, yet increasingly present, concept of ageism plays in the workplace. In this social context, and while recognizing that this concept has not gone unquestioned (Noels et al. 1999, 2001) and should ideally be construed from a life span perspective (Nussbaum and Baringer 2000; Williams and Giles 1998), we shall expend our energies on the “process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old” (Butler 1987, p. 22; see also Gatz and Pearson 1998). First, we argue that intergenerational communication plays a central, though as yet understudied, role in workplace ageism. As Williams and Giles (1998, p. 159) stated, “Alongside the other ‘isms,’ [ageism] receives its impact through and is shaped in turn by communication.” That said, we construe ageism as a particularly unique -ism given its facility to trigger cognitions and feelings of premature or impending, yet total, demise. Second, we contend that ageist stereotypes are central to the production of ageist attitudes, discourse, and behaviors that are commonplace in the workplace. In making this argument, we present an array of empirical evidence that challenges widely held perceptions that older workers are less adept than their younger counterparts. Third, the issue of age discrimination in the workplace will be examined, with emphasis placed on the role of discourse and communication in cases heard under the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967. Finally, an agenda for future research will be set while simultaneously highlighting two relevant theories that could guide future research into the role of communication management in workplace ageism.

**Intergenerational Communication and Workplace Ageism Research: Their Merging**

Although aging issues unfortunately do not command mainstream attention in the discipline of communication (Giles 1999), the multidisciplinary study of intergenerational communication is just beginning to enjoy a rich and varied history (Giles 1998; Nussbaum and Coupland 1995). Over the past fifteen years, it has rapidly evolved to encompass an