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The effects of old-age stereotypes on organizational productivity (part one)

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to examine common stereotypes regarding old-age workers and the effect of these stereotypes on organizational productivity, as well as to suggest practical solutions for accommodating old-age workers and increasing productivity in all employees.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This three part paper will present a thorough review of relevant literature (1991-2014, with the exception of two studies from 1976) that were conducted on the topics of old-age stereotyping, the effect of old-age stereotyping on organizational productivity, and methods for adequately motivating and managing old-age workers. Studies concerning psychology theories are also examined in order to provide a framework for practical solutions, as well as demographic statistics on population age and employment trends.*

Findings – *This paper identifies a number of old-age stereotypes that have decreased organizational productivity in empirical studies, including reluctance to change, decreased learning ability, intelligence and memory, poor health and accidents, higher organizational costs, decreased motivation, and low innovation and productivity. Findings also suggest that old-age workers can positively affect productivity, and that low productivity is often a result of stereotyping.*

Research limitations/implications – *The prevalence of old-age stereotyping and its impact on organizational productivity may differ by culture, industry, type of employment, education level, and other factors, and thus further research may be necessary. The literature reviewed may not adequately represent worldwide organizational trends, as the literature is largely comprised of studies performed in North America and Europe.*

Practical implications – *Solutions based on these findings are taken directly from the literature or derived from literature on psychology theories, which include self-determination theory, socio-emotional selectivity theory, and selective optimization and compensation theory. The practical solutions proposed address work environment, motivation, rewards, flexibility, and the loss and gain of resources in old-age workers.*

Social implications – *The proportion of old-age workers is increasing and it is therefore necessary to determine ways to adequately integrate old-age workers in the workforce. Furthermore, this can raise productivity in all employees.*

Originality/value – *This paper demonstrates that old-age stereotyping is both prevalent and detrimental within an organizational context. These findings and solutions can potentially be used by organizations in order to increase individual and overall productivity.*

Keywords *Self-determination theory, Old-age stereotypes, Organizational productivity, Selective optimization, Socio-emotional selectivity theory*

Paper type *Literature review*

Introduction

In most industrialized economies, the average life expectancy has increased. People do not want to retire early, diseases are curable, people are healthier than ever before and hence the age of the workforce is growing quickly. In Canada, for instance, by 2021, people aged 55 and over are projected to represent nearly 24 percent of the working age population, the highest proportion on record (Statistics Canada, 2011). Moreover, the outlook for the USA is an increasing

proportion of workers of 55 years and older (21.2 percent in 2014) (Silverstein, 2008). This increase in demographics is explained by 78 million births between the 1940s and 1960s (i.e. “baby boomers”). Furthermore, the population will not be offset by the proportion of people in succeeding generations (Silverstein, 2008).

These changes in workforce have occurred simultaneously to numerous other changes in the workplace. The most notable changes include downsizing, increased use of technology, and less-hierarchical work structures that often use teams. As a result of these changes in the workplace, training and retraining have become hallmarks in today’s organizations. Thus, companies must find ways to cope with an increasingly aged and aging workforce (Feyrer, 2007; Peeters and Van Emmerik, 2008).

The workplace is an essential venue when it comes to achieving equality for people of different culture, gender, age, race, etc. After the other two most common stereotypes, racism and sexism, ageism has become the third most common stereotype used to discriminate against people, especially in the workplace. Ageism refers to making judgments about the actions, characteristics, and desires of people based on their age. Furthermore, these judgments often include negative beliefs rather than positive beliefs about we will refer to as “old-age” workers.

According to Johnson (1993), most employers and probably most employees believe in a rule of thumb that average productivity begins to decline between the ages of 40 and 50. Managers interviewed for the 1995 AARP study were more likely to rate older workers as weak on flexibility, acceptance of new technology, and ability to learn new skills – all traits considered desirable within the workplace. These negative old-age stereotypes held by many employers and co-workers often hinder a company’s growth and performance (Posthuma and Campion, 2009).

In social psychology, a stereotype is a thought that can be adopted about specific types of individuals or certain ways of doing things (McCarty and Yzerbyt, 2002). Studies showed that every person uses stereotypes almost all the time. Stereotypes are used unknowingly – sometimes consciously, and sometimes unconsciously. Studies also reveal that much of what enters consciousness comes from one’s culture. Furthermore, like culture, it seems that people’s minds are split on the subjects of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation (Paul, 1998). This is part one of a three part paper.

Stereotypical beliefs about older workers

Attitudes and beliefs about older workers have been characterized as “ambivalent” (Barth *et al.*, 1993, p. 162) and “mixed” (American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), 1995, p. 19). In other words, several studies agree that older workers are viewed as having both positive and negative attributes. According to Kenrick *et al.* (2002), negative stereotypes about one’s group make it more difficult for people of that group to give their 100 percent performance. In the long run, however, the distancing of older employees from their workplace will produce, among other things, less involvement, less interest, and less enthusiasm (Roberson and Kulik, 2007). Some of the most common stereotypical beliefs are described below in more detail.

Older workers are set in their own ways and are reluctant to change

This is one of the most common stereotypes about old-age employees. A study performed by Rosen and Jerdee (1976a, b) demonstrated that undergraduate students perceived a 60 year old worker as more rigid and inflexible than a 30 year old worker and believed that it is more difficulty to get a 60 year old to change his or her behavior. Various other studies have been conducted on older workers’ willingness to change with time and their ability to adapt to new things. Some studies conclude that inflexibility is a personality trait, not a result of ageism, while others prove that older workers are more reluctant to change than younger workers. According to Carnevale and Stone (1994), older workers do not fear change, but they fear discrimination. In fact it has been argued that age makes one more flexible since older individuals have had to adjust to a higher number of life changes such as retirement, disease, illness, death of family/friends, and lifestyle. Without the ability to change, this adjustment would have been impossible. Older people may be slower in changing their opinions as compared to young people but they cannot be labeled as inflexible.

According to Pogson *et al.* (2003), managerial careers can be divided into the following three stages:

1. trial stage (< 31 years);
2. stabilization stage (31-44 years old); and
3. maintenance stage (45 years and older).

Since older workers fall within the maintenance career stage, they are assumed to be more cognitively rigid, shorter term focussed, and hence more resistant to change. The extent to which one can change without difficulty decreases from the trial stage to the maintenance stage.

Older workers are slow to learn, less intelligent and more forgetful

Old-age workers are often perceived as slow learners with weak memory; however, age does not determine curiosity or the willingness to learn. Older workers may sometimes take slightly longer to learn certain tasks and may respond better to training methods more suited to their needs. In fact, old-age workers demonstrate better study attitudes. Furthermore, accumulated experience helps to lower training costs (Government of Alberta, 2010). Many people, regardless of age, enjoy new technology whereas some try to stay away from learning new things. Older workers are likely to respond well to innovation if it relates to what they already know, allows for self-paced learning, and provides opportunities for practice and support. Age has very small effect on one's learning ability and intelligence (Neisser *et al.*, 1995). In addition to stereotypes regarding learning ability, intelligence, and memory, older age workers are often perceived to be in poorer health and at higher risk for workplace accidents.

Poor health and accidents

In a study performed by Hassell and Perrewé (1995), results showed that people believe that older workers have fewer accidents. This is contradictory to an earlier 1995 AARP study, which found that managers rated older workers below average on avoidance of workplace injury (AARP, 1995). Barth *et al.*'s (1993) research explained these conflicting results by revealing that when it comes to older workers, managers are concerned with health care costs, their flexibility in accepting new assignments, and their suitability for retraining. According to Statistics Canada (2011), three quarters of Canadians aged 65-74 and two thirds of those over 75 rate their health as good or very good. These figures are even higher for workers aged 45-64. Some studies revealed that among old-age workers, absenteeism is less frequent, although it is longer when it is due to injury or chronic illness (Statistics Canada, 2011).

Results concerning the health of old-age workers often yield conflicting results. For example, in another study (Chiu *et al.*, 2001; Kite *et al.*, 1991), researchers examined that older workers have more health problems on the job. Furthermore, in their study of age stereotypes about physical health, Rosen and Jerdee (1976a, b) found that experimental subjects were more likely to reject the request of an older worker (described as in good physical condition) for a transfer to a physically demanding job than they were to reject the same request from a younger worker.

Older workers are more costly

Older workers are considered to be more reliable (McGregor and Gray, 2002) and to have better business ethics, however, they are also perceived as less flexible, less adaptable, less productive, and to have higher salary expectations than their younger counterparts (Hendricks *et al.*, 2008). Van Ours and Stoeldraijer's (2010) study found that when workers grow older there is an increasing gap between productivity and wages, i.e. wages increase with age while productivity does not or does not increase at the same pace. This creates a gap between productivity and wages. The "labour cost productivity gap" suggests that there is no clear positive correlation between the growing salary of an older employee and their productivity (Conen *et al.*, 2012). This is the reason that employers often see younger workers as offering higher value, as they can provide high productivity, better ability to deal with clients, and better ability learn new skills. Older employees with tenure are also entitled to more vacations and a pension depending on number of

years worked. However, a study by Hatcher (2006) demonstrated that the costs of more vacation time and pensions are often outweighed by low turnover among older workers, and the fact that higher turnover among other groups translates into recruiting, hiring, and training expenses. Furthermore, in addition to being perceived as more costly, older workers are perceived as less motivated than their younger counterparts.

Older workers are less motivated

Older workers are believed to be less motivated and enthusiastic than younger workers (Fritzsche *et al.*, 2009). Older workers are sometimes viewed as having less ambitious career goals and, as a result, are stereotyped as exerting less effort on their jobs (Rabl, 2010; Wong *et al.*, 2008). There is some empirical evidence that young adults display a stronger orientation toward growth while older workers put more energy into preventing losses of resources (Freund, 2006). Greller (2006) found that older workers are less interested in training and career development activities, which could be the result of lack of motivation (Greller, 2006; Maurer *et al.*, 2008).

Aside from the negative stereotypes mentioned above, people often believe that older workers help in maintaining a reliable, dedicated workforce. Other positive stereotypes suggest that older workers possess skills such as loyalty, interpersonal skills, honesty, and the ability to cope with unavoidable stress (McGregor and Gray, 2002). However, older age workers are perceived as less innovative and less productive.

Older people are not innovative or productive

Managers and co-workers often assume that older age employees are less productive and less innovative than their younger counterparts. Even if age does not directly influence job performance, older age is perceived as a phase of lower productivity (Silverstein, 2008). Employers who prefer younger or middle aged workers will neither invest in the development of older workers nor in long-term age management, career planning, or training programs (Taylor and Walker, 1998). According to Czaja (1995, p. 57), “the relationship between age and job performance is complex and far from understood” because much of the data available on this topic is unreliable and biased. For example, studies that rely on supervisors’ ratings of performance may be questionable; if the rater has negative attitudes about older workers, their ratings could be affected by their personal beliefs (Hassell and Perrewe, 1995; Siegel, 1993).

Similarly, in a study on the effect of age on performance evaluation and promotion, Siegel (1993) found that there is no significant difference between supervisors’ performance evaluations for older managers compared to similar groups of younger managers, however, older managers were less likely to be promoted. Hassell and Perrewe (1995) found that compared to younger supervisors, older supervisors are more negative in their beliefs about older workers. Furthermore, based on his research review, McNaught (1994) concluded that managers almost always underestimate the productivity of older workers. According to McNaught (1994), employers and managers believe older workers are loyal and have good work habits, but are also inflexible and difficult to train.

Stereotyping can have negative consequences on overall company performance and productivity. Now that we have examined stereotypes attributed to older workers, the following section of this paper will focus on describing some of the consequences of stereotyping on productivity. Part two will cover the consequences of negative stereotypes on productivity.

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