Age Diversity in the Workplace

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Overview

The twenty-first-century workplace presents new trends while challenging formerly accepted behavioral paradigms. Original efforts to manage diversity resulted more from the need to comply with legal requirements (Harrison et al. 1998). Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 became federal laws enacted to protect individuals against employment discrimination and age bias (Lynch 2015). Even having formal equal opportunity policies has not necessarily led to outcomes resulting in equality and inclusion (Riach 2009). The US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2016a, b) reported that in 2015, age discrimination charges totaled more than 20,144 with several awarded judgments of more than a million dollars. The continuing emphasis on inclusion within the organizational setting acknowledges the growing awareness of value-added benefits offered by embracing a mix of diversity components. Gaining insight into organizational inclusion implications requires a detailed analysis of viewpoints. Age diversity is one of the key components since the current workforce offers a unique generational mix (Boehm et al. 2014).

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Butler (1980) first coined the word ageism as prejudice, discrimination, and harmful practices based on a person's apparent age. This chapter explores perceptual, as well as evidenced-based information regarding workplace age diversity and the practical applications for managing an age-diverse workforce.

Aging Workforce

Numerous demographic and socioeconomic changes promote an aging workforce in the new millennium. People are healthier and living longer than in the past. Older workers who find fulfillment in their work and enjoy being a productive member of society want to remain active in the workplace. Financial constraints due to inadequate savings, increased healthcare costs, or supporting other family members cause older workers to delay retirement. The declining birthrate means fewer younger workers entering the workforce (Boehm et al. 2014; Drabe et al. 2015). Each of these factors impacts changing workforce patterns and contribute to continuing bias, stereotyping, and mistreatment.

Life Span Aging Theories

Developmental psychology research examines aging from an interconnected, multidisciplinary, life span development framework (Baltes 1987). The goal is to explore how and why a person changes during each phase of life. The emphasis for younger adults is on growth and development, while a focus on retention and minimizing decline spans the progression from middle age to old age. Researchers determined that this theoretical process leads to a realistic outlook as prospects and goals change throughout life (Ebner et al. 2006). Trends in life span psychology focus on between-person age differences, within-person age differences, and a combination of the two (Baltes et al. 1999; Hofer and Piccinin 2010). Closely aligned with life span development is the capability approach (CA), which focuses on what people aspire to and achieve (Robertson 2015). Another theory examines life span development regulation. The assumptions in this research viewpoint target meta regulation or pairing goals with opportunities, goal engagement or pursuing goals, and goal disengagement or changing the importance of a goal (Hasse et al. 2013). Outcomes from these theoretical perspectives yield valuable

information related to the mental, physical, and motivational changes experienced throughout the life span (Kanfer and Ackerman 2004).

AGE STEREOTYPES AND BIASES

Age stereotypes exist for younger as well as older workers and are both positive and negative. These stereotypes have profound effects on work-place decisions, especially if these decisions lead to prejudice and discrimination (Bertolino et al. 2013; Rauschenbach et al. 2012). Many of these stereotypes emerge due to the generational issues from the three generations currently comprising the workforce. Segmenting into cohorts may add to the problem and actually promote unintentional discriminatory behaviors (Barrett and Bourke 2013; Cox and Coulton 2015). While different perceptions exist between the generations, it is important to note that variations also occur within the generations. Just as not everyone follows the same developmental path, not everyone matches the perceived generational differences. What is most surprising is that expressing generational stereotypes is viewed as acceptable behavior, while mentioning other demographic stereotypes is deemed socially intolerable (Deal et al. 2010).

Baby Boomers

The perception of the Baby Boomer generation, born between 1946 and 1964, is one that exhibits a solid work ethic with an emphasis on individual growth and development, as well as being more stable than younger workers (Bertolino et al. 2013; Riach 2009). Many older workers, however, have limited offers for growth or promotion opportunities due to contrasting perceptions regarding lower productivity levels, limited technology skills, or because the older worker may not match the organization's customer demographic profile (Ilmakunnas and Ilmakunnas 2011). DeArmond et al. (2006) confirmed from study results that older workers are perceived as less adaptable: interpersonally, culturally, and physically.

Baby Boomers are also the first generation where women strived for equality in the workplace. In 2008, during an exceptionally high period of unemployment caused by the economic downturn, older female workers were the most adversely affected group (Ghilarducci 2016). A more recent

study by Neumark et al. (2015) revealed that "based on evidence from over 40,000 job applications, we find robust evidence of age discrimination in hiring against older women" (para. 1).

Trends show that due to increases in life expectancy, Baby Boomers want to continue working, either full- or part-time, beyond the traditional age of retirement (Bell and Narz 2007; Paggi and Jopp 2015). In contrast to the stereotypical viewpoint that older workers are not adaptable interpersonally, a study by Matz-Costa et al. (2012) verified that older workers experienced the highest levels of inclusion when they were members of an age-diverse team. Alternately, younger workers felt the highest levels of inclusion when team membership was more homogeneous.

Generation X

Born between 1965 and 1980, many Generation X members were latchkey children of dual career Baby Boomers and as adults, the Xers tend to be more self-reliant (Crumpacker and Crumpacker 2007). Due to their early environment, this generation of workers tend to exhibit less loyalty to employers and are more concerned with a better balance between work and family life (Bell and Narz 2007). The turbulent economic conditions negatively impacted Generation X members as they first joined the workforce. Thus, they are perceived as cynical and demonstrating distrust in authority figures (Crumpacker and Crumpacker 2007).

Millennials

The Millennial generation members were born between 1981 and 2000. Workers in this generation are perceived to be technologically savvy and embrace various forms of diversity more than other generations. Unlike the Baby Boomers who are perceived as workaholics and gain motivation from intrinsic rewards, the Millennials are recognized as wanting more flexibility in work schedules, value their personal time, and need extrinsic rewards (Bell and Narz 2007; Paggi and Jopp 2015). As children, this generation received constant praise and therefore as adults, the Millennials appear to need continuous feedback and recognition (Crumpacker and Crumpacker 2007). Due to an over-reliance on technology, the Millennial workers are perceived as having poor communication and problem-solving skills (Backes-Gellner and Veen 2013; Crumpacker and Crumpacker 2007).

AGE DISCRIMINATION

The scholarly literature presents several different reasons why age discrimination occurs and whom it impacts. Older workers are considered those who were aged 55 years or older and approaching the more traditional age of retirement (James et al. 2013). This age group may face age discrimination because employers mistakenly believe that eliminating these potentially higher paid individuals may resolve company budget issues. What is not considered when devaluing older workers is the abundance of knowledge and skills acquired through years of experience (Duncan and Loretto 2004). A study by Smeaton et al. (2009) presented evidence that employees working past the traditional retirement age benefit the economy. Older workers are also mistakenly viewed as less productive than younger workers. Employers may be reluctant to invest in training and developing older worker due to a perceived diminished return on investment (Urwin 2006). Older female workers may be particularly vulnerable, as stereotypes encourage the perception that they have less education than younger female employees (Schuman and Kleiner 2001). "Older workers may face greater discrimination because they are perceived to be compliant and thus willing to put up with more" (Glover and Branine 1997, p. 285). Additionally, study results indicated that older workers who are consistently subjected to age stereotypes tend to conform to those lower expectations, resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy (Grima 2011).

Even middle-aged workers are not immune from age discrimination. Failure to achieve what is considered sufficient job-level progression tends to foster feelings of discrimination in middle-aged workers (Arrowsmith and McGoldrick 1997). Discrimination in this age group may also be linked to industry standards. "In advertising and IT, a worker as young as 40 can be considered too old" (Duncan and Loretto 2004, p. 96).

Reverse age discrimination is equally prevalent. With fewer jobs available, younger workers experience difficulties when competing against older, more experienced colleagues (Choi et al. 2011; de Guzman et al. 2014). At CVS retail store, customers reported feeling much more comfortable discussing their health concerns with older employees rather than sharing these issues with younger employees (Clark 2004). Instances of reverse age discrimination may also be industry-related. When hiring a consultant, corporate leaders tend to use age

and experience as indicators to determine the credibility of the consultant (Choi et al. 2011). In the university setting, tenure practices inhibit younger educators' teaching staff opportunities, which may lead to intergenerational conflict (Barrett and Bourke 2013).

Cat's Paw Theory

Age discrimination needs to be avoided to prevent legal consequences. Numerous management personnel throughout a hierarchical organizational structure retain input into the hiring and firing decision process. This decision-making process requires objectivity to ensure fairness. Due to continuing instances of workers filing claims of age discrimination, it becomes increasingly important to examine each manager's motives. An employer is now held liable if one manager with biased motives influences another manager to take negative action against an employee (de Guzman et al. 2014). This is a confusing and frequently debated point of law and is known as the cat's paw theory or subordinate bias liability (Covel 2011).

Judge Richard Posner used a children's fable to create an analogy in deciding the outcome of the Shager v. Upjohn Co. influenced-based liability case (Powderly 2012). In the children's fable, a cat's actions were unknowingly influenced by a monkey with negative, ulterior intentions ("Aesop for Children" 1919). In the lawsuit, the Career Path Committee from Upjohn, Co. fired 53-year-old Ralph Shager. The Committee based their decision on a recommendation submitted by Shager's 38-year-old supervisor. At the time, the Committee did not know that the supervisor preferred younger employees (Powderly 2012).

Another legal case, Staub v. Proctor Hospital, explored a hospital radiology technician who also served in the Army Reserves. Vincent Staub's supervisor, Janice Mulally, openly criticized his military obligations, which required regular training sessions and, on occasion, conflicted with scheduled work shifts. When Staub complained to the department head, Michael Korenchuk, he received no support and further criticism from that leader, as well. While the Vice President of Human Resources actually fired him, Staub claimed that Ms. Mulally and Mr. Korenchuk directly influenced HR personnel in the decision to terminate him (Covel 2011; Powderly 2012). After lower court reversals, the Supreme Court ultimately issued a final ruling on this case and upheld the validity

of the cat's paw liability theory to find in favor of Staub (Pipal and Robbennolt 2011).

"Since 1990, plaintiffs have asserted claims premised on the cat's paw theory under various federal anti-discrimination statutes" including age discrimination (Covel 2011, p. 160). This point of law is controversial because it is not easy to determine the amount of influence one party needs to exert over another party to actually claim liability (Covel 2011). A review of the case outcomes led to the following recommendations for management and HR personnel:

1. Conduct investigations using a qualified independent person to ensure company personnel follow established legal practices.
2. Clearly document all process steps so that this information may be used as evidence of ethical practices.
3. Strive to uncover the truth by interviewing all parties and witnesses (Powderly 2012).

DIVERSITY CLIMATE

It is important to establish the difference between affirmative action and diversity. These are not interchangeable words. As Calloway and Awadzi (2010) posited "diversity is the springboard that leads to the need for affirmative action, while the controversy and race-based focus of affirmative action spurs the need for diversity and inclusion" (p. 67). Prior affirmative action initiatives instituted to favor the hiring of women and minorities unfortunately led to a focus on meeting quotas and, in many instances, resulted in reverse discrimination practices (Velazquez 2006). Diversity refers to a wider spectrum of organizational inclusion rather than a need for initiatives promoting preferential treatment (Barak 2000).

Promoting a workplace climate that embraces diversity requires "employees' shared perceptions of the policies, practices, and procedures that implicitly and explicitly communicate the extent to which fostering and maintaining diversity and eliminating discrimination is a priority in the organization" (Gelfand et al. 2005, p. 104). Placing an emphasis on promoting age diversity becomes an important subset in the development of the overall organizational climate. The world of work changes and evolves at a constant rate. The workplace in previous decades exhibited a clear chain of command with older workers in senior-level

leadership positions. Current organizational structures are less hierarchical, and many promote leaderless team approaches where even the young and less experienced workers contribute valuable input and challenge the status quo (Stanley 2010).

An employee's age should not produce any barriers to achieving organizational opportunities or demonstrate signs of preferential treatment. Older employees, with breadth and depth of work experience, should not be overlooked for upward mobility and younger employees, who are eager to learn, should not be limited due to lack of work tenure (Gelfand et al. 2005). Having an age-diverse workforce may provide more upward mobility for everyone. Backes-Gellner and Veen (2013) noted that a homogeneous workforce leads to situations where workers may remain in job positions for many years and limit promotion opportunities for others. A heterogeneous workforce provides a more dynamic environment with continuous movement. Research study results demonstrated that while age diversity may not directly correlate to bottom-line profitability, an age-inclusive workplace may impact the work environment, which leads to positive performance outcomes (Kunze et al. 2013; Wegge et al. 2012). Innovative organizations reap the most benefit from age diversity and tend to show increases in productivity outcomes (Backes-Gellner and Veen 2013).

Managing this age-diverse workforce presents challenges related to retaining experienced and highly skilled older workers, maintaining the work motivation for middle-aged workers, and recruiting high-potential younger workers. It becomes vitally important to understand age-related differences in preferences related to factors such as pay, meaningful work, advancement and development opportunities, recognition, and autonomy. Bright's (2010) cross-sectional study discovered that age diversity influenced the above-mentioned work factors based upon three different perspectives rather than a single overall causative factor. The three factors were as follows: generational differences, access to opportunities or job level, and organizational socialization. Study results from Bright indicated that generational cohort preferences determined the differing needs for recognition. Actual access to opportunities or job level explained the differences regarding the importance of pay, meaningfulness of work, and autonomy. Organizational socialization was the most influencing factor for differences related to the importance of advancement (Bright 2010). Organizational leaders should, therefore,

continually foster the HR practices in recruiting, training, evaluating, and promoting that encourage diversity inclusion (Avery and McKay 2010).

Although building a diverse workforce creates many workplace advantages, it is also important to consider and properly manage the incurred challenges and additional costs related to productivity. Cross-generational communication and socialization challenges may inhibit successful problem-solving (Gevers and Peeters 2009). Continuing confrontational communication issues cause increased frustration and absenteeism and, ultimately, may result in a turnover (Richard and Shelor 2002). Differing values, attitudes, and perceptions between different age groups lead to challenges in effective team performance (Backes-Gellner and Veen 2013). Awareness of these potential issues allows managers to proactively take measures to diminish the chances of age diversity-related problems (Avery and McKay 2010).

Practical Applications for an Age-Inclusive Workplace

A strategic approach appears to be an effective way to utilize the labor force and harness the desired benefits of fostering age diversity. An evaluation of current policies and practices may generate the implementation of newer, innovative strategies to meet organizational goals. Success factors that advance a more inclusive work environment include an audit of the current organizational culture and policies, job analysis, training initiatives, and finding commonalities.

Analysis of Organizational Culture and Practices

Promoting organizational age diversity initiatives inspires favorable internal and external stakeholders' viewpoints of the firm and can be used as a benchmark by other organizations (Stankiewicz 2015). Implementing HR policies that foster equal opportunity and promote zero tolerance for discrimination suggests to employees that their employer is open-minded, fair, and responsible (Kunze et al. 2013). As a first step to assess the age diversity climate, company leaders and HR personnel may want to analyze the current age alignment within the organization. This establishes the present status and reveals any potential for discriminatory practices (Kunze et al. 2013). An evaluation of the existing values and norms

is also prudent in order to establish the current organizational culture (Crumpacker and Crumpacker 2007).

Incorporating the use of auditing and assessment tools helps to analyze the current organizational culture regarding age acceptance. Voelpel and Streb (2010) developed a balanced scorecard monitoring approach based upon creativity and productivity in relation to five components: (a) "enabling managerial mindset, (b) facilitating knowledge management, (c) implementing health management, (d) adapting HR practices, and (e) cultivating the appropriate work environment" (p. 86). The Age Audit Tool uses a red, yellow, green traffic light rating process to help leaders and HR personnel determine the current organizational climate and direct organizational leaders toward action steps, such as immediate action required, plan to take future action, or the current climate meets standards (Broughan 2013).

Communication Initiatives

Improving organizational communication practices becomes a powerful tool to combat ageism in the workplace. Lagacé et al. (2016) presented new evidence that supports the argument that "non-ageist communication practices, including intergenerational contacts, multi-age perspective and non-patronizing/ageist messages …. reduces bias" (p. 72). Managers play a vital role in fostering an organizational climate that promotes fairness and understanding. De Guzman et al. (2014) recommended that organizational leaders provide more opportunities for employee interaction, such as meetings and group forums to cultivate an age-friendly workplace. All communication practices should foster two-way, transparent exchanges (Panaccio and Waxin 2010).

Recruitment Practices

Implementing objective recruitment practices establishes an age-diverse candidate pool. Panaccio and Waxin (2010) recommended a thorough analysis of the organization's reputation and image in order to showcase an age-friendly workplace as part of the recruitment advertising process. When interviewing potential job candidates, the US Department of State (2005) suggested the use of patterned interview questions in the form of hypothetical situations and past behavior examples to uncover potential

age biases. HR personnel must fully evaluate the referral system currently in place to ensure that it does not further promote discriminatory practices (Panaccio and Waxin 2010). Conducting routine statistical analysis to evaluate recruiting and hiring practices ensures that decisions are based upon the established job dimensions (Mishra and Mishra 2015).

Job Dimension Analysis

As diminished adaptability is a perceived stereotype of older workers, HR personnel may want to examine job design and structure to garner work components as a means to predict the actual dimensions needed for the job (DeArmond et al. 2006). "As suggested by lifespan aging theories, different job characteristics will differentially affect job outcomes of older and younger workers" (Zaniboni et al. 2014, p. 509). Offering flexible work schedules and working conditions, such as telecommuting, job sharing, and compressed work weeks, benefits all employees (Ciutiene and Railaite 2015).

Training and Mentoring

Offering multigenerational training programs, for management and non-management personnel, is imperative in order to reinforce the legal ramifications of discriminatory practices (Panaccio and Waxin 2010). Training initiatives also diminish negative stereotypes, minimize destructive conflict, and encourage the synergy that results from group diversity (Van Vianen et al. 2011; Ciutiene and Railaite 2015; Wegge et al. 2012). Opportunities exist to create an organizational competitive advantage by utilizing the specific skill sets and knowledge of workers of all ages through mentoring initiatives (James et al. 2013). "The ability to learn and remember new skills can continue into a person's 70s, 80s, and beyond …. creativity of a person continues across the lifespan" (de Guzman et al. 2014, p. 397). Implementing traditional mentoring and reverse mentoring processes supports the important practice of knowledge transfer between workers and diminishes individual information silos (Achar 2016; Schrobsdorff 2015). Reverse mentoring offers a younger worker an opportunity to pair with an older employee to share technological expertise while gaining leadership skills (Lankau and Scandura 2002). General Electric is one example of an organization

that paired 500 older, senior leaders with younger, lower level employee to analyze technology usage. Members of each pair reported gaining insights from their partners, with senior leaders gaining valuable technology information while junior members established important networking contacts (Ciutiene and Railaite 2015). Learning from mentoring and reverse mentoring practices produces cognitive improvement, skill-based knowledge, and positive motivational outcomes (Schrobsdorff 2015).

Assessment of Commonalities

Many of the work-related concerns expressed by each generation of workers may have cross-generational appeal. For example, interest in more flexible work schedule options and better work-life balance practices transcends workers of all ages (Bell and Narz 2007). In addition, managers want every employee to feel engaged with his or her work, and it becomes important to overcome age bias or workers tend to feel disengaged (James et al. 2013). Health and wellness concerns are vital at every age; however, one disturbing trend shows that "if current health-related behaviors do not improve, it is realistic to expect that Millennials will have substantially worse health as a result of obesity than did older cohorts at the same age" (Deal et al. 2010, p. 195). Finding shared commonalities while appreciating the significant differences between age groups promotes a respectful work environment that values every employee's contribution.

Summary

Organizational leaders face numerous challenges in today's dynamic workplace that require experiential, technical, and analytical skills that are only achieved with an age-diverse workforce. A combination of life span development theories, perceptions of generational differences, and legal ramifications presents the challenges faced by HR personnel and organizational leaders in order to manage the span of age groups at work. Positive HR applications of age-inclusive initiatives have an impact on creating an effective work environment, changing negative age stereotypes, and dispelling earlier misconceptions and mistreatment.

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