Age diversity: an inconvenience for the organization?

Insights from research to practice

Prof. Donatienne Desmette
The context

- **Challenges related to populations ageing**
  - workforce ageing (raising pension age/non mandatory retirement)
  - increasing age diversity (more co-working age groups: younger/middle-age/older/“old-old” workers)

- **Aim of the presentation**
  Understanding possible traps and levers of (the management of) age diversity

[Graph: Activity rate 45-64 years old, Belgium]

Content overview

I. Age diversity: an introduction
II. Ageism in the workplace
   - The role of the manager
   - The role of the older worker
III. Approaches of age diversity management
IV. Conclusion and discussion
Age diversity: an introduction
The inconvenience of age diversity

Age diversity - health: ↓
Age diversity - absenteeism: ↑

See Boehm & Kunze (2015)
Negative effects of age diversity can be explained by several theories:

- **Social identity and self-categorization approach** (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, 1999)
  - People classify themselves and others in groups; people of the same group are perceived as similar and favoured
  - Age is one of the most basic criteria for social categorization (Brewer & Lui, 1989)

- **The age-anxiety based approach** ("Terror management theory"; Martens et al., 2005)
  - People feel personal anxiety related to aging characteristics

- **The institutional age segregation**
  - Western modern societies have made old age an "isolated island" (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005)

*predict ageism toward the older workers*
Ageism in the workplace
Ageism

Process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination of people because they are (perceived as) old (Butler, 1987)

Stereotypes

Compared to younger workers (YW), older workers (OW) are perceived as (see Posthuma & Campion, 2009):
- lower in performance
- more resistant to change
- less able to learn,
- having a shorter tenure
- a higher cost
- dependable

- more negative than positive stereotypes
- stereotypes predict behavior
From stereotypes to behavior

In the workplace

- **Two-dimension competence**
  - Higher work efficiency
    (i.e., experienced, think before acting)
  - Lower adaptability
    (i.e., the ability to quickly learn and be creative)
  (Warr & Pennington, 1993)

- **The role of the context**
  - adaptability often more important than efficiency ("young-typed job")

(Fiske et al. 2002; Cuddy et al., 2002)
Effects of ageism on the employer

- **Age discrimination**
  Compared to YW, the OW are less hired, they are dismissed from jobs, denied promotions, trainings or other career development opportunities (Posthuma & Campion, 2009)

- **The role of the context**
  Age discrimination is stronger when age-based categorization processes are activated
  - *direct social comparison between younger and older workers*
  - *limited individuating information is limited*
  - ...
  
  (see the meta-analyses of Bal et al., 2011; Gordon & Arvey, 2004)
Effects of ageism on the older worker: example with a study (Gaillard & Desmette, 2010)

• Method

Sample: workers 45+
Experimental design: Activation of
- positive stereotypes
- negative stereotypes
- Age (no text)

Measure of consequences: intention to retire early

• Results

Early retirement intentions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>positive stereotypes</th>
<th>negative stereotypes</th>
<th>age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>5.38</td>
<td>5.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⇒ Explicit negative stereotype = disengagement
⇒ Age = implicit activation of negative stereotypes

(for similar findings with perceived discrimination, see Laplante et al., 2010; von Hippel et al., 2013)
To sum up at this point

**Age diversity**

Age categorization
« This worker is older »

Activation of age stereotypes
« Older workers are less ... »

Age biased behavior toward the older workers
*Denigrating language, discrimination, ...*

Reaction of the prejudiced older worker
*Withdrawal, lower motivation, ...*

Adapted from Ries et al. (2011)
Approaches of age diversity management

*How to reduce ageism and to benefit from the advantages of age diversity?*
1. Age tailored practices

- **Age tailored HR practices**
  HR practices that aim at specifically fulfilling older workers’ needs in order to reduce job demands (e.g., flexible work-schedules, reduced working hours) (e.g., Armstrong-Stassen & Schlosser, 2010; Paullin & Whetzel, 2012)

- **Positive effects on:**
  - Intentions to remain (Armstrong-Stassen & Schlosser, 2010; Zaniboni et al., 2010)
  - Perceived organizational support (Armstrong-Stassen & Schlosser, 2010)

- **Possible pernicious effects of preferential treatment**
  Favoring individuals on the basis of their group membership (i.e. preferential treatment) = negatively affects perceptions of beneficiaries whose competence is questioned (e.g., Crosby et al., 2003; Heilman & Welle, 2006)
Age-tailored practices and ageism
(Iweins, Desmette, & Yzerbyt, 2012a)

• **Study 1**

  **Participants**: younger workers in a Belgian hospital (mean age: 30)

  **Measure of perceived age-tailored practices**
  “In my organization, specific policies for older workers are implemented”

• **Study 2**

  **Participants**: Younger workers (Mage = 33)

  **Experimental design**: Activation of:
  - Preferential treatment
    ... « was hired in agreement with an employment policy that favours workers over the age of 50. »
  - Merit
    ... « was hired in agreement with an employment policy that favours the most competent workers. »

  ⇒ *Age-tailored HR management: likely to increase ageism*
  ⇒ *Should we be blind to age?*
2. Denying age differences

- Being blind to age differences may not avoid the risk of ageism because of implicit age categorization
  - age categories will continue to exist
  - does not help to cut the deleterious cycle of ageism
  - segregation and discrimination

- Ageing process: Employability/sustainability issue
  - Age (diversity) can not be ignored
3. The multi-age perspective

- The multi-age climate

Based on the “multiculturalism” (e.g., Wolsko et al., 2006) and “integration & learning” perspective” (Ely & Thomas, 2001):

⇒ *Organizational support to age diversity that recognizes and values each age group as contributing to the development of the organization*

  e.g. “In its age management diversity, my organization considers that recognizing the specificity of each generation leads to harmony between workers” (Iweins et al., 2013)

⇒ Intergenerational contact = added-value for the organization
Participants: younger workers ($M_{age}=37$)
- The multi-age climate reduces ageism through:
  - inclusive self-categorization
  - perceived organizational justice
- Positive impact on employability

Study 1
Iweins, Desmette, Stinglhamber, & Yzerbyt (2013)

Perceived multi-age climate

- Dual identity
- Organizational justice

Lower negative stereotypes on OW
Lower intentions to quit

Study 2
Iweins, Desmette, & Yzerbyt (2012b)

Participants: workers aged from 22 to 63 ans ($M_{age}=42$ ans)
- Multi-age HR is a buffer against age discrimination (see also Kunze et al., 2013)
- Effects are similar for younger workers and older workers
Discussion

From research to practices and vice versa
The multi-age climate interventions

- Age categorization
  « This worker is older »

- Activation of age stereotypes
  « Older workers are less … »

- Age biased behavior toward the older workers
  Denigrating language, discrimination, …

- Reaction of the prejudiced older worker
  Withdrawal, lower motivation, …

- Sharing common social identity

- Informing about age differences

- Training to age diversity management

- Affirming positive social identity
Thank you for your attention

donatienne.desmette@uclouvain.be
References


