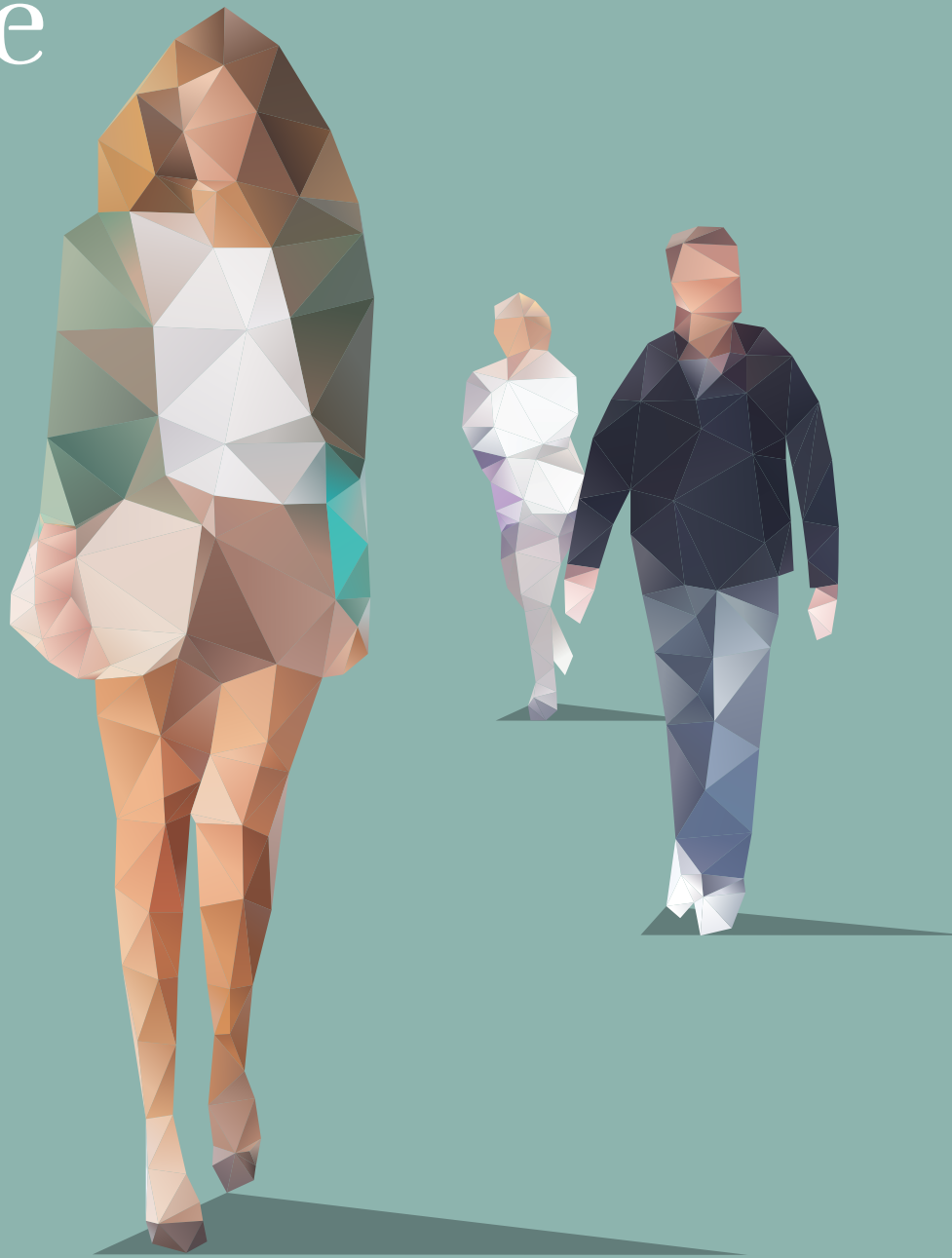Managing Age

Organising age for an innovative workforce

The project investigates how organisations manage age, and identifies effective strategies for building capacity, innovation and learning for an intergenerational workforce.

THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY
Business School

THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Cardiff
Business
School
Cardiff University

Organising age for an innovative workforce

Most innovative organisations are also the most age diverse. Yet this diversity will only be achieved across organisations when taken-for-granted age-related assumptions are challenged. Two typical assumptions are that younger, up-and-coming employees will be the source of innovation, while older employees who have 'put in their time' are expected to be bastions of experience devoid of innovative capacity. Both are examples of aged-based stereotypes that can lead to age discrimination and corporate stagnation. In contrast, as our study shows, chronological age does not correlate to these stereotypes. If organisations are to achieve an innovation advantage, creating a healthy intergenerational workforce, that is socially and economically transformative is paramount.

Currently, age discrimination is rife in the workforce, but compared to race and gender discrimination little work has been done to address it. What we do know is that labelling employees according to fixed categories based on chronological age tends to reinforce stereotypical assumptions and divide the workforce. This 'generational-talk' can be professionally damaging for individuals and stifling for businesses. Only by challenging these assumptions is it possible to change the narrative and develop positive ways of dealing with age.

Diversity for its own sake can achieve very little. However, embracing a mindset where age does not matter enables individuals of all ages to construct work-based identities drawing on a diverse range of experiences and opportunities from their past. Challenging hierarchical career structures and time-served cultures can also help to achieve an innovative workplace. As we show, teams that are not locked into old ways of thinking and are hostages to past experience are able to build capacity, leading to variety in organisational practices and new ways of doing things.

In sum, understanding age-identity is essential in the context of rising workforce participation rates of an aging population. Yet the aim must be more than simply understanding age-identity or even preventing discriminatory exclusion. It is about age ceasing to be a factor, and therefore ceasing to be a constraint on creativity, productivity and working relationships. The question is what do organisations need to do if they want to ensure that age doesn't matter?

The study

In our study, we examined generational-talk about age in two divisions belonging to the same global engineering company. We focused on interview responses from older and younger employees. The two divisions displayed extremely different approaches to managing age: in the first division, which we call Salus, age did not matter; whereas in the other division, which we call Neptune, age was made to matter very much – but not in a helpful or productive way.

Salus delivers products and services for health care systems and has 367 employees, mainly electrical and service engineers. Neptune delivers products and services for water treatment and filtration systems, and has 220 employees, who are mainly mechanical and chemical engineers. Both divisions are similar in terms of the average age and tenure of their employees and both were originally separate companies before being acquired by the global engineering firm in the early 2000s. We conducted interviews in each division including questions about employees' age-identity, whether they identified as older or younger, and how they thought older and younger age identities were valued in their particular division. Company documentation also contributed to the data. Data were initially analysed for the type of generational-talk dominant in each division, then to assess whether or not this talk enabled or inhibited change. 'Discursive identity work' is the term we use to capture the way in which identities are crafted and constructed through the accounts, narratives and other rhetorical strategies used by individuals to craft identities for themselves and others.

We developed a framework, seen in figure 1, which maps how discursive identity work, which consists of relational and temporal talk, influences agential change and innovation. Relational talk refers to how individuals of one age category talk about the other age category. Temporal talk refers to how individuals talk about their past, present and future. Taken together, these two forms
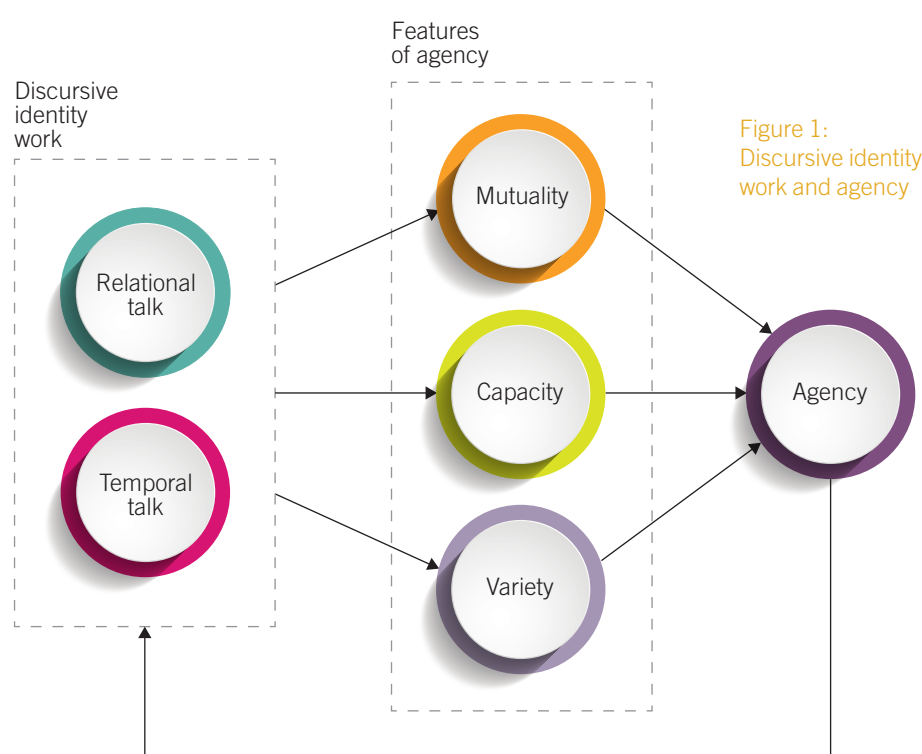

Figure 1: Discursive identity work and agency

Organising age for an innovative workforce

of talk can create three core dimensions: mutuality, capacity and variety. We argue that a higher level of mutuality among employees, more variation in organisational practices, and a greater capacity for action will result in change and innovation. On the flipside, a paucity of these dimensions, such as when employees are confined in set age categories, results in hierarchies, limited action, and routine.

Mutuality in Identity Categories

Mutuality is understood here to mean that both older and younger employees are recognised for their experiences acquired through learning and doing, and each group openly acknowledges the value of the other. If employees are equally valued, appreciated and recognised as being capable, then mutuality thrives. One way that discursive identity work creates mutuality is through the nature of individuals' relational talk. In other words, when older employees and younger employees talk positively about each other and value their characteristics, they help to increase mutuality.

"They [younger employees] keep me on my toes...they're interesting. They talk about their kids and work and holidays and have a bit of a laugh. I don't know. I just like it. Yeah, a lot of energy, a lot of energy." (Joan, older employee at Salus)

In contrast, when members of one age group talk negatively about the other, especially when dominant employees use negative relational talk to maintain their superiority, they reduce mutuality.

"I would say there's a degree of impatience [among younger employees] with the rate of how their career develops. That's how it feels to me. The people like me who have been around a lot more are more happy to go through the steps, work their way through, do the detail stuff; whereas the younger engineers are – some of them – they're quite ambitious, and they want to be moving quickly." (Edward, older employee at Neptune).

"We younger engineers have come up with a lot of ideas for improvements and, so, you would think they [older employees] would be excited about trying to fix things, but they're not." (Stephen, younger employee at Neptune)

In this situation, older employees are far more dominant and privileged than their younger counterparts, who are well aware of being disadvantaged by their position.

Another way to extend mutuality is to make sure valued competencies are distributed across age categories.

Where experience is seen as based on learning, as well as doing, it becomes 'opportunity-based' rather than depending on 'time-served'. This means that both older and younger employees are valued for the experience they have acquired by taking advantage of the diverse opportunities available to them.

"I think you can be experienced, if you're older and you can be experienced if you're younger. I mean, a lot of people say I'm very experienced even though I'm relatively young [for a manager]." (Thomas, younger employee at Salus).

In contrast, in Neptune, valued competencies, such as experience, were hoarded. Only older employees had it because only they had served their time and acquired extensive practical experience.

"You get these young engineers who have [only] had a few years' experience … making decisions on how the project should be carried out. They've got no idea. It's just scary." (Edward, older employee at Neptune).

As a result, mutuality was reduced because younger employees were excluded.

Variety in Organisational Practices

When practices are varied, employees are more likely to be innovative because they can adapt and generate alternative, diverse ways of doing things. One way that discursive identity work creates variety is through the nature of individuals' temporal talk. If both older and younger employees share their experiences of their pasts, they also share knowledge of doing more and different things.

"I managed to work in five or six different industries, five or six different roles without having to change employer. I've worked in semiconductors, IT, telecommunications, healthcare, strategy, building technologies, energy efficiency and now back to healthcare." (Stuart, younger employee at Salus).

Such temporal talk allows room for these multiple pasts to act as resources for decisions that need to be made in the present and gives both younger and older employees the ability to imagine alternative, positive futures. Likewise, an openness to debate a variety of ideas generates new knowledge, allowing both older and younger employees to participate in learning.

"I find that we [an older and younger employee] bounce well off each other. Things that I say unconsciously, he'll step back and say 'okay let's strategise that' whereas, me, I may have some ideas floating around and they might be great ideas but really mapping it out is where I'm going to learn from him." (Morris, younger employee at Salus).

On the other hand, temporal talk that repeats and reinforces past uniform practices tends to quash new knowledge and new ideas, as well as depriving old and young employees the opportunity to experiment and learn.

"I had this conversation with this [older] person and I said: 'Look, we'd like to really try this way, this way and this way' because I'm really big on change. I really like to try different things and see what works. The discussion, basically, in a nutshell was: 'Look, we've tried that before and it didn't work' … So to me, that was very closed, to say 'No, this isn't the way.'" (Henry, younger employee at Neptune).

Organising age for an innovative workforce

Capacity for Action

Capacity is an important component of being an agent for change and innovation. It refers to a repertoire or toolkit of skills that helps individuals to construct strategies for action that are suitable for their organisation.

While many associate the capacity to act with innovation and change, it can be used to reproduce existing organisational practices and societal patterns, in which case it maintains the status quo, rather than brings about change. Discursive identity work provides individuals with the capacity to act innovatively if it disperses valued competences across age categories so that all employees can contribute to change, and if managers 'stretch' these competences by augmenting the responsibilities of both older and younger employees.

The lawyer left the project, and my boss said to me: 'Do you want to take over this role?' I fell into it because there was no one there; there was a gap to be filled. We started immediately on negotiations. I called in the [legal advisor] for the first negotiation but he sat there for three hours with nothing to say. I'd led the whole negotiation. At the end of it, he said to me: 'Don't call me in again please, you can do it.'"(Morris, younger employee at Salus)

"I'm fully occupied at the moment, which is great … They [the organisation] approached me and said: 'Look we're doing this. We need you. Would you be interested?' I said, 'Sure!' It's the most exciting thing I've done in my whole 42 years! I love it. I just love it."(Daniel, older employee on being given a new project shortly before his 65th birthday at Salus).

At Neptune, older employees constrained the capacity of younger employees by hoarding valued competences, which prevented the latter from acquiring and applying experience, as well as regulating younger employees by reducing their responsibilities, making them wait and reducing further their opportunities to learn.

"The young ones obviously come with very little experience. It's mostly a matter of bringing them up on experience and also sometimes maturity. [My job is to let] them understand when they've screwed up or how to communicate with other people without upsetting them." (Eric, older manager)

Innovative Agency

The study found that a combination of mutuality among age categories, variety in organisational practices, and a capacity to act that was dispersed among individuals led to a distributed form of agency (see figure 2), where younger and older employees were both willing and able to innovate and valued each other for their contribution to that innovation. This was the situation at Salus, and it was brought about by the following discursive identity work:

- Positive talk about others.
- Positive talk about the past, present and future.
- Recognition of opportunity-based experience.
- Augmenting responsibilities.
- Sharing and valuing of multiple, diverse pasts, presents and futures.

As a result, old and young alike embraced the future at Salus: *"I think it's about the opportunity: right timing, right place and being brave enough to say 'Yes, I will try it'. Look, if I fail, the worst thing that can happen to me is I will just go back to where I was before. If it works out, it works out, perfect. I would never say 'No'. I would usually say 'Yes' and I would say: 'Let's see what comes out of it.'"* (Eleanor, younger employee at Salus)

Figure 2: Aggregate Dimensions of Distributed and Attenuated Agency
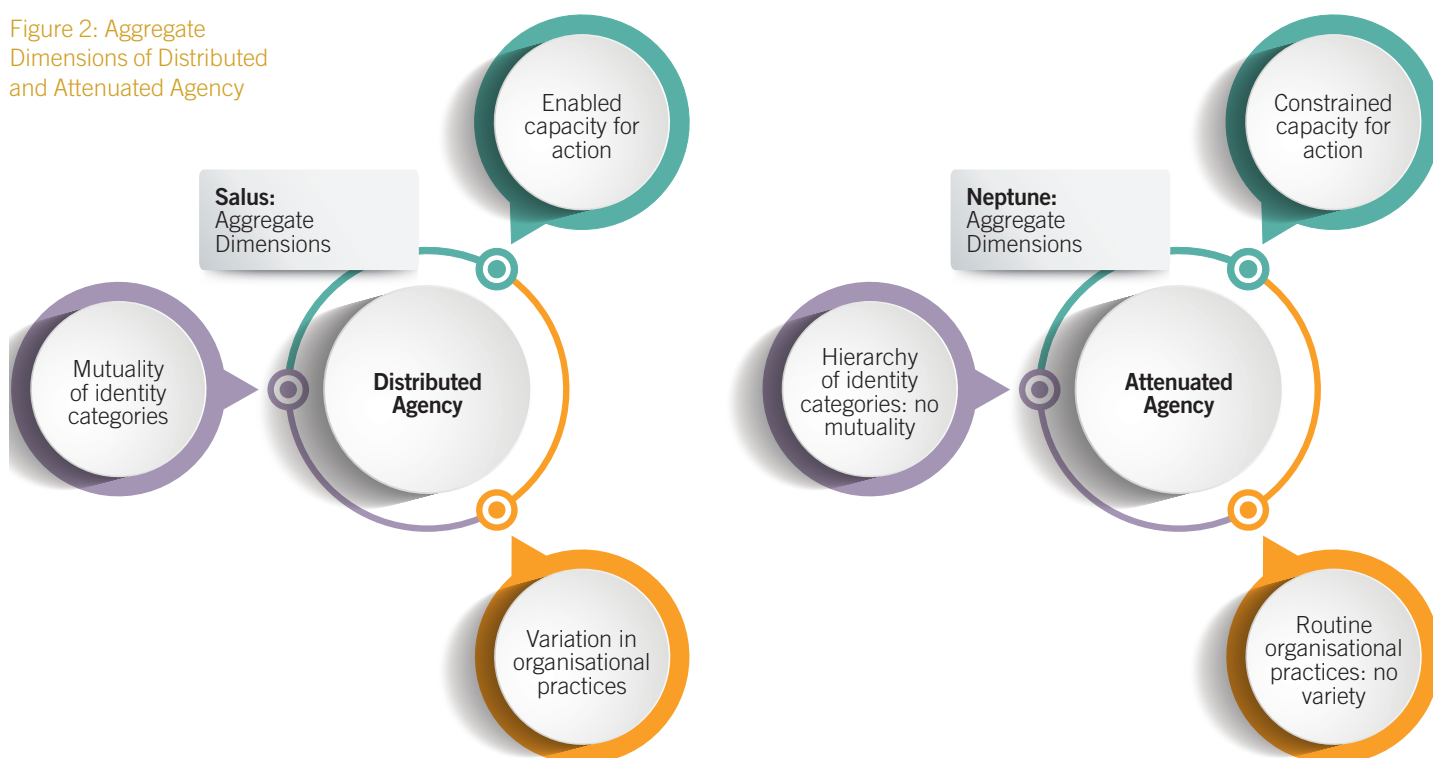
Organising age for an innovative workforce

"The project [that I am responsible for] doesn't open for two years, at which point I'll be nearly 66. I'll be passed the official retirement age. But I'd like to stay on whilst I still have a role. I'm not chomping at the bit to retire…" (Daniel, older employee at Salus)

Salus was not only a division in which younger employees were very positive about older employees and vice versa, it was one in which there was far more innovation. There was a shared vision about the future and, when employees discussed the past, it was how it could help to provide resources for the present. At the same time, they readily acknowledged the need to deviate from past practices in order to generate new ideas.

Employees felt their experiences and other opportunities were acknowledged and valued regardless of age.

"Every person [younger or older] contributes to the success of the team. We listen to everyone in the team – to all those different perspectives. It provides the environment to come up with innovative services or ideas. Just to push it to a different level. Not to stagnate on old theories and old methods. We push to new methods and to rethink why can't we do it differently." (Nadine, older employee).

In contrast, Neptune was characterised by the following discursive identity work:

■ Negative talk about others and about the present and future.

■ A romanticised view of the past that contrasted with a very negative present, excluding younger employees and robbing all employees of a source of resources.

■ The perpetuation of routines and reduction of variety in organisational practices.

■ The hoarding of valued competencies by older employees.

■ Constraining the responsibilities of younger employees, which reduced learning opportunities.

The result was not only intergenerational conflict, but corporate stagnation: *"I've learnt from experience is that you need a lot of patience. You then also choose your battles, so to speak. You say, well, is this really worth the effort? So you can sometimes just give up on certain ideas."* (Henry, younger employee at Neptune).

"People who are very established in their routines, who have been here a long time – which is, obviously, generally older people – don't like the change." (Douglas, younger employee at Neptune)

At Neptune, older employees were critical of their younger colleagues; they romanticised the past, but held out little hope for the future, while their younger colleagues felt they had nowhere to go. To the extent that agency did exist at Neptune, it was restricted to older employees and highly attenuated (see figure 2).

We found that an additional strength of distributive agency is that it becomes self-perpetuating by creating greater mutuality, increasing variety, and enabling capacity for change, with the flow-on effect of distributing, modifying and facilitating more agency (figure 1). Conversely, when discursive identity work constrains mutuality and limits variety, and disables capacity, agency is likely to be weakened. This attenuated agency, in turn, is likely to restrict identity work in ways that perpetuate stereotypes, reinforce identity hierarchies and obscure future horizons, with the result that agency becomes even more attenuated and concentrated in the hands of a few.

Conclusions

When age no longer matters in the workplace, what are the benefits? Aside from addressing real and pressing concerns about age discrimination, something even more fundamental is at stake. If age ceases to be a category by which employees are selected or rejected, the workplace is freed up from the constraints of age-based thinking. Experience is no longer seen as the purview of older employees only and learning opportunities are not reserved only for the young. Instead, employees are assessed on their merits, fresh ideas get an airing, and capacity building is widely valued and bears fruit in initiative and innovation. In eschewing age-based thinking, our study shows that they will not only avoid discriminatory practices, but reap multiple benefits in terms of innovation, change and a healthy culture of distributed agency.