

Managing Age

A case study: Tantalus



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This research was supported by the Australian Government through the Australian Research Council's Discovery Projects funding scheme (project DP120100513). The views expressed herein are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Government or Australian Research Council. The recipients of this grant are: Cynthia Hardy (University of Melbourne), Leanne Cutcher (University of Sydney), Robyn Thomas (Cardiff Business School) and Susan Ainsworth (University of Melbourne).

A case study: Tantalus

Tantalus¹ is a global engineering and electronics conglomerate employing over 300,000 individuals worldwide. In Australia, Tantalus is quite small and employs only around 3,000 people although these employees have access to job opportunities elsewhere in the organisation. Providing global job opportunities is something on which Tantalus prides itself: *“What Tantalus offers is that opportunity to do different things. Tantalus is great for job hoppers, because you stay with the same company but you can move from one division to another or from one sector to another.”* (Tantalus Human Resource manager).

Tantalus also aspires to creating and supporting a diverse workforce, where everyone has equal access to these opportunities. It believes diversity is the key to innovation. However, Tantalus has recently been struggling with age-based diversity. Human Resource managers in the company are becoming aware that the recent obsession with ‘generations’ – Baby Boomers, Millennials and the like – is having a negative effect. People are starting to employ age-based stereotypes with comments like: “she’s too young to take that job on” or “he’s too old for that”. Dismissing people purely on the grounds of chronological age is not something that Tantalus wants to encourage.

Tantalus decided to explore this issue of age more closely in two of its Australian-based divisions – Neptune and Salus. Neptune was founded as a separate company in 1983 and became part of Tantalus in 2004. It develops technology for the treatment and delivery of clean drinking water and has 220 employees, mainly mechanical and chemical engineers. Salus was founded as a separate company in 1961 and became part of Tantalus in 2001. It deals with advancements in diagnostics, therapy and healthcare technologies and has 367 employees, mainly electrical and service engineers. The age and tenure profile of the two divisions are roughly the same. Insofar as both divisions are part of the larger, global company, both sets of employees have access to global job opportunities.

The Neptune Division

Edward, a senior manager at Neptune, is grumbling to Eric, his longstanding friend and work colleague. He’d just had one of his younger employees in this office asking him when he could expect to be promoted.

“The younger employees around here are so impatient with the rate of how their career develops. That’s how it feels to me. Older folks 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.”

Eric is sympathetic: *“The young ones do come with very little experience. It’s mostly a matter of bringing them up on experience and also sometimes maturity. I’m also telling them when they’ve screwed up and how to communicate with other people without upsetting them.”*

Edward agrees: *“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.”*

The young employee in question – Stephen – had, in fact, been recruited from a competitive graduate program at one of Australia’s leading universities and was considered to be among the highest achievers among his graduate cohort. He believed that he was the right material for promotion and that it was sensible to discuss career planning with his boss. When Edward had told him he was being “impatient” and needed to “wait his turn”, he’d felt very disappointed.

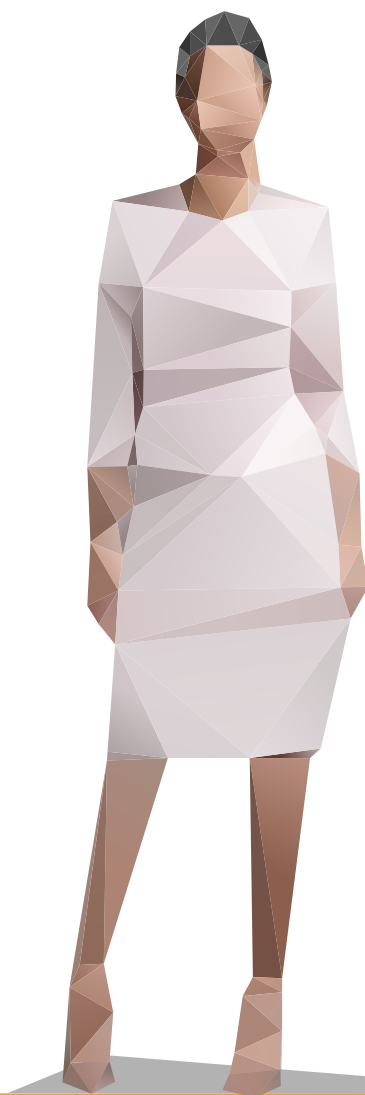
At lunchtime, he’d caught up with his colleague, Henry, another young employee and together they gave vent to their frustrations.

“We younger engineers have come up with a lot of ideas for improvements and, so, you would think they would be excited about trying to fix things, but they’re not. It’s frustrating.”

Henry agrees: *“The only way to get ahead in this place is to serve your time. There are no short cuts – I thought my MBA would help but it hasn’t.”*

Henry goes on to recount a recent meeting with his boss, Alan: *“Alan said to me: ‘I know you have done an MBA, but that’s textbook stuff. What you don’t know are the dynamics of executing a project’. I said ‘But I’m ready to do the next thing.’ Alan said: ‘That’s fine, but to go to the next level, you have to live a project. You have to live it from start to finish, and some of these projects take, you know, two years. You need to spend that time on site because you’ve got to learn how things work.’”*

Stephen commiserates with Henry: *“It’s not fair. You’ve done your MBA, but that’s just considered to be reading out of a textbook. That’s how the older managers perceive you: you don’t have the experience, you’re just young.”*



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Xavier and Emile, other young employees, join the conversation. Xavier points out that site experience is valuable – it lends people legitimacy and provides experience.

“If you’re an engineer at Neptune who hasn’t got site experience, then you’ll probably never get respect from anybody, and you will probably never learn how to do things properly, and how to install something in the real world. You do need to have site experience.”

Emile agrees with him, saying that younger employees have to be prepared to wait: *“I’m having to wait for the right opportunity and, as long as I’m interested and I’m gaining experience in doing things that are occupying me, I’m sort of happy to wait for that right opportunity.”*

Stephen and Henry laugh. *“Sort of happy”* says Stephen, *“you’ve been working here too long: you are turning into one of them”*. Henry stops laughing. *“I understand that you pay the older ones more respect because they have more experience. But that doesn’t mean they shouldn’t respect us”*. Henry sums the situation up despondently as he leaves the group to return to work. *“I’ve learnt from experience that you need a lot of patience. You then also choose your battles, so to speak. Mind you, when you ask yourself is this really worth the effort, you end up giving up on certain ideas.”*

Xavier chuckles. *“Don’t take it to heart. Being patient does help. If one of the old guys is yelling at me – I just sit there and wait until they finish yelling.”*

Meanwhile, Edward is holding a meeting with two of his older managers – Justin and Howard. The group is planning the forthcoming performance reviews they will hold with their younger subordinates. Justin is giving Howard some advice: *“I say to my younger subordinates: ‘Well, this is where you are, to progress to the next step this is what you need to do, and it’s going to take about this amount of time.’ I always like to give them a sufficiently long time so that they don’t come to me next month and say: ‘Well, I’ve done that.’”*

Howard is worried that his young subordinates will ask for specialist roles in order to acquire different forms of experience: *“They always want to have a specialist role in doing this and that. I don’t think it’s a good idea. From the point of view of developing skills of younger engineers, it really retards their development.”* (Howard, older employee)

Edward agrees, saying that younger employees need to learn how to wait their turn and describes a recent performance appraisal that he carried out: *“He’s a young man. I said to him his career will progress, but he’s got to do the graft first... If he walked out now and went for another job or changed jobs within the organisation, all he’s got is a bunch of CAD diagrams. He doesn’t have a product on the market, so he hasn’t got any impact yet.”* (Edward, older employee)

“Exactly,” says Justin, *“the youngsters always say: ‘No, I would like to do it this way.’ And then, I have to say: ‘No, that won’t work because...’ I have the experience and I know that what they are suggesting won’t work because I’ve done it before and it failed.”*

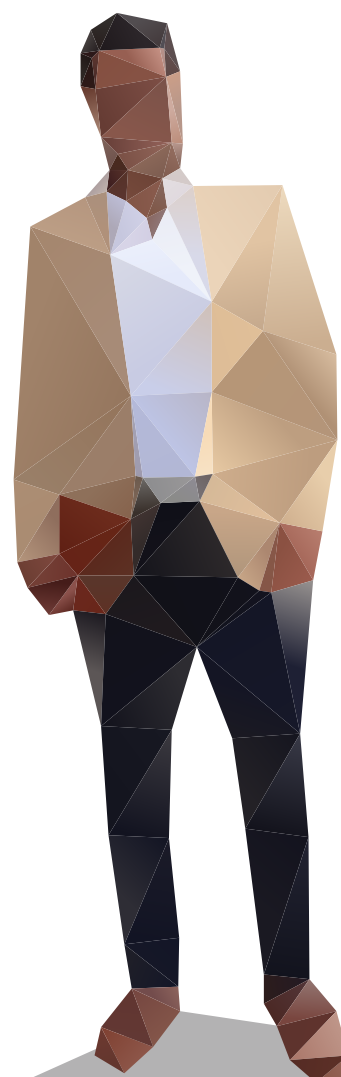
After work, both older and younger employees are having a drink at the pub to celebrate one of the secretary’s birthdays. They have split into two groups. The older ones are talking nostalgically about the past – when they had been part of the original start-up company, prior to its acquisition by Tantalus. Alan is reminiscing about the freedom and responsibility he used to have: *“I started out in the company when there was a lot more freedom and responsibility given to younger engineers. It was fantastic training, a great experience. But that would never happen.”*

Justin agrees: *“Yes. We used to get involved a lot in all aspects of the company. It was a growing technology, a growing company. Us older ones now were the younger ones then and we were involved in the development of products and we all had an input.”*

Neville concurs: *“We were just a very small company at that time. We just did whatever we felt like doing – the right way to do it. But once we became Tantalus, a bigger company, there were a lot of restrictions that we can and cannot do.”*

Bradon thinks the problem is Tantalus. *“We’re more risk averse than when we started. Today, we’re not freestanding as a business any more. We’re just a subset of a much larger organisation. So we have a lot of constraints that sit over the top of us. We can’t just go off and do whatever we choose any more.”*

A group of younger employees are eavesdropping. *“They are bleating on about the past again”*, says Gavin, *“I can’t really speak to that because I wasn’t here. I wonder if it was so great back then. I wonder what it would have been like to have been part of it.”* Emile agrees. *“Well, I wasn’t there either and I feel a bit excluded when they go on about it. Having said that, Tantalus does make us all fit you together – work a certain way and it wants a certain level of performance. If you don’t fit or you don’t perform, then you’re not part of the organisation. There’s not any malice about that. I just think it’s the way it survives as a big company.”*



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Henry is irritated about the fact that the older employees are talking about how innovative they were back 'in the old days'. *"They carry on about how innovative they were. But they aren't anymore. I was talking to Neville and I said: 'Look, I'd like to really try it this new way.' You know me, 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.'"*

"It's true", said Douglas. "People who are very established in their routines, who have been here a long time – which is, obviously, generally the older crowd – really don't like change."

Meanwhile the CEO of Neptune is concerned. He knows Henry is unhappy and he also knows that Tantalus, as a global company, will provide opportunities for 'rising stars'. He had been talking to his counterpart at Salus, who is always describing about how many of his

young employees move around the company, taking up promotions. But none of the 'youngsters' in Neptune seem to want to take advantage of these opportunities. The CEO has also been talking with Eric about another rising star – Hugh. Eric agrees that Hugh is, indeed, a young rising star. He even tells the CEO that has discussed a possible overseas posting with Hugh: *"So for younger people – someone like Hugh – we even talked about this with him. He's ambitious and young and keen and he doesn't want to stay doing this job, working for me, for the rest of his life. So we've talked when and if he does move. He should hang around for long enough to see his project through and have some solid piece of work completed. Then after that we hope he moves within Tantalus. We've sent people overseas in the past."*

However, when the CEO meets with Hugh, it's clear that Hugh does not see much of a future for himself in the company, despite whatever conversation he had with Eric.

"Nobody has said to me: 'if you stay here five years, there'll be a place for you' because there is no one moving out for me to go in and take their place. There's nowhere to go in this place. So, I'm looking at the moment to get another job."

When the CEO started to talk to other younger employees at Neptune, he found they held similar views. They found it hard to see a future for themselves in Neptune or even the wider company.

The Salus Division

A group of employees at Salus are gossiping in the coffee room. They are discussing age: one older employee was saying he had been exhausted looking after his grandchildren over the weekend; how it made him feel "old" and maybe he should be considering retirement. *"You're not old"* says Jeremy a older colleague, *"you're still young"*.

Miriam, a younger colleague, joins in: *"Yes. Think about Judy. She's 64. The woman's sprightly as. She doesn't want to give up work. She doesn't at all. It's a generalisation that if you're older you're on your way out."*

Russell, another younger employee agrees: *"The oldest guy I've got in my team is probably one of the hardest workers in the whole engineering team. He works harder than the young guys."*

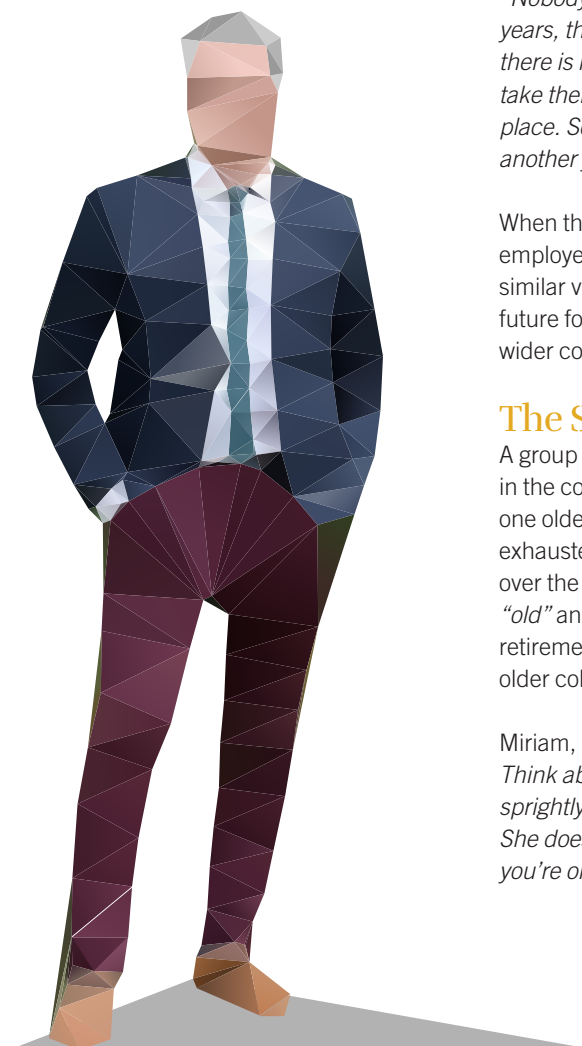
Joan, an older employee, says that it's good to have to deal with younger people, whether its grandchildren or colleagues: *"The younger employees keep me on my toes. They're interesting. They talk about their kids and work and holidays and have a bit of a laugh. I don't know. I just like it. It generates a lot of energy, a lot of energy."*

Jeremy goes on to say: *"this age thing is over-rated. It doesn't really matter if you are old or young."*

Anya, another older employee, agrees: *"We have quite a few graduates come in and they're really young but they just get treated like the rest of us. We've got one young graduate with us now, I don't know how old he is but I'd be surprised if he's 20, I talk to him like the rest of them. I don't think that age really makes much difference."*

"Actually", says Joan, it's the interaction between old and young that really works: "I had to learn the new skills such as spreadsheets and a bit of Excel. I've had good people that have got the patience to sit and show me what to do. Once shown what to do, I'm fine. I don't have a problem with relating to the younger ones. They don't seem to have a problem relating with me. They took the time out to show me when they could most probably have somebody that can do it better and faster shows they don't seem to have prejudice against me as an older person." (Joan, older employee)

Morris, a younger colleague, agrees: *"I find that Fred, who's a lot older than me, and myself 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."*



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Meanwhile a group of senior managers are discussing upcoming performance appraisals. This group of managers contains both older and younger employees. The discussion starts with a question about what constitutes experience and whether it relates to seniority.

Thomas, one of the younger managers, jumps in: *"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."*

Another young manager – Matthew – agrees: *"Even as a younger person, I bring certain experience to the table that older individuals lack, which is an accounting background for this big project. That's a form of experience where I then proved myself and I increased my credibility with the more senior guys."*

The group goes on to discuss about how experience can be acquired. The group agrees that it derives from taking advantage of various opportunities, such as taking on different roles and responsibilities. Older and younger managers talk about 'their' experience in terms of the different positions they have held. They argue that it is the diversity of their experience – the different kinds of things they had done – that was important rather than the length of time that they had held them. They also agree that experience can be derived from learning, such as through education and training, as well as from practical experience. As a result, it is within reach of younger employees, rather than being reserved exclusively for older employees.

Helena emphasises this point with a recent example: *"There are three of us within the last year who have joined the executive team. We range from, I think it's 28 to 45 years old. Stepping into the whole politics and how you interact with that level of management is the biggest learning curve. For all three of us, it wasn't about an age thing; it was about how you start to deal with people at that level."*

The discussion then moves to what managers need to do to ensure that both older and younger employees have access to these opportunities. The CEO of Salus sums it up: *"Well, you've got to stretch them and support them, haven't you?"*

Thomas, a younger employee, who manages a number of older subordinates, agrees. *"Yes, I stretch them all. I tell my subordinates that this is what I expect from you. This is what you need to do day-to-day. If you need anything, you can come to me but you're all grown-ups and you can make decisions. If you make a bad decision, I'll still support you because you made a decision the best way you could when I wasn't around."*

Angus talks about the importance of supporting younger employees through mentoring: *"I think if you are going to be a mentor. You've got to live it and you've got to breathe it insofar as you've got to want to do it and you've got to want to impart knowledge and you've got to want to pull the person or the mentee – you've got to pull them along."*

The discussion then discusses support and resources in more depth. "Well", says the CEO, *"past experience is an important resource, isn't it?"*

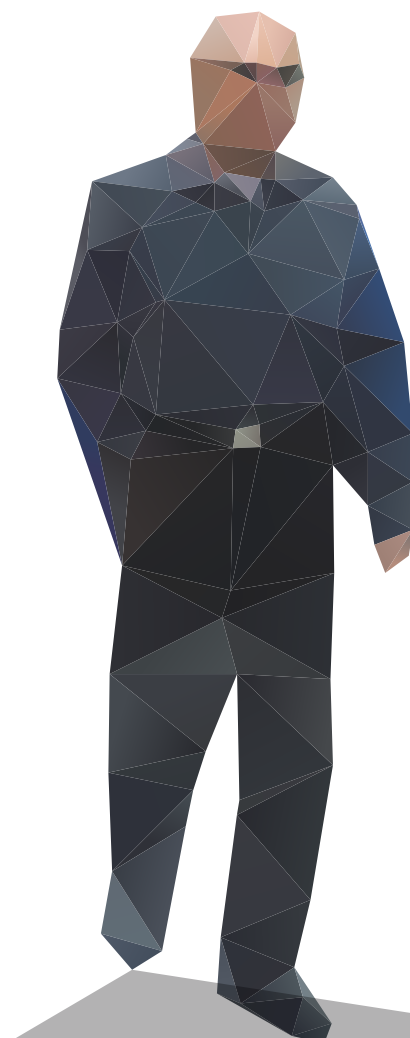
Thomas agrees: *"It was interesting for me to work in headquarters and, from a career development point of view having, let's ticked the box for headquarters experience. It is important for people moving up."*

"But", says Matthew another one of the younger managers, *"you have to be careful that people don't dwell on what they've done in the past too much and get too set in their ways. I'm happy to change my way of approaching a problem but we do have some confrontations over this. My team consists of a number of very, very strong characters who, every now and then, tend to be a bit stubborn in not changing their opinions."*

Nadine, an older manager, replies: *"I think it helps that we do respect diverse experiences. That way, everyone – younger or older – can contribute to the success of the team. We listen to everyone in the team – to all those different perspectives. It helps us to come up with innovative ideas and not stagnate on old theories and old methods. We push new methods and rethink why can't we do it differently."*

Both older and younger managers agree that while past experience was an important for employees, it had to be balanced with a willingness to deviate from past practices in order to generate new ideas and, in the latter case, the diversity of individuals' experiences was an important factor.

Following the meeting, the CEO decides to talk to some of the managers' subordinates to find out if their views match. He is pleased to hear lots of younger employees bring up examples of having taken on greater responsibilities.



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"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)

"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)

The same is true of older employees: *"I am someone who has had the benefit of going through those various areas. I know the frustrations of sales. I know the frustrations of marketing ... I've been exposed to them and also supply chain management. So I've been in a very fortunate position to be able to say and understand where the inputs need to be." (George, older employee).*

The CEO is also gratified to see how positive employees are about their future, not just in Salus but in Tantalus more generally.

"One thing that my husband and I have talked about is potentially even taking a role, maybe, for three years in Singapore or something along those lines. Just to get a bit more exposure and a different experience." (Helena, younger employee)

"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).

This optimism extends to older employees too: *"I've already asked my boss where does he see the next stepping-stone for me. My current job came out of the blue so I'm thinking: what else is going to come out of the blue. This is a company of opportunity so I'm not too concerned." (Katlin, older employee)*

"I'm fully occupied at the moment, which is great... 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)

Questions

1. If you were HR manager at Tantalus, how would you interpret these two situations?
2. What concerns do they raise in relation to your desire to reduce age-based discrimination and to increase age-based diversity?
3. What lessons do they contain for doing things differently?
4. Identify the identity talk that is most problematic. How would you change it?
5. Identify the identity talk that is the most effective and productive. How would you extend and reinforce it.



1. Based on original research funded by the Australian Research Council ARC Project ID: DP120100513. Some details have been changed.