Managing Age

What does age mean in *your* organisation?

THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY
Business School

THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Cardiff
Business
School
Cardiff University

What does age mean in *your* organisation?

Read the case studies of the Neptune and Salus divisions at Tantalus. If you closely examine the language used to refer to age, you will see that it is quite different in the two divisions. To understand what age means in your organisation, it's important to investigate relational talk and temporal talk about age. Relational talk refers to how people talk about themselves – in this case, their age – in relation to other ages i.e., how older employees talk about younger employees and vice versa. Sometimes individuals differentiate themselves from people in other categories, sometimes they identify with them. Sometimes, they talk negatively about the 'other'; sometimes positively. Relational talk disseminates a range of practical, professional and emotional judgements that shape the meaning of age. Temporal talk includes the narratives we tell about ourselves – or others tell about us – about our past, present and future. Temporal talk shapes the degree to which employees of different ages can participate in and contribute to the life of the organisation.

In this diagnostic tool, we invite you to answer some questions about relational and temporal talk about age in your organisation. Answering these questions will help you understand how age is viewed in your organisation, how it affects your work and career, and how you can change it. To answer the following questions, tick answers that you feel characterise your organisation. You may tick as many as you like. Where appropriate, answer open ended questions with a brief sentence.

1. What is your age?

Do you see yourself as:

☐ An older employee

☐ A younger employee

Is there any other age-related categorisation that you would prefer? If so, what is it?

2. What is the nature of relational talk in your organisation?

**How do younger people talk about older employees in your organisation?**

☐ With admiration and respect.

☐ As being technologically clueless.

☐ As being experienced and mature.

☐ As waiting around to retire.

☐ As being role mentors and models.

☐ As being resistant to change.

How do older people talk about younger employees in your organisation?

☐ As being full of enthusiasm and energy.

☐ As being inexperienced and immature.

☐ As being innovative and receptive to change.

☐ As being overly ambitious and impatient for promotion.

☐ As being technologically savvy.

☐ As being instrumental and having no organisational loyalty.

How do people talk about experience in your organisation?

☐ Experience is based on opportunity.

☐ Experience is a matter of serving one's time.

☐ There are lots of different forms of experience.

☐ Only older employees can be experienced.

☐ Only employees with experience should be given more responsibilities.

☐ Employees should be given more responsibilities to acquire experience.
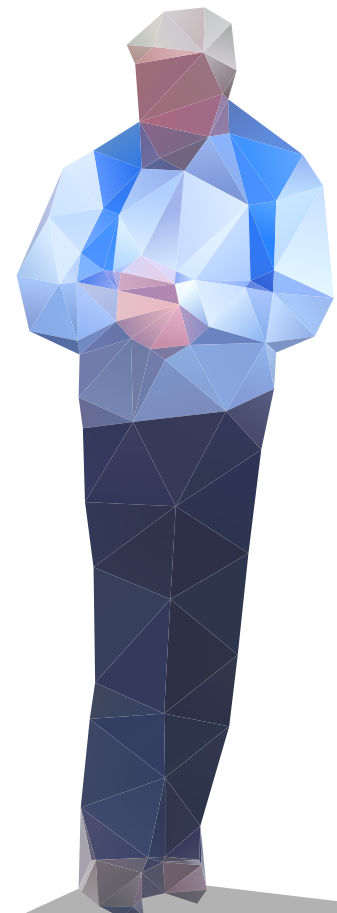
What does age mean in *your* organisation?

3. What is the quality of temporal talk in your organisation?

How do people talk about the past in your organisation?

☐ As the organisation having a single past.

☐ In terms of individuals having lots of different pasts.

☐ In terms of individuals having very similar pasts.

☐ People talk about the past nostalgically.

☐ When people talk about the past, you feel included.

☐ As the organisation's past being relevant today.

☐ As your past relevant to the organisation today.

How do people talk about the organisation's present?

☐ In terms of 'stretching' individuals and providing opportunities.

☐ In terms of people having to wait before being given new responsibilities.

☐ In terms of younger employees being part of the organisation.

☐ In terms of older employees being part of the organisation.

How do people talk about the organisation's future?

☐ Younger employees talk about having a future they can imagine for themselves inside the organisation.

☐ Older employees talk about having a future they can imagine for themselves inside the organisation.

☐ Younger employees talk about the future optimistically.

☐ Older employees talk about the future optimistically.

☐ Younger employees talk about having an impact on the organisation's future.

☐ Older employees talk about having an impact on the organisation's future.

4. Reflection

Reflect on your answers above and answer the following questions.

☐ How would you characterise the relational and temporal talk about age in your organisation?

☐ Do you think this talk should change? If so how?

☐ Are there specific groups or individuals who need to pay attention to their age talk?

☐ Would changing the way people talk about age make a difference in terms of how younger and/or older employees are treated?

☐ Would it make a difference in terms of how younger and/or older employees feel about working in this organisation?

Based on your answers, can you develop a strategy to improve the relational and temporal talk about age in your organisation? Or, if you think this talk is working well, what would you do to maintain it?

You can discuss your answers with your colleagues to learn more about age talk and its effects in your organisation.