Managing age in organisational contexts

By studying different organisations, we have found that the effective management of age is highly context-specific. Different challenges face managers depending on the needs and characteristics of their particular organisational setting.

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Organisational context #1

Attracting and retaining older workers

An Australian insurance call centre predominantly staffed by younger employees. Over time these younger staff members were becoming older and their needs were changing. In addition, the call centre wanted to attract older workers to increase diversity. Organisations where the majority of employees are young, such as call centres, often find it difficult to adapt in ways that allow them to attract older employees or to respond to the ageing of the existing workforce.

Recommended actions:

Emphasise service ethos in communication and practice

Focus group and interviews revealed mature-age workers respond well to service-centred approaches and building customer rapport. Leveraging a service ethos both attracted job applications from older individuals and made effective use of their strengths once they were employed.

Formulate job advertising to be more 'age friendly'

Employers need to highlight aspects of the job that are most important to older individuals when targeting an older cohort. These include the recognition of skills, valuing broader life experiences, and providing opportunities to learn new things.

Expand range of advertising media

Managers should consider a wider range of media outlets and remember that older employees may not be so tuned into new forms of social medial. Local newspapers, letterbox drops, local clubs, school newsletters and older worker recruitment agencies may be more effective than Facebook and Twitter.

Decentralise training and formalise mentoring

Managers should focus on skills development and identify opportunities for ongoing learning among both older and younger employees. Mentoring can be encouraged in ways that are inter-generational – younger individuals can learn from older colleagues and vice versa.

Organisational context #2

Key challenge:

Recognition and reward of older workers

A corporate head office where focus groups with younger and older staff members highlighted issues of knowledge retention, career progression and reward mechanisms, especially for mature age staff who were 'content' in their role.

Recommended actions:

Develop a broader set of KPIs

Redesign the performance review process so that it recognises that not all employees want to climb the traditional career ladder.

Rather than KPIs being centred on individual progression and aspirational career targets, they could be reconfigured, where appropriate, to recognise and reward collective knowledge sharing, championing of younger team members, relationship maintenance, and the development of expertise-based competency.

Expanding the ways in which employees can demonstrate excellence will foster diverse ways of working and promote team collegiality.

Connect people and share knowledge through online channels

Use digital media such as the Intranet to foster connections between employees of all ages and backgrounds where insights and experience can be shared and captured.

Encourage employees to develop an online profile that is regularly updated and highlights the knowledge and experience they bring to their role. The site could also have a 'skills swap' function where individuals can access on-line training opportunities from 'in-house' experts.

Individuals who demonstrate the sharing and swapping of skills with other employees through the site would be formally rewarded and recognised on the site.
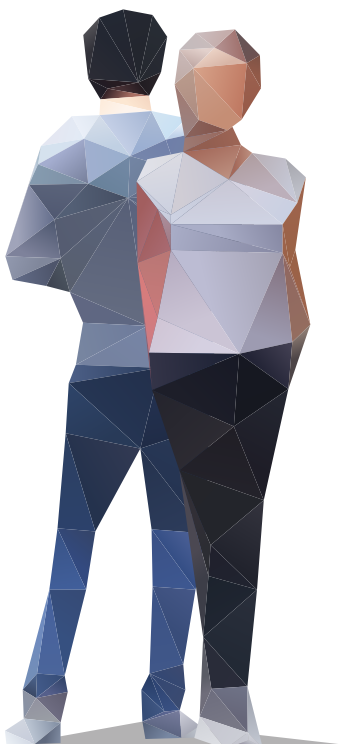
Organisational context #3

Intergenerational management

A research and development (R&D) service and implementation teams across two divisions of an engineering company. Although some research suggests that diverse teams are more effective, we found that age diversity did not in itself guarantee higher levels of engagement and effectiveness. In some teams inter-generationality was a resource for innovation but in other teams it was a source of tension and conflict. We found that the most effective teams displayed strong inter-generational working relationships and respect.

Define experience as opportunity-based not time- or service-based

Shift the mindset away from a 'time-served' approach to recognise that people of all ages and tenure bring experience to the table. Identify ways to expand experience through 'stretch' management, for example give individuals opportunities to do more.

Implement flexible career structures

Remove caps and impediments to organisational movement, making it easier for staff to advance their careers and add value to the organisation through gaining new opportunities regardless of their age. Match younger managers with older subordinates to develop more diverse career paths and skill sets.

Intergenerational mentoring

Recognise that mentoring can be two-way. It is important to identify areas in which younger workers are able to mentor mature-age workers, as well as vice versa. Not only does it add value in terms of skill development, it also promotes inter-generational understanding and respect.

Organisational context #4

Management-by-generation and careers for older workers

A young and rapidly expanding insurance call centre with a very young workforce, and an emphasis on youth, youthfulness and fun in its organisational culture and practices. With an average age of only 23, older workers were very much the minority at all levels in the hierarchy. The company had recently developed an approach to leadership and a rewards package tailored to different age-cohorts. Interviews and focus groups highlighted that older workers felt marginalised in the fun culture, and had fewer opportunities for career growth.

Avoid practices that manage-by-generation

Eschew managing and rewarding people according to different age categories, as this results in pitting different generations against one another, and legitimates age-related stereotypes and assumptions about older and younger worker in a manner that would be unacceptable were it applied to gender, race or disability. People should be managed as individuals rather than age-based categories.

Widen age-based practices around 'fun' culture

Cultures not only affect individual experiences of organisations but also influence a wide range of policies and decisions, including access to status and rewards, allocation of tasks and decision-making. A culture configured in ways that privilege youth-related forms of fun can exclude older workers.

Engineered 'fun' cultures, while helping to create feelings of belonging and enjoyment when undertaking routine and repetitive work, can also reinforce age-related identity archetypes for younger workers, while leaving older workers feeling marginalised.

Fun cultures can be made more inclusive by widening the practices associated with fun so that they are mindful of the diverse range of people working in the organisation, according to age as well as other identity characteristics.

Broaden reward systems to recognise service ethos

Value skills that older workers demonstrate in dealing with complex work cases requiring customer care and attention to detail. Performance targets need to recognise and reward not only sales volume but also the quality of customer interaction.

Organisational context
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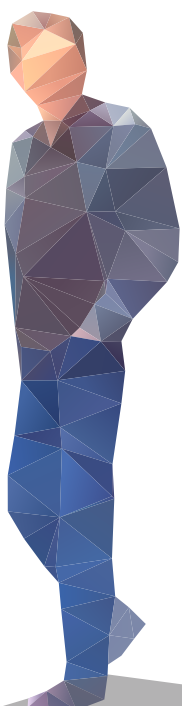
To ensure that older workers feel valued, recognised and rewarded, having opportunities to develop, while also offering opportunities for early career recruits to progress in the organisation

A world leading provider of communication services and solutions, with more than 90,000 employees in 170 countries, facing an ageing workforce with nearly one third anticipating retirement in the next decade. Successive recruitment freezes and downsizing activities of recent years, followed by a new program of graduate recruitment have left the company with a 'hollowed out' middle. There are concerns over organisational memory loss with the current cohort of older workers taking retirement due to attractive pensions package, together with challenges of rewarding older workers and succession planning.

Reward through training and secondments

Older workers need to feel challenged and motivated in their role and also valued by the organisation. The challenge is to reward older workers in ways that are not centred on individual progression and aspirational career targets. Consider rewarding through offering high quality training opportunities and secondments to other parts of the organisation, demonstrating a willingness to invest in the older worker.

Develop broader KPIs

KPIs should be broadened to recognise and reward a range of activities around mentorship and knowledge share. By expanding the ways in which employees can demonstrate excellence, diverse ways of working can be fostered and team collegiality promoted. Older workers need praise too.

Connect and share knowledge

To combat concerns over corporate memory loss, opportunities should be developed to encourage and reward the sharing of knowledge across ages and backgrounds. This may be done through creating an online database of knowledge and experience as well as permitting short secondments for experts to share their knowledge on specific projects. Individuals who demonstrate the sharing and swapping of skills with other employees may then be formally rewarded and recognised.