

# Intergenerational and Age Differences at Work

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## Workplace Trends

The U.S. workforce is aging and as a result:

- Four generations are working side-by-side in the workplace: Veterans, Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and the Millennials



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## Workplace Trends

- Work teams are increasingly age diverse
- It is more likely today than in years past that an older employee will report to a younger supervisor



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## The Broad Question

- What are the implications of an increasingly age diverse workplace for how teams and individuals (e.g., supervisors and their subordinates) work together and the work related outcomes they produce?

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# Organizational Demography Theory

Compositional: Group-level diversity impacts group level processes and outcomes



Communication  
Turnover  
Performance

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# Organizational Demography Theory

Relational: Relative demographics of an individual and their group, or an individual and another individual, impacts individual related processes and outcomes (e.g., attitudes, behaviors)



Liking  
Performance

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## What Research Tells Us

- Age diversity reliably predicts turnover and absenteeism at both the group and individual-within-group levels (e.g., O'Reilly, Caldwell, & Barnett, 1989; Williams & O'Reilly)
- Little evidence that group level age diversity influences group performance (e.g., Webber & Donahue, 2001)
- Mixed evidence that a group's age diversity influences group processes (communication, conflict, cohesion) (e.g., Webber & Donahue, 2001)

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## What Research Tells Us

- Little consistent evidence that age similarity between supervisors and subordinates positively influences interpersonal liking and subordinates' performance (Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989)
- Some evidence that only certain age differences (those that violate age norms) have negative implications for subordinate outcomes (Tsui, Porter, & Egan, 2002)
- Little research has directly explored the processes by which dyadic effects may or may not occur

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## Implications for Research and Practice

- Anticipate the negative implications of increased turnover and absenteeism in age diverse groups (e.g., reduced knowledge transfer; increased work group management)
- Conduct additional research to explore how age diversity impacts turnover and absenteeism
- Develop interventions to improve a range of work group processes in age diverse groups
- Give greater attention to demographic composition when individuals are assigned to work groups

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## Implications for Research and Practice

- Train supervisors to understand the role of demographic differences in how they manage subordinates
- Make older subordinates aware of their own reactions to younger supervisors
- Reduce the usefulness of age information by encouraging members to share similarities along other dimensions
- Conduct additional research to identify how age differences impact members of the dyad

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## The Good News

Group performance does not appear to be negatively affected by age diversity

Some age differences have positive implications – even those that appear to violate age norms

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## The Not So Good News

- Age differences can increase employee withdrawal
- We know very little about how age differences impact group and individual level outcomes
- We know very little about the impact of age differences between co-workers on individual level outcomes

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## Conclusions

- We need to be more systematic in the research we do; at any given level of analysis, studies have explored different outcome and process variables so there is little convergent research on any given outcome
- In addition to the need for more research on supervisor/subordinate dyads, we need to study co-worker dyads
- Different outcomes and process variables have been studied at different levels of analysis (the group; individual-within-group; and dyad); we need to share what we know across levels

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