Working Against Type

IT’S NOT ENOUGH FOR A MANAGER TO NOT DISCRIMINATE. IN THE ABSENCE OF CLEAR SIGNALS THAT SHOW AN ORGANISATION VALUES OLDER EMPLOYEES, NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES WILL PREVAIL.

Demographic challenges are creating a new urgency around the management and retention of mature-age workers. With more mature-age workers staying on the job longer, the need to celebrate age diversity and deliver age friendliness has become critical.

Nearly 4 million mature-age workers (45 years of age and older) are currently employed in Australian organisations. Over the last 15 years, the Australian labour force has steadily shifted towards a greater proportion of older workers and a relative scarcity of new entrants. At the same time, the economic downturn has taken a toll on the nest eggs of many mature-age workers, leading them to postpone their retirement plans. Budget constraints have also resulted in employees downsizing and cutting costs, creating pressure on employers to demonstrate their value.

These forces are raising employer awareness of the need to recruit more mature-age workers, retain the mature-age workers they already have, and encourage mature-age workers to stay on the job. But employers must also create organisational policies and practices that support and maintain age-friendly work environments.

Age-unfriendly workplaces. Unfortunately, workplaces are not always supportive of mature-age workers. Many people, young and old, hold negative stereotypes about mature-age workers. Research suggests that these stereotypes have three components: (1) a performance component—we expect mature-age workers to be slow thinking and less competent than their younger colleagues; (2) a dispositional component—mature-age workers are expected to be cynical, bitter, and prone to complain; and (3) an interpersonal component—mature-age workers are seen as disinterested, resistant to change and even ‘acted on the job’.

What I think you think about me. Mature-age workers are well aware of the negative stereotypes that exist and often express concern that managers, co-workers, and clients may expect them to perform poorly because of their age. This concern reflects ‘stereotype threat’, a term used to describe the psychological experience of people who are members of a stigmatised group. When mature-age workers perform in the workplace, their concerns about negative stereotypes can siphon cognitive resources away from the task at hand, disrupting their performance and Ironically, confirming the very stereotypes they hoped to avoid.

So how does stereotype threat work? Imagine a 55-year-old motivated and intelligent accountant sitting down to prepare a complex report analysing sales trends and projections. Hu, something-must-makes-the-report-by-the-end-of-the-day. Earlier this year, the accountant’s workplace mounted a recruiting campaign for ‘energetic, ambitious’ staff and now the accountant is the only person over 45 in his immediate workgroup. These contextual cues have made the accountant aware that age stereotypes might be operating in his workplace, and have evoked stress and anxiety, even on a subconscious level. As a result, the accountant is multi-tasking rather than giving his full attention to the report—some of his focus is preoccupied about age stereotypes. This makes him more likely to make a mistake in the final report, and when an error occurs, he is frustrated and angry about his poor performance, and too many mistakes start appearing he begins to think seriously about retirement.

Stereotype threat predicts employee outcomes. As part of a research project funded by the Australian Research Council, we surveyed more than 1000 mature-age workers to measure stereotype threat in their workplaces. We asked the employees to agree or disagree with statements like “people in my workplace believe I have less ability because of my age” and “my manager expects me to do poorly because of my age.”

Many employees were concerned that their managers and co-workers endorsed age stereotypes, the less engaged they were with their work and the less committed they were to their employers. These employees reported lower performance evaluations and learned to leave the labour force as soon as possible. In other words, mature-age workers who experienced stereotype threat on the job displayed many of the classic symptoms associated with the mature-age stereotypes—they were dissatisfied, grumpy, and had lost interest in their work. But, in workplaces that did not evoke stereotype threat, older employees expressed more satisfaction and engagement than their younger counterparts, and they were more interested in staying on the job longer. And, importantly, in contexts where mature-age workers did not experience stereotype threat, there were no age differences in performance evaluations.

Context matters. These early findings suggest that mature-age workers will be more successful and productive in contexts that don’t evoke stereotype threat. Although many organisations have taken steps to reduce discrimination against mature-age workers, few are actively promoting age diversity and supporting mature-age workers. In the absence of strong unambiguous signals that their employer values them, mature-age workers assume that age stereotypes are operating—and experience the negative consequences of stereotype threat.

For more information, visit: unisa.edu.au/chr

Creating an Age-Friendly Workplace

To send clear and effective signals that an organisation values mature-age workers, managers can:

1. Present visible opportunities for mature-age workers to take on challenging and meaningful work roles.
2. Provide opportunities for mature-aged workers to train and mentor other employees.
3. Proactively recruit mature-age applicants to fill job openings (and avoid using age-related words or images in recruiting materials).
4. Provide training for mature-age workers to upgrade and maintain their skills.
5. Actively encourage mature-age employees to work past the traditional retirement age.