
Age and Work Performance: Myths and Realities

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Introduction

- The workforce is aging worldwide.
- Older worker stereotypes remain (Examples: Less motivated, flexible, able to learn)
- Realities are very different and more complex.
 - *What people think about older – and younger – workers may be quite different from what has been shown in research.*

Overview

- Stereotypes commonly held about older workers.
- Cognitive skills and personality across the lifespan.
- Work motivation across the lifespan.
- Older and younger workers' work attitudes.
- Older and younger workers' job performance.
- Implications for the workplace.

What is meant by an “older worker”?

What are the negative stereotypes regarding older workers?

What are the negative stereotypes of younger workers?

Why do age stereotypes matter?

- Stereotypes influence employment decisions such as hiring and performance ratings.
- They may affect the motivation and performance of those people affected.
- May have legal implications for employers if stereotyping leads to charges of discrimination.

What are the stereotypes?

- Older workers cost more.
 - *Fact:* Not necessarily true due to performance differences.
- Investing in older workers is not worth the investment.
 - *Fact:* May lead to a greater ROI because they are less likely to quit.

What are the stereotypes?

- Age is a key determinant of performance.
 - *Fact: Age is less important than individual skills. There is more variability in work performance within age groups than between age groups.*

What are the stereotypes?

- Older workers are less able to learn.
- Older workers are less adaptable and flexible. They resist change.
- Older workers are less motivated.
Their motivation likely is different from that of younger workers.

What are the stereotypes?

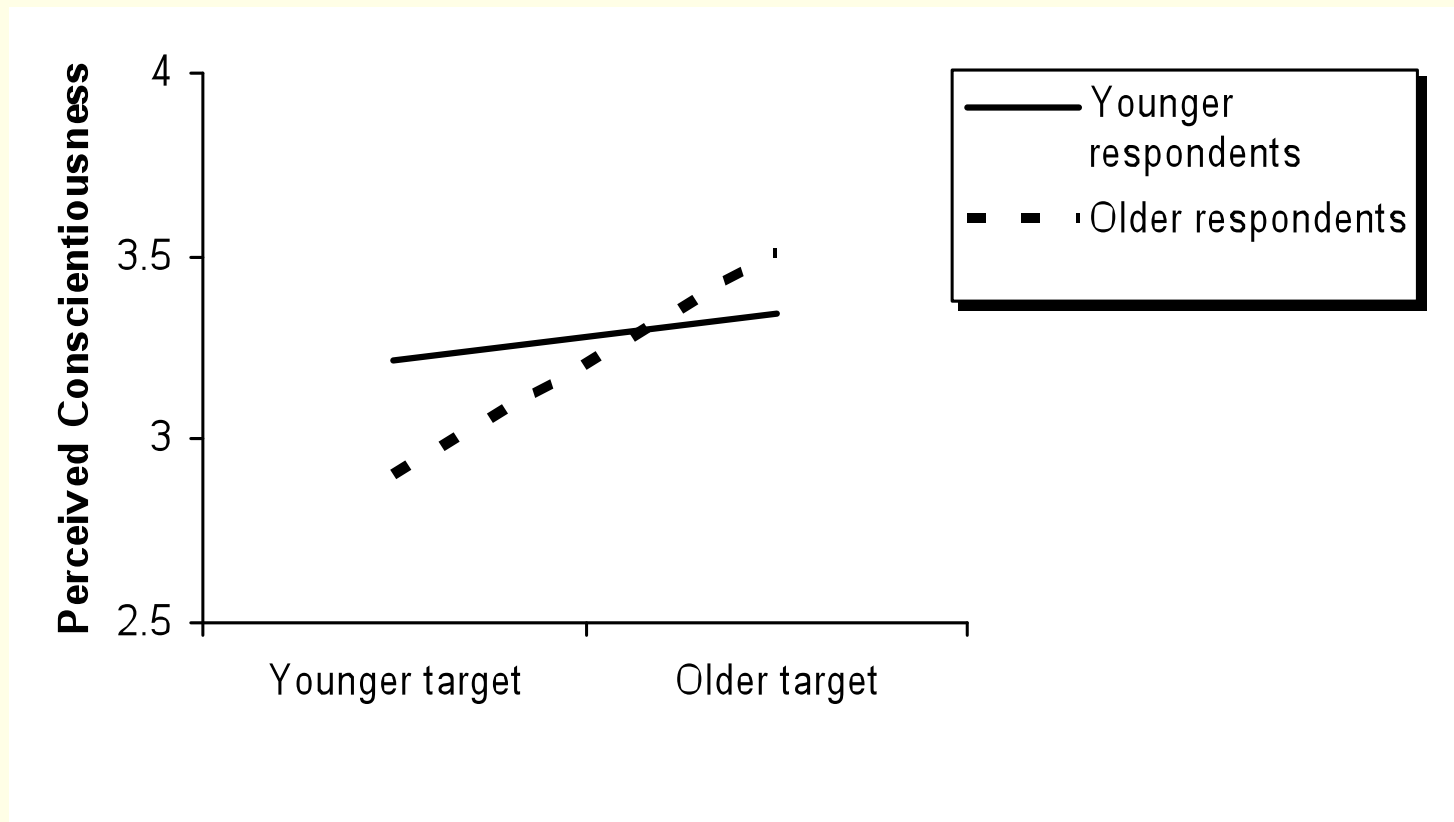
- Older workers perform at a lower level than younger workers. *Research does not bear this out.*
- Older workers may be more dependable than younger workers. *There is some evidence that this is at least partly true.*

Research Findings about Age Stereotypes

- Stereotypes can be reduced by providing relevant job information (e.g., hiring decisions versus performance reviews.)
- There is a job-age stereotype.
- Older and younger workers tend to hold the same age stereotypes, but there may be a self-serving bias.

Perceived conscientiousness of older versus younger workers *as described by* older and younger workers

(Bertolino, Truxillo, & Fraccaroli, 2008; 2009)



Research Findings about Age Stereotypes

- Some stereotypes are more common in certain industries.
- It is possible also to have a bias against *younger* workers.
- Bias against older workers seems to be changing or at least becoming more complex. (Research in the 1970s versus today.)

What are the implications of age stereotypes at work?

- Employers should be aware of age discrimination as important legally (e.g., *Smith vs. City of Jackson, 2005*). If adverse impact occurs against older workers (e.g., not hired or not promoted), employers should be prepared to offer a job-related explanation for their decisions.
- Employers should consider whether their decisions are made based upon erroneous stereotypes about older workers.

What are the implications of age stereotypes at work? (continued)

- Keep employment decisions focused on job-relevant information, not factors like age.
- Train managers to avoid age stereotypes.
 - Include information about positive characteristics of older workers.
 - Again, keep the focus on job-relevant factors in making employment decisions.

What are the implications of age stereotypes at work? (Continued)

- Remind managers that there is more skill and performance variation within age groups than between age groups.
- Consider adding more cognitively challenging roles to older workers' jobs rather than simplifying their jobs.
- Stereotypes of either older or younger workers may affect their motivation.

How might people change as they age in terms of

- cognitive skills?
- personality?

The realities about how people change: cognitive skills

- Cognitive skills (see Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004):
 - *Fluid Intelligence*: Working memory, abstract reasoning, attention, processing novel information.
 - *Peaks around 20s.*
 - *Crystallized Intelligence*: Broad educational or accumulated knowledge (“Wisdom”).
 - *Increases through middle-age and beyond (Ackerman & colleagues).*
- Note: Changes within groups are greater than differences between older and younger groups.

The realities about how people change: cognitive skills

- In terms of *stereotypes*, workers are also *perceived* to increase in terms of crystallized intelligence and decrease in terms of fluid intelligence (Truxillo, Bertolino, and colleagues, 2007; 2008; 2009).
- *Increased crystallized intelligence may compensate for declines in fluid intelligence.*
- **Workers may choose jobs that fit their skills; for example, workers in jobs that require fluid intelligence may prefer work that is supervisory or to conduct training.*

Personality (for review and meta-analysis, see Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006).

- *Conscientiousness and neuroticism decrease as people age.*
- *Some aspects of extraversion decrease, as do some aspect of openness to new experiences much later in life.*


Note: Changes within groups are greater than differences between older and younger groups.

- In terms of *stereotypes*, workers are also *perceived* to increase in terms of conscientiousness and decrease in terms of neuroticism, extraversion, and openness (Truxillo, Bertolino, and colleagues, 2007; 2008; 2009).


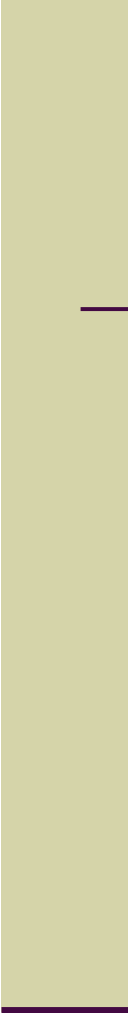
How do older and younger workers differ in terms of job satisfaction?

Age and job satisfaction (e.g., Barnes-Farrell & Matthews, 2007)

- Older workers tend to report higher job satisfaction.
- Age more closely related to intrinsic job satisfaction (e.g., the work itself) rather than extrinsic satisfaction (e.g., pay, promotions.)
- Why is age be associated with satisfaction?
 - Older workers are typically at higher levels.
 - They have found a fit with their work.
 - May be due to cohort differences; e.g., the generation which grew up in the Great Depression.
 - Older workers may generally be more positive – lower neuroticism.



Do older and younger workers
differ in their motivation? How?



Work motivation across the lifespan

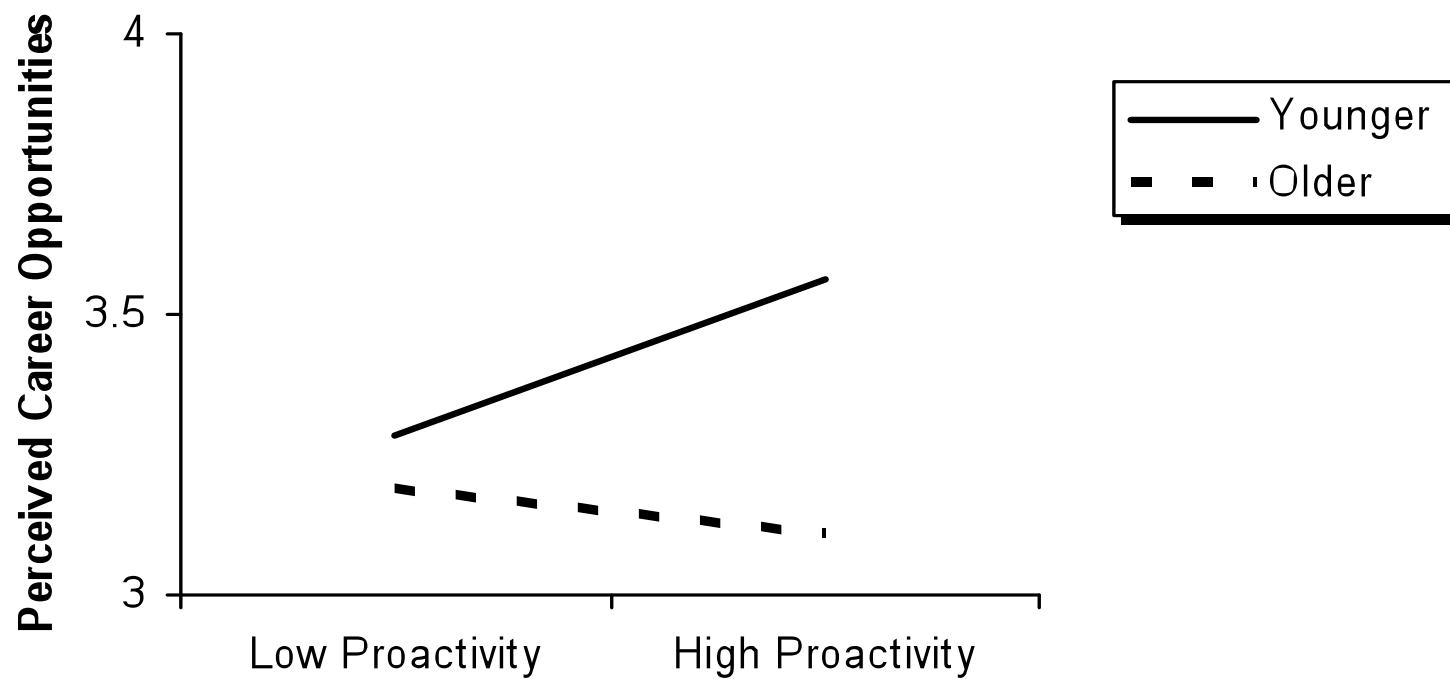
(Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004)

- Self-confidence (self-efficacy) may decrease for skills related to fluid intelligence.
- Younger workers may seek social interaction for information and for future opportunities, whereas...
- Older workers may focus on gaining satisfaction from social interactions.
- “Generativity motives” – caring for others, helping future generations – may increase and peak in middle age.
 - **Mid-life workers may focus on collaboration and respond to management strategies focused on cooperation rather than competition.*

Work motivation across the lifespan

- *Motivation of older and younger workers affected by workplace relationships that suggest bias.
- Proactive older workers may behave differently from proactive younger workers – less focused on advancement and learning new skills – than proactive younger workers. *Older workers may be focused on other issues such as maintaining their skills and interpersonal aspects of work* (Bertolino, Truxillo, & Fraccaroli, in press).

Proactive personality and perceived career opportunities from training: Younger vs. older workers



What are the actual job performance differences between older and younger workers?

Possible Job Performance Differences for Older and Younger Workers

- Possible concerns
 - Performance *may* decline in jobs where certain skills are needed (e.g., psychomotor skills).
 - Performance *may* decline where executive functions are needed (e.g., monitoring information).
 - Learning may decline.
- But years of work experience and wisdom likely compensates for these possible declines.
- Learning appears to be a bit slower initially for older workers but then catches up.

Actual job performance differences: Meta-analysis of age and job performance (Ng & Feldman, 2008).

- Reviewed 380 studies on the relationship between age and work performance.
- Included more managerial and non-managerial jobs, and complex and non-complex jobs.
- Many thousands (>70,000) participants.

Meta-analysis of age and job performance (Continued).

- Examined the effects of age on 10 key performance dimensions:
 - Core task performance
 - Creativity
 - Performance in training programs
 - Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB)
 - Safety performance
 - Counterproductive work behavior (e.g., stealing, gossiping, ignoring supervisors' instructions)
 - Aggression
 - Substance abuse
 - Tardiness
 - Absenteeism

Note : There is great variability within the older and younger groups.

Results of the meta-analysis

- Core task performance:
 - Age was generally unrelated to core task performance.
- Creativity
 - Age was generally unrelated to creativity.
- Performance in training programs
 - Older workers performed very slightly lower in training ($r=-.04$)

Results of the meta-analysis

(continued)

- Organizational citizenship behavior
 - Older workers were slightly more likely to help other employees, the organization, etc.

- Safety performance
 - Older workers were more likely to comply with safety rules.
 - Older workers were less likely to experience work injuries.

Results of the meta-analysis

(continued)

- Counterproductive work behavior
 - Older workers were less likely to participate in counterproductive work behavior.

- Aggression
 - Older workers less likely to be aggressive.

Results of the meta-analysis

(continued)

- Substance abuse
 - Less likely to participate in substance abuse.
- Tardiness
 - Older workers much less likely to be tardy.
- Absenteeism
 - Older workers much less likely to be absent.
 - Slightly more likely to have sickness-related absences.

Implications of the meta-analysis

- Taken with past research and theory, it suggests that:
 - Older workers appear just as motivated as younger workers.
 - They may go out of their way to help others and be good organizational citizens.
 - They may work to compensate for any cognitive declines; wisdom (crystallized intelligence) may compensate.

Implications of the meta-analysis

- Taken with past research and theory, it suggests that:
 - More positive work performance in terms of a number of key dimensions: safety, counterproductive work behavior aggression, tardiness.
 - Older workers may exhibit less hostility and be better at regulating their moods.

Some recommendations for workplace practice

- Older workers' performance in other areas than core task performance should be considered.
- For training, spend less time trying to train on technical skills, and more time helping them facilitate the performance of younger colleagues.
- Training that is delivered less time-intensively may be more effective for older workers (e.g., training over 1 week vs. over 1 month.)

Some recommendations for organizational practices (continued)

- Focus on the significant value older workers bring to the workplace, not just avoiding discrimination against older workers.
- Consider how skills may vary across the lifespan, e.g., younger, older, and middle-aged.

Other questions

- What does it mean to be an “older worker” today?
- Is there actually a generational divide? (Or is it actually any worse than it’s always been?)
- Are there greater opportunities for middle-aged workers versus younger or older workers? (Steiner and colleagues).

Areas where more research is needed

- Motivation and performance of people through the life span – younger, older, and *middle-aged*.
- Challenge: Distinguish bias from actual performance differences.
- How much does additional information about a person reduce age bias?

Research needs (continued)

- What does it mean to be an “older worker” today? What’s the role of culture, job norms, organizational norms?
- Organizational climate and culture and their effects on motivation and performance of older and younger workers.
- Combination of age stereotypes with gender and other demographic categories, e.g., older male versus younger female? Job-age stereotypes?

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