

A LOWER SUBJECTIVE AGE FOR A HIGHER PRODUCTIVITY

IT ISN'T HOW OLD YOU ARE, BUT HOW OLD YOU FEEL



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How old do you feel? Your employees' answer to this question is crucial to your company. If the employees of an organization feel younger than their true age, they will accomplish more and benefit the organization's overall performance. All they need is meaningful work; age-inclusive HR practices; and a dynamic environment.

LEADERSHIP AND PEOPLE MANAGEMENT
• SUBJECTIVE AGE • AGE-INCLUSIVE HR
PRACTICES

“Age is not how old you are, but how old you feel,” according to Gabriel García Márquez and many others. Given the press-

ing issue of aging workforces in the developed world, there is good reason for organizations to take a close look at how old their employees feel in comparison with their actual age, in other words, their subjective age.

We know that being young at heart has clear benefits for health, vitality and productivity. People who feel younger than their biological age often have a more positive outlook on life and are fitter and more content. Similarly, as our new research shows, if the employees of an organization feel younger than they actually are, they achieve more instrumental goals, which enhances their job performance and benefits the performance of the company overall.

How people perceive their own age in relation to their biological age is influenced by a number of things. Their health, the amount of exercise they do, and events and benchmarks such as birthdays and

retirement and many other factors all come into play.

And crucially, how old a person feels depends on where they work. Many companies have their own age norms, for instance. These are the specific ages that people think they are expected to be when they hold certain positions in that company. Or, employees might compare themselves to others in the organization of a similar age and adjust their subjective age to the shared beliefs and accepted standards of the group.

Some research has shown that in their younger years, people tend to perceive their future as open-ended. Employees at the young end of the scale feel that a big chunk of their work life lies ahead of them. So they are more invested in development opportunities and achieving performance goals in their work.

In their later years, people tend to look less to the future and focus more on the present, investing more energy in more immediate goals. It follows that employees who feel their age or older may be less interested in development and training opportunities and will be more invested in goals such as good



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social relationships, which have immediate rewards.

Over time, these motivations will gradually shift from the focus on professional growth and development in younger years, to a focus on maintenance and loss-reduction later on.

However, our research shows that if the “subjective age” of the workforce of an organization is relatively low, meaning that employees across all age groups, not just the older members, feel younger than their biological age, this can counter the effects of this shift in focus from future to present.

Clearly, it is in the best interests of organizations to help their workforces feel younger than their chronological age. The good news is that helping a workforce feel younger is straightforward enough for an attentive organization to orchestrate.

MAKE WORK MEANINGFUL

There are two simple practices companies can adopt to reduce the self-perceived age of its workforce. First, allocate meaningful tasks. When employees of all ages are engaged in meaningful tasks, they feel more integrated in the working process, are more satisfied with their work and are more optimistic. This influences their subjective age – not to mention their personal investment in the company’s success.

Numerous studies have illustrated that many age stereotypes exist in the workplace that associate ag-

ing with a decline of work-related abilities and performance. In such organizations the aging workers are more often assigned to lower-status jobs with less purpose. Although these stereotypes are often proved to be unfounded, they restrict aging workers’ opportunities for training, promotion and career development and can lead to less challenging and meaningful assignments.

The same organizations will often stereotype young employees with labels such as “key performers.” These key performers are considered to have the most promising careers and development opportunities of all age groups. The “young talent” receives the challenging tasks while the older employees are left to languish in the corner licking stamps.

If employees perceive their work to be meaningful it should lower their subjective-age perceptions in relation to their chronological age, whether they are young or old. As a result, aging employees with meaningful tasks will perceive a large gap between those common negative age stereotypes and their true age.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL AGES

The second practice companies can adopt is age-inclusive HR practices. These management measures ensure that all employees, irrespective of age, can develop their knowledge, skills and abilities, be equally motivated, and have the same opportunities to contribute to the goals of the organization.

Offering training opportunities at all stages to all ages helps to ward off age-based stigmatization and biases and brings benefits not just to the older workers, but also the younger ones and the company itself.

If the young employees have no competition and are permitted to rest on their laurels and ride the momentum of youth and classification, they may not be challenged to reach their full potential. But



if employees of all ages are also in the game, the youngest employees can be kick-started into action and see their own performance enhanced. Ultimately, age-inclusive HR practices create a climate of positive age diversity throughout the company.

If there are no age-inclusive HR practices, age-based discriminatory behavior is likely to happen in the workplace and age stereotypes will become more apparent. Employees might perceive that their age affects their career and reward potentials. That makes it difficult for employees to develop a subjective age that's different from the existing negative stereotype, and regrettably, this can cancel out the positive effects of having meaningful tasks.

DYNAMIC ENVIRONMENTS

● Companies need to beware, however, that the benefits of having both meaningful tasks and age-inclusive HR practices are only effective in dynamic work environments. These are settings where products or service demands are in constant flux and because of this staff are required to be flexible and adaptable throughout the entire duration of their working life.

Highly dynamic environments include high-tech start-up companies. These deal with constant fluctuations in customer preferences, short product life cycles and frequently changing production methods. Companies operating in these environments will require their employees – of all age groups – to invest large amounts of energy and resources into reaching their instrumental goals. They require their employees to remain cognitively and emotionally flexible and continuously undergo training and knowledge building to make sure that they accomplish these goals.

In contrast, if the external environment of the company is more stable, such as in a large, bureaucratic automotive supplier (which

will have a lot of repetitive and less meaningful tasks to divvy up), it will have a higher relative subjective age, with employees throughout the company focusing more on prevention and maintenance. They will focus more on achieving goals that are more emotionally satisfying and may be happy just to prevent performance losses. In these more stable environments, aging employees will more likely express age-conforming behavior.

But in a dynamic environment where meaningful tasks are given to workers of all ages, with age-inclusive HR practices, the subjective age of the company on average will be reduced – across the board. This is instrumental for individual goal accomplishment, and that is what benefits the organization's performance overall.

Ultimately, the longer employees of all ages focus on growth and development (use it or lose it, as the saying goes) and see an open-ended future, the better this will be for their individual productivity and job performance. If the company embraces age-inclusive HR practices, allocates meaningful work and does these things in a dynamic environment, the better for all the cogs in the wheel – of any age – and the better the wheel will turn.

MORE INFORMATION:

Kunze, Florian; Raes, Anneloes; Bruch, Heike, "It Matters How Old You Feel: Antecedents and Performance Consequences of Average Relative Subjective Age in Organizations," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2015 (online).

