

Instead of Workers' Age Alone, Let's Focus on Their GATE: Generation, Age, Tenure, Experience

By Michael S. North

Aging populations worldwide have meant aging workforces worldwide.¹ However, relevant management research has been scant, and organizations' adaptations for older workers (e.g., offering flexible work arrangements, changing workplace ergonomics²) have been slow to catch on.

Given demographic trends, a major challenge has been the unexpected complexity of the increasingly age diverse workplace. For instance, adapting to an increasing number of older workers is an opportunity related to, but still distinct from, harnessing the increasing overall age diversity in the workplace. Likewise, different considerations emerge for accommodating workers of different ages and life stages entering the workforce for the first time versus workers staying with his or her current organization for a fourth decade. So, what do we really mean when we discuss the global rise in age diversity in the workplace, and how can businesses better understand how to adapt to maximize the opportunity?

To address these complexities, in a recently published paper, I outline how business leaders and scholars need to avoid focusing too heavily on chronological age alone. Instead, I suggest thinking more about what age tends to signal within the workplace: a particular Generation, a certain Age (life stage), a level of organizational Tenure, and a certain Experience-based skill set. This GATE framework takes a more comprehensive look at 50+ employees, helping to avoid stereotypes and misconceptions.

One-Size-Fits-All Age Characterizations Fall Short

In line with the recent AARP message that age is just a number,³ research overwhelmingly shows that age alone cannot predict a worker's ability, outlook, or needs. Aside from the challenge of defining older workers in the first place (research thresholds range from age 37⁴ to 70+),⁵ numerical age alone has yielded unresolved key

research questions within the areas of individual performance, interpersonal discrimination, and group-level diversity domains:

- 1. What is the relationship between age and job performance?** Recent large-scale studies find that chronological age does not predict performance one way or the other in most core work performance domains.^{6, 7, 8} On one hand, it is encouraging that older and younger workers tend to perform equally well, suggesting that certain beliefs about "outmoded" older workers are severely misguided. On the other hand, this finding speaks to only part of the issue; we still don't know where and when older workers might perform better — and how to put them in positions to succeed.
- 2. If older workers are valued, then why does workplace age discrimination persist?** In an apparent paradox, managers consistently value their older workers,⁹ yet age discrimination remains a growing problem at multiple job stages. In hiring, older (versus equally qualified younger) entry-level applicants are 40 percent less likely to receive interviews.¹⁰ Further, on the job, older (versus equally qualified younger) workers receive far less training investment.¹¹ Meanwhile, in firing, age discrimination claims have risen 47 percent from 1999 to 2017.¹²
- 3. How do workplaces foster consistently productive age diversity?** Like defining older workers, conceptualizing age diversity is complex — is it overall age variance within a workgroup¹³ or equal representation among age brackets?¹⁴ Regardless, the multigenerational workforce is here to stay and business leaders desire a better understanding of the implications for engagement, productivity, innovation and revenue. According to the current literature, greater leadership

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diversity overall (including age) predicts a 19 percent increase in innovation revenue and a 9 percentage point increase in profit margins,¹⁵ and a study of 18,000 German companies found that age heterogeneity fosters an increase in annual productivity.¹⁶ Numerous other studies find age diversity to have zero effect on group performance (i.e., no significant relationship with performance) — which is not a bad outcome — consistency regardless of age diversity is good for business, too.¹⁷ Ultimately, we need more research and, just as important, we need employers willing to pull back the curtain of their operations to allow us to better study the implications of demographic trends within the workplace.

A GATE-way to Going Beyond Numerical Age

These research questions highlight the need for a new, nuanced perspective on the age diverse workforce. I suggest starting with four related, yet distinct factors underlying workers' age:

- **Generation:** Hailing from a certain birth cohort, experiencing formative events at certain points in time
- **Age:** Existing at a certain chronological point in the life span

- **Tenure:** Hailing from a certain work cohort, having entered the organization at a certain point in time
- **Experience:** Possessing the experience of various life and work events that shape a particular skill set

Considering all components helps clear up the ambiguity of chronological age alone. For example, in the performance domain, across work contexts, long tenure tends to predict higher performance but also an increased risk for discrimination — that is, targeting the “old guard” (figure 1). Certainly there are exceptions to these overarching trends, but in general, factoring GATE into the equation helps us understand the nuances that shape different 50+ work experiences.

GATE also clarifies what makes for productive age diversity, which I argue is more clearly defined as GATE diversity. Per research, the biggest benefit of such diversity is diversity in tenure — presumably due to the unique combination of newcomers' fresh perspectives and the old guard's longstanding organizational memory. Thus, workplaces seeking productive age diversity might focus on maximizing tenure diversity, although to a lesser extent, mixing life stages and experience levels also produces benefits, per the research base.

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Figure 1. Per research,¹⁸ different GATE domains differentially predict key work outcomes in performance, discrimination, and diversity. This shows why numerical age alone tells us very little.

Using GATE to Dispel Aging Workforce Myths

Although the business case for accommodating a 50+ workforce is undeniable, even the biggest proponents need to think carefully in order not to overgeneralize based on numerical age. Thinking about age as GATE helps individualize and contextualize older workers, which is the key to avoiding stereotypes. In a workplace context, GATE dimensions tell us far more than numerical age does.

If you are a 50+ worker yourself, then considering your own GATE domains can be adaptive too. For example, research shows that thinking about your generational identity (e.g., Boomer) tends to enhance your health and productivity more than thinking about your status (e.g., elder) does.¹⁹ Therefore, emphasize your strongest GATE aspects to put your best foot forward — professionally and personally. ●

¹ C. T. Kulik et al., "Aging Populations and Management," *Academy of Management Journal* 57 (2014): 929–35.

² M. S. North and H. E. Hershfield, "Four Ways to Adapt to an Aging Workforce," *Harvard Business Review* (2014), <https://hbr.org/2014/04/four-ways-to-adapt-to-an-aging-workforce>

³ Weinstock, S. (2019, January 23). Age is just a number. *AARP International*. <https://www.aarpinternational.org/the-journal/current-edition/journal-articles-blog/2019/01/weinstock>.

⁴ P. A. Riach and J. Rich, "An Experimental Investigation of Age Discrimination in the English Labor Market," *Annals of Economics and Statistics* 99/100 (2010): 169–85.

⁵ D. Neumark, I. Burn, Ian and P. Button. "Is it Harder for Older Workers to Find Jobs? New and Improved Evidence from a Field Experiment" (October 2015). NBER Working Paper No. w21669. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2679708>

⁶ G. M. McEvoy and W. F. Cascio, "Cumulative Evidence of the Relationship between Employee Age and Job Performance," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 74 (1989): 11–17.

⁷ T. W. H. Ng, and D. Feldman, "The Relationship of Age to Ten Dimensions of Job Performance," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 93 (2008): 392–423.

⁸ R. A. Posthuma and M. A. Campion, "Age Stereotypes in the Workplace: Common Stereotypes, Moderators and Future Research Directions," *Journal of Management* 35 (2007): 158–88.

⁹ M. Pitt-Catsoupes et al., *The National Study Report: Phase 2 of the National Study of Business Strategy and Workforce Development*. Center on Aging and Work, Boston College, (2007), http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/agingand-work/pdf/publications/RH04_NationalStudy.pdf.

¹⁰ J. N. Lahey, "Age, Women and Hiring: An Experimental Study," *Journal of Human Resources* 43 (2008): 30–56.

¹¹ M. S. North and S. T. Fiske, "Resource Scarcity and Prescriptive Attitudes Generate Subtle, Inter-generational Older-Worker Exclusion," *Journal of Social Issues* 72 (2016): 122–45.

¹² "Charge Statistics: FY 1997 through FY 2016," U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, published 2017, <https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/statistics/enforcement/charges.cfm>.

¹³ P. Ilmakunnas and S. Ilmakunnas, "Diversity at the Workplace: Whom Does It Benefit?," *De Economist* 159 (2011): 1–33.

¹⁴ M. C. Schippers et al., "Diversity and Team Outcomes: The Moderating Effects of Outcome Interdependence and Group Longevity and the Mediating Effect of Reflexivity," *The International Journal of Industrial, Occupational and Organizational Psychology and Behavior* 24, no. 6 (2003): 779–802.

¹⁵ R. Lorenzo, N. Voigt, M. Tsusaka, M. Krentz, & K. Abouzahr (January 2018). "How Diverse Leadership Teams Boost Innovation." Boston Consulting Group. <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2018/how-diverse-leadership-teams-boost-innovation.aspx>

¹⁶ U. Backes-Gellner and S. Veen, U. Backes-Gellner and S. Veen. "The Impact of Aging and Age Diversity on Company Performance" (January 2, 2009). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1346895> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1346895>

¹⁷ S. A. Boehm and F. Kunze, F. "Age Diversity and Age Climate in the Workplace," in *Aging Workers and the Employee–Employer Relationship*, edited by P. M. Bal, D.Kooij, and D. M. Rousseau (New York: Springer, 2015), 33–55.

¹⁸ Steffens, N. K., Shemla, M., Wegge, J., & Diestel, S. (2014). Organizational tenure and employee performance: A multilevel analysis. *Group & Organization Management*, 39(6), 664–690.

¹⁹ M. S. North and A. Shakeri, "Workplace Subjective Age Multidimensionality: Generation, Age, Tenure, Experience (GATE)," *Work, Aging, & Retirement* 5, no. 4 (2019): 273–80.



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