THE INFLUENCE OF EMPLOYEE AGE ON WORK

ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

Employers are interested in how to engage their employees, what engages them and how to

increase it. The aim of this paper is to fill the gap and examine obviously implausible negative

assumptions referring to work engagement and its relation to age, specifically in retail.

Organizations that know the importance of age diversity in the workplace have an advantage

over others because they are able to react faster to changing work environments. This paper was

conducted as a part of a larger organizational research focus on the work engagement of

employees working in retail. The subject of the survey is to find out the level of work

engagement of retail employees based on age. This paper answers the research question "Does

an employee's age influence work engagement?". The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions

that respondents answered on a five-point Likert scale (1 strongly disagree – 5 strongly agree).

The survey was conducted in the Spring of 2021. Retail employees (N = 2535) filled online

questionnaire distributed to their work e-mail addresses. This research as well as prior studies

have confirmed that older employees are more engaged than younger employees.

Key words: employee's age, work engagement, age discrimination, diversity

JEL Code: J24, M12, O15

Introduction

There is a lot of research on employee or work engagement. Employers are interested in how

to engage their employees, what engages them and how to increase it. According to Albrecht et

al. (2018), only those organizations that maintain work engagement increase work performance,

which positively affects the company's growth.

The aim of this paper is to fill the gap and examine obviously implausible negative

assumptions referring to work engagement and its relation to age, specifically in retail. Contrary

to speculations regarding older employees, various studies show that older employees are more

engaged than younger ones. Those organizations that know the importance of age diversity in

the workplace have an advantage over others because they are able to react faster to changing

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work environments. This diversity brings different opinions, experiences, knowledge, lifestyle and can contribute to greater productivity, motivation, creativity, innovation, satisfaction and change acceptance (Rožman, Treven and Čančer, 2020). In general, employers want engaged employees and to keep them energized, productive and committed to the organization (James, 2010).

This paper consists of an introduction to the topic, a literature review including an overview of studies concerning the relationship between work engagement and employee age. The next part explains the methodology of the research, followed by the next part providing results. And the last part, the conclusion and limitation to research where are the recommendations to scholars on what to focus on in the next research.

1 Literature review

As mentioned before, there is a lot of research on work engagement, among those also some focus on demographic factors such as age. Unfortunately, there are still negative stereotypes connected with older or on the other hand younger workers. Among these belong poor performance, change resistance or in general the opinion, that they are less engaged (Douglas and Roberts, 2020). Negative biases regarding the employee's age result in age discrimination and create an issue in the labor market. Younger employees are often discriminated because of lack of experience and older employees are often discriminated because of their ability and efficiency. Age discrimination has also a negative effect on the working environment, therefore it is essential to create a positive working environment for all workers (Rožman, Treven and Čančer, 2020). Older workers are often seen in their preretirement phase with less motivation and growth potential, preparing for their retirement, reducing their effort or investment in work and disengaging (Damman et al., 2011). In contrast, James et al. (2010) found in their study that older employees do not count down the time until retirement. However, previous studies found a higher level of work engagement among older employees, there are still these negative stereotypes in some organizations. The latest approaches to paying more attention to age diversity in the workplace show the first steps in organizational policy that focus on older employees. Some employers are aware of this aging issue and have a positive approach toward age (Rožman, Treven and Čančer, 2020). In organizations work employees from young adults to retirement-eligible who are at different life and career stages. Therefore, there can be found some differences in norms and job expectations (James et al., 2010). Diversity in the workplace is a vital part of every organization. Studies on age revealed significant differences in work

engagement across ages. Young employees (below 25 years) tend to be less engaged than older employees (Chaudhary and Rangnekar, 2017). Understanding how engagement influences various aspects of work life and the relationship between work engagement and an employee's age is important.

2 Methodology

This paper was conducted as a part of a larger organizational research focus on the work engagement of employees working in retail. The subject of the survey is to find out the level of work engagement of retail employees based on age. This paper answers the research question "Does an employee's age influence work engagement?".

The survey was based on Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9), Gallup Q¹² and other questions focused on the work itself, engagement in the team, the role of the manager and the last one focused on company vision. The first seven questions were chosen from the Gallup Q¹² work engagement survey, which targeted different areas such as work performance/feedback, development, tools/equipment, own perception of appreciation and opportunities to do what they do best. The following four questions were taken over UWES, spotlighted dedication to examine the state of commitment and vigor to examine the level of energy. All the questions were chosen based on the literature review. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions that respondents answered on a five-point Likert scale (1 strongly disagree – 5 strongly agree).

The survey was conducted in Spring 2021 in Austria. Retail employees (N = 2535) filled online questionnaire distributed to their work e-mail addresses.

3 Results

The research confirmed other studies on the relationship between work engagement and age, which means that older employees are more engaged than younger (below 25 years). The results (Tab. 1) reveal the findings such as the most engaged age group are 51-55 years old employees and on the other hand, the least engaged age group is 21-25 years old employees. Similarly, Sharma and Rajput (2021) found in their study among university teachers in India significant differences in the overall mean engagement level between age groups below 30 years old and 51 and above. No significant differences were found between the age groups of 30 and 31-50. Another research conducted by Rožman, Treven and Čančer (2020) confirmed that older workers are more engaged in their workplace, adding the statement with the highest score "I

am engaged to the quality of my work". Robinson et al. (2004) also found that employees over 60 were the most engaged compared to other age groups. That older employees are more engaged than younger endorsed Pitt-Catsouphes and Matz-Costa (2009) as well. James et al. (2010) used data from a national retail chain in the United States to examine work engagement among different age groups. Their findings support that older employees are significantly more engaged than younger. Ramos, Jenny and Bauer (2016) conducted an online survey among workers from Germany, Switzerland and Austria with 1417 respondents aged between 20 to 65. Among other results, they endorsed the significantly higher engagement level of older workers than younger. A survey among employees ranging from 30 to 86 years with a mean age of 57 confirmed that employees above 50 are more engaged in their work than employees under 50 (Douglas and Roberts, 2020). The results of the study organized by Kim and Kang (2016) also verified that the level of work engagement of older workers is higher than younger workers and moreover they found the reason why the older workers are more engaged – because they have more resources to handle the demands they face in the workplace.

Looking closer at the questions in this research, the lowest values gained the first question of the questionnaire "At the company, I have the opportunity to do what I do best", where the mean value is equal to 68,9 % and less than half (48,2 %) of 21-25 years old employees agreed with this statement. The next lowest rated statement is "I am regularly given useful performance feedback by my manager" with a mean of 70 % and again the lowest agreement (59,7 %) belongs to the age group 21-25. Opposite, the highest value gained the statement "My colleague and I collaborate well" with a mean value of 93,2 %, where the highest agreement belongs to two age groups: less than 20 and 31-35 years old employees. The next highest value is represented by the most engaged age group 51-55 years old employees with the statement "I feel I contribute meaningfully through my work" with a mean value of 91,6 %. The study of 181 employees working in the private sector also showed a higher mean in the level of work engagement in the age group 63 and above than 30-50 years old employees. These results confirm that age is connected to employee engagement. Although, it does not necessarily mean that all older workers are more engaged and that it will sustain without any effort. Moreover, age discrimination leads to lower engagement level (Douglas and Roberts, 2020; Bayl-Smith and Griffin, 2014). Furthermore, Schaufeli, Bakker and Salanova (2006) did a study in ten countries to find out the relationship between age and work engagement whereas a small statistically significant positive association was found.

Tab. 1: Results in % by age group

Source of question			Age								
Gallup Q12	UWES-9	Survey question	< 20 years	21-25 years	26-30 years	31-35 years	36-40 years	41-45 years	46-50 years	51-55 years	> 55 years
At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day		At company, I have the opportunity to do what I do best	55,6	48,2	63,0	67,3	69,7	79,2	76,0	79,9	81,1
I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right.		I have the right tools and equipment to do my job	91,5	84,3	77,1	72,3	74,2	76,0	77,2	78,2	81,1
There is someone at work who encourages my development.		My manager supports my development	83,8	75,8	78,1	77,4	73,6	79,6	75,8	81,3	76,4
I know what is expected of me at work.		I know what my manager expects of me	96,3	92,3	84,2	82,6	85,0	93,2	91,4	94,4	89,6
In the last six months, somenone at work has talked to me about my progress.		I am regularly given useful performance feedback by my manager	79,0	59,7	66,3	64,6	68,6	71,7	70,3	74,7	75,0
The mission or purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important.		I feel my work is appreciated at company	87,8	76,0	74,4	77,8	74,9	83,7	80,1	90,0	86,2
The last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow.		At company, I have good opportunities to develop my competences	80,0	68,1	74,7	76,3	75,2	79,0	78,2	83,4	83,3
	I am enthusiastic about my job	I enjoy my work	88,9	83,7	82,6	86,0	85,1	89,1	90,7	92,9	94,8
	I find my work that I do full of meaning	I feel I contribute meaningfully through my work	90,1	86,7	87,9	87,2	88,9	96,8	93,1	97,7	95,7
	I am proud on the work what I do	I am proud of the work I do	90,1	77,9	83,9	87,2	87,9	94,0	91,8	94,4	94,4

At my work, I feel bursting with energy	My work energises me	72,2	56,6	65,1	73,0	73,9	81,4	83,2	88,1	87,1
	I have the freedom to make decisions at work	74,4	63,8	69,1	76,5	76,1	81,3	76,0	84,3	79,2
	I enjoy taking on new responsibilities	88,9	86,8	89,5	88,7	88,6	87,4	87,8	85,4	84,8
	My colleagues and I collaborate well	95,1	92,0	93,0	95,1	91,0	94,1	94,1	92,3	92,3
	My team's goals are clear	92,7	84,5	83,0	84,3	82,6	88,8	85,5	90,6	87,3
	My manager makes time for me	90,2	86,9	84,7	83,7	79,7	85,9	80,5	86,1	88,2
	My manager behaves in line with our values	93,8	83,4	80,5	79,2	79,5	86,9	86,3	84,8	86,8
	My manager holds me accountable for my performance	90,1	88,2	87,0	86,1	88,9	93,2	89,1	92,7	92,3
	My manager shares important information with me	87,8	82,0	79,1	79,9	77,7	83,7	79,6	84,3	83,3
	I am inspired by the vision of company	85,4	81,4	83,6	85,5	87,6	90,9	89,0	91,1	91,7

Source: own research

The means of work engagement for each age group are illustrated in Box-Plots in Fig. 1. A box plot is one of the graphical methods used in statistics to examine data using quartiles. Quantiles are values that divide an ordered set of values into a certain number of equally occupied parts. These are values that divide the set into four parts, each containing 25% of the units, and are denoted as follows: the lower quartile, the second quartile (Median, marked as x), the upper quartile. It allows to identify outliers in a set of values. The Box-Plot exhibits asymmetry in most of the age groups (especially in age groups: less than 20, 21-25, 26.30, 36-40, 51-55) because the data do not have a normal distribution, the median line is not in the

middle of the "box". The variance displays how spread out are the values, the largest is represented by the age group 21-25 and the lowest are the age groups 51-55 and 31-35.

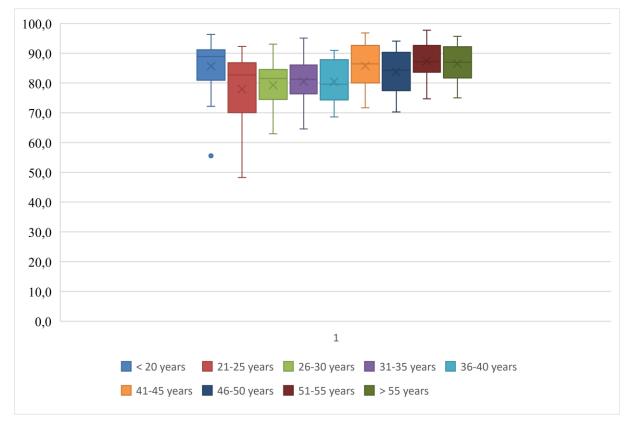


Fig. 1: Box-Plot illustrating the results for each age group

Source: own research

The greatest difference is seen between the age groups 21-25 and 51-55 which are the most and the least engaged employees according to their age. The maximum value similarly shows no significant difference in results. The mean varies from 77,9 to 87,3.

Conclusion

This research as well as prior studies have confirmed that older employees are more engaged than younger employees. There are different benefits to hiring older employees such as experience, knowledge, work ethic and lower turnover (Douglas and Roberts, 2020).

This paper brings some implications for theory and practice. It provides a brief overview of the literature and studies concerning work engagement and employee age. The results support other research and confirm that older workers are more engaged than younger ones. The findings of this research should inspire HR professionals and managers to pay more attention to age discrimination in the workplace, overcome the biases that older workers are less

motivated or planning their retirement. Results in this research, similarly to a study from Sharma and Rajput (2021) demonstrate that a "one-size-fits-all" approach to engaging employees may not work and various strategies to engage workers need to be used.

There are also some limitations. Firstly, this research focus only on workers in retail, it should explore other industries beyond the scope of this research. Future research should include other demographic variables such as gender or length of service. It would be also interesting to compare more countries from Europe or the rest of the world. Moreover, future research should try to find specific reasons for work engagement.

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