

Work and Equalities Institute Research Briefing

Emotion, stress and burnout – 'don't write off older workers'

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Summary

People working in organisations are getting older and jobs with direct customer contact are growing; at the same time, people over the age of 50 are subject to ongoing challenges around age discrimination, despite frameworks in place to protect them. This briefing looks at research which explores how older workers in the service sector deal with emotion regulation, stress and burnout. It joins a raft of previous research, which supports the notion that people get better at dealing with certain professional situations and challenges, with age. They can draw on experience, changing motivations and their professional ability to create more authentic connections with customers and colleagues. The findings challenge the stereotypes about older workers and some recommendations for organisational leaders and policy makers are provided. The message is clear: don't write off older workers.

Introduction: age is still an elephant in the room

People are getting older and living longer. In a world where retirement ages are increasing and pensions are changing, they are also working later. The proportion of people in work between the ages of 55 and 64, increased from 46 per cent to 58 per cent, in the ten years to 2018 (Eurostat, 2019). These figures will only increase, as people who planned to retire at 65 will work longer, and many will adopt portfolio careers.

But an ageing population is challenging a big elephant in the boardroom – age discrimination. While laws exist to protect workers and have done for over a decade in the UK, there is a common stereotype that as people get older, they are somehow less able or committed at work. This means they often get overlooked for recruitment and promotion and face difficulty getting jobs after the age of 50.

I have spent the last decade exploring the truth behind the headlines about older workers. My 2017 paper, *Age, emotion regulation strategies, burnout and engagement in the service sector: Advantages of older workers*, is part of a large body of research aimed at providing evidence to tackle age discrimination and present a balanced view.

It's not unusual for us to associate age with a decrease in ability. As we get older, we assume that we get less physically and cognitively able, and I think that at the extreme ends of age that is true. But it's not the case for people of working age, where there is very little evidence of any deficit. In the service sector the evidence shows, in some ways, we get better with age.

The research paper, which looked at the experiences of 444 workers in Germany's service sector, was carried out by myself and colleagues from Goethe-University in Frankfurt. Through questionnaires, it explored how people regulate their emotions in the workplace, their levels of engagement, and experiences of stress and burnout. Participants were aged between 16 and 70, with an average of 40. They worked in jobs ranging from sales, banking, travel, pharmacy, hairdressing and the restaurant industry.

The findings: we get better with age

The message of the study is clear: older workers are better at using emotion regulation strategies and are more engaged and less prone to burn out than younger colleagues. Their life experiences and ability to anticipate situations enable them to respond more authentically, and with more empathy, which reduces the need to fake emotion in challenging situations in front of customers.

The researchers found no evidence that older workers get worse with age. In fact, they suggest the opposite: that people's enhanced emotional competency in the workplace means they are valuable employees and well placed to take on customer service roles as they get older.

Our main findings:

- The relationship between age and emotion regulation strategies remains consistent no matter how long someone has been in a job. This means life experience, not just job experience, is important when managing situations at work. Prior experience increases the likelihood of preparing for an emotional encounter and may also influence feelings of being able to deal with a situation again. Older workers commonly use a technique called 'anticipative deep acting', which aims to bring felt emotions in line with required emotions. It involves preparing for situations in order to show an understanding of why someone is upset or angry, for example.
- Older workers are also more engaged with their work, perhaps because they are more confident in their abilities to do the job. The study found that when situations with customers are particularly stressful, difficult or challenging, there is a difference between younger and older workers when levels of deep acting are high. This means that older workers were reporting more professional efficacy in these situations, which supports the broader findings that they use emotion regulation strategies more effectively.

- Older workers also experience less exhaustion and cynicism than younger employees. When people get older, they are more likely to be motivated by doing a job well and developing stronger relationships at work. The emotion regulation strategies they use are more closely related to the creation of positive emotions and enhanced productivity.
- Younger workers, who are more likely to be motivated by pay and promotion, more commonly fake emotions using a technique called 'surface acting'. This means they can pretend to care about what someone is saying, even when they don't. It's a useful technique when a customer is being unreasonable, for example, but doing it too much can lead to being emotionally exhausted and feeling indifferent at work. This can lead to higher staff turnover.
- There was a difference between anticipative deep acting and 'situational deep acting', in the context of age. While the former refers to emotional preparation for a situation, the latter is about being able to call on the right emotions as and when something arises with a customer. With age we get better at preparing, but the study found that there was no difference between age groups for situational deep acting. This suggests that we prepare for situations based on previous life experiences, and we can anticipate what might happen and select a strategy appropriate to the situation.

The key message is that we don't find any support that there is a detriment with age. As we get older, people don't get worse, they actually get better at some elements. We are talking about quite complicated interactions, but these are things we do every day. We know through this paper that surface acting is bad for our health, deep acting is better, and we can select different strategies. People do that better as they get older.

The implications: is this the end of age discrimination?

There is a raft of evidence that older workers experience greater obstacles in the labour market than any other group of employees (Parry & Harris, 2011). While age discrimination laws have been in place since 2006 – and supported by further legislation in the Equality Act of 2010 – there is little evidence to suggest the situation has become any easier over the past decade because of ingrained stereotypes and unconscious bias.

My argument is we can only start to change those stereotypes by talking about them and publicising research like this. We also need to acknowledge that age stereotypes exist, and they are negative. They influence HR decisions, hiring decisions and whether you get offered training. I've spent the last ten years looking at these issues, and one thing I say quite often to students and other audiences is we can change stereotypes, but it takes time.

Back in 2015 I was commissioned by the Government Office for Science, and Foresight, to explore how **changing working environments would impact people** turning 65 in 2025 and 2040. I found that workers would be increasingly protected against age discrimination, but stereotypes would continue to prove challenging for their prospects in the short term. This will continue until new ways of working, and changing retirements ages, become better accepted.

We know that people over the age of 50 really struggle to get back into employment. One of the reasons that happens is because of discrimination: fears they might leave, take more time off, are less productive, or unable to learn new things. Actually,

the evidence is they are likely to stay as long as a younger person, because people are moving jobs and careers so often now. The argument that people will be worse at the job, or their health will get worse, also doesn't hold within the working life span. There is nothing to support hiring younger workers over older ones, so if I as a manager have the choice between hiring a 25-year-old or a 50-year-old then age should not come into it. But we know that we have unconscious bias and that does influence our decisions.

My **work in the transport sector** has also contributed to the wider understanding of older workers and backs up the findings about emotion regulation. The Age, Health and Professional Drivers' Network was set up in 2017 to look at health and well-being practices and needs of drivers. It was set up because the job of being a professional driver carries numerous health and well-being risks, and as the workforce gets older they need to be better understood to keep people healthy and productive. As part of the research, older drivers reported "having calmer attitudes and improved ability to deal with some workplace stressors, compared to when they were younger" (Johnson and Holdsworth, 2019).

Looking at this paper on emotion regulation as well, we need to think about how people cope with work situations and the impact that can have on their health and on their ability to perform well. There is also a positive message of what older people can bring and share with others in the workplace that will help to better deal with those situations.

Recommendations

The findings of the research, which contribute to the wider study of older workers, shows that older workers have skills that would be beneficial to customer-service roles and that they are valuable members of the workforce. The findings also suggest that well developed emotional competencies are beneficial to other industries, supporting better interaction between individuals, teams and leaders. This is especially true at a time when the growing adoption of technology is highlighting the need for human interaction and empathy in the workplace. Here is a list of recommendations for organisations and policy makers to consider, based on this research.

- It starts with you. The research has implications for customer service, but also protecting yourself. One way we can do that in a customer service situation is to try not to surface act too much – it's bad for us, our customers and the organisation.
- Enable communication. Organisations should seek to pass on messages about emotion regulation from older workers to younger workers, or those who are more experienced to those who are less experienced, to help people deal with customer interaction more positively.
- Develop autonomy. Deep acting can be facilitated by giving people time to make choices about how they behave with customers. Organisations that give workers some autonomy may reduce the amount of surface acting and amplify opportunities for deep acting.
- Think about life experience. This research suggests the skills we develop through our life course are transferable into other contexts, not just the skills we develop on the job.
- It's a long-term vision. Evidence suggests it takes time to break down stereotypes, even after the introduction of legal frameworks. Educating leadership teams, HR directors, and wider stakeholder groups – including the next generation of managers – will help move the dial on age discrimination.

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