

Status and trust key to the performance of age-diverse work groups

WHAT WAS THE RESEARCH QUESTION?

Workplaces are becoming more and more age-diverse, as multiple generations of employees come together—from students completing experiential learning work placements to seniors re-entering the workforce after retirement.

This growing diversity presents opportunities as well as challenges. *How can employers create conditions that will promote high performance in age-diverse teams?*

WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT?

Most employers recognize that diversity offers many possible perks. Like other kinds of diversity, age-diversity has been linked to gains in innovation, service quality, and overall performance.

But many employers are missing out on these benefits because they don't know how to manage multiple generations in their workforce. This study examines two specific factors that influence the ability of mixed-age teams to collaborate: status and trust.

HOW DID THE RESEARCHERS CONDUCT THE STUDY?

The researchers distributed two surveys to 59 work groups, consisting of 197 employees and 56 supervisors. The groups performed a variety of functions, including customer service, marketing, sales, and account management.

Employees completed the first survey, which asked them to respond to questions related to age diversity, status, and trust in their work group. Supervisors completed the second survey, which focused on the work group's performance, including the ability to make decisions, solve new problems, and maintain relationships.

WHAT WERE THE MAIN FINDINGS?

1 For best performance, perceived status and perceived competence must align.

An employee's status reflects their power and authority within the group. In age-diverse groups, confusion and conflict can arise over the criteria that determine status. When that happens, performance suffers. On the other hand, when everyone understands and agrees on how status is awarded, group performance improves.

Controversy over status occurs in age-diverse groups because society-at-large tends to assume that an older person is wiser and more qualified for leadership than a younger person. In the workplace, however, this assumption may not hold true. For example, an older employee may lack skills and training of a younger employee, especially in technical areas. Or a younger employee may have more years of experience in a field than a senior employee who has recently transitioned from a career in another domain.

Cara-Lynn Scheuer and Catherine Loughlin, "The moderating effects of status and trust on the performance of age-diverse work groups," *Evidence-based HRM, a Global Forum for Empirical Scholarship* 7, no. 1 (2019): 56-74.



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When a group attributes more or less status to a member based on their age, rather than their competence, the team experiences status incongruity. This shows up as perceptions of unfairness and injustice, which undermine morale and productivity. On the other hand, when members view status as matching competence, the group experiences status congruity and is likely to perform at a high level.

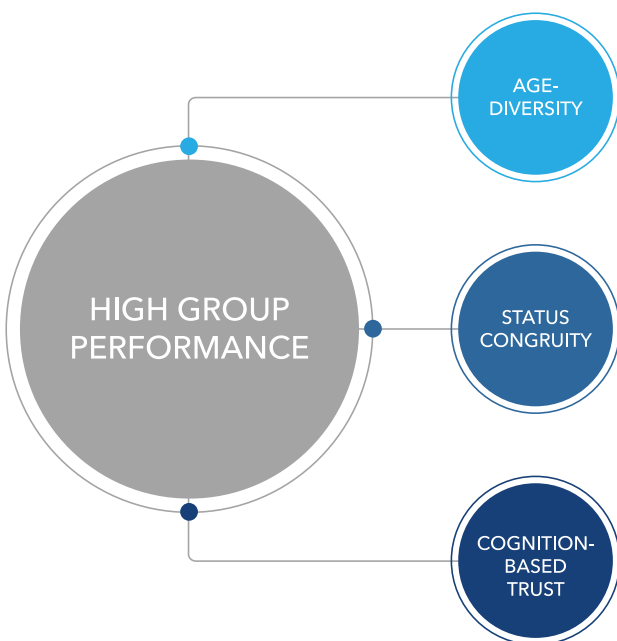
2 Trust must also derive from perceptions of competence.

Trust can be based on evidence of competence and reliability, or it can be based on emotional bonding. For age-diverse work groups to perform at their best, they must experience cognition-based trust, which develops when we witness proof of skills and dependability.

In other words, it's not enough for age-diverse colleagues to establish rapport or appreciate personality differences. They must also build trust based on a sense that they can rely on one another to perform well in their different roles.

3 When groups with high age-diversity experience status congruity and cognition-based trust, they perform better than groups with low age-diversity.

Conditions that foster high performance in work groups



HOW CAN YOU APPLY THE FINDINGS IN YOUR BUSINESS?

Consider practical ways you can influence status congruity and cognition-based trust in work groups. Here are a few ideas:

- Encourage group members to describe their skills and abilities and give updates on new knowledge or skills they've gained.
- Make information about the skills and abilities of group members readily available via such media as company newsletters or employee profiles posted on the company website.
- Facilitate job shadowing, which allows group members to observe and appreciate the skills and abilities of their colleagues.
- Promote a sense of organizational justice by ensuring that all employees are treated fairly and respectfully. Avoid doing anything that could create the impression there are "pet employees." One way to do this is to provide the "why" behind decisions, such as the choice to follow a procedure in a certain way.
- Help work groups form a collective identity by providing opportunities for them to engage in team-building activities.