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Through a Different Looking Glass: The Prism of Age

Marcie Pitt-Catsoupes
Christina Matz-Costa
Jacquelyn James

Tenure

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We all have a quick answer to the question, “How old are you?”

At the workplace, though, the way we perceive age is more complicated than adding up the number of birthdays we’ve celebrated. At work, if we think about how old we are, we consider our energy level (“By 2 p.m., I’m beat”); where we are on our career trajectory (“I feel like I’m just getting going, because I have so much to learn”); or the number of years we’ve been with our employers (“Feel free to ask me for advice, because I’ve been around this block a few times”). As a result, people can be “young” in some ways and “old” in others.

During the past few decades, a number of demographic changes have added still more dimensions to people’s experiences of age and aging. For example:

- People are living longer and (in general) have more years of health and vitality than in the past. Many experts have observed that a new life stage has emerged. Older adulthood is the robust period after middle age but before the onset of a frail “elderhood” (a term, though not yet in the dictionary, that is gaining in cultural currency).¹ This shift is important, because many of today’s older adults are actively questioning what they will do with these years.
- Workers are extending their labor force participation into the so-called “retirement years.” One out of every five workers who are 50 and older report that they are working even though they have previously retired.²
- Norms about what older adults want to do, can do, and should do have shifted. For example, the prospect of constructing a retirement totally around leisure has lost its appeal for many.

Employers need a way to think about the different aspects of the aging experience, so that they can use age diversity in the workplace to the organization’s and its employee’s advantage. In this issue brief, we describe the “Prism of Age” framework developed by the Sloan Center on Aging & Work and then consider the implications of this framework for employers and employees of all ages.



“Chronological age” – the simplest indicator of age – refers to the number of years lived since birth.

Chronological age often marks many transition points in our lives. For example, most of us enter first grade at the age of six. We become teenagers at 13. In most states, we can drive at 16 (regardless of our emotional maturity!). We can vote in national elections when we turn 18. We can access most retirement plans without penalties by 65. Transitions to new decades in adulthood (30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, and even 100!) are considered important birthdays.

Chronological age is an important facet of the prism of age. However, it is just one of many.

For much of the 20th century, chronological age was a useful indicator of the seasons of life, in part because people’s lives seemed to unfold in a way that (more or less) corresponded with their years. Now many of the benchmarks—to the extent that they are reliable at all—have changed. People are crossing important cultural thresholds later in life, on average, than their ancestors did. For example, the median age at first marriage rose from 22.8 for males and 20.3 for females in 1960 to 28.7 for males and 26.5 for females in 2011.³ Moreover, the range in age when people experience significant life changes has become wider, making the timing of these changes less predictable. If we look again at marriage, in 1960 two-thirds of people in their twenties were married. As of 2008 (nearly 50 years later), only a little more than a quarter of people in their twenties were married.⁴ The pattern is similar for other gateway events, such as the age when formal education ends and the age when transition to retirement begins. As a result, the chronological dimension of age has become somewhat less meaningful than it once was.

A Mind Experiment

Imagine that you’re sitting at your computer checking your email, and a survey request pops up in your inbox. It’s a market survey for a new professional association. You click on the link and the survey opens to the very first question, four little words: “How old are you?”

This question is followed by a small box for a two-digit number. It’s a simple question that calls for a simple answer.

But what if the question weren’t so straightforward?

What if the question were followed by a text box that would not accept numbers? What would you say?

Would you mention...

...your maturity?

...how old or young others think you are?

...how society and history have shaped your views and perspectives?

...how old you are compared to others on your work team or in your organization?

What else?

“Physical-cognitive age” refers to physiological changes occurring over time that affect people’s ability to function.

Because health limitations can have a big impact on the decisions that people make about whether and how they will participate in the labor force, to understand the intersection of aging and work, employers must take the biological dimensions of aging into account.

According to a recent survey by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, approximately two in five Americans who are 65 and older are in “very good” or “excellent” health.⁵ While most people past middle age experience some age-related declines in physical ability and in particular types of cognitive functions, these usually set in long after workers leave the labor force, are not uniform across tasks, and usually do not happen precipitously.^{6,7}

Some people find that certain physical and cognitive abilities improve with age (at least, up to a point). Employees of all ages may develop strategies that help them tap into their strengths so that they can perform at their best, but this ability to find ways to optimize strengths and to compensate for weaknesses typically gets better as we age.⁸ Typing is a classic example. As typists grow older, many learn to anticipate what is to be typed, thus compensating for slower eye-hand coordination and keeping their performance on par.⁹

Employees’ health-related abilities to function are often situation-specific. That is, these abilities may vary with 1) the demands of the work environment, and 2) the resources available in a workplace that can help employees meet those demands. Because demands and resources vary across workplaces, an employee’s performance might be lower in one situation and higher in another. In other words, performance might change depending on the tasks workers are expected to complete and on the access workers have to the supports they need to be productive. This situation-specific view of employees’ ability to do their jobs has sometimes been labeled “workability.”¹⁰

When we consider the physical-cognitive dimension of aging, it is easy to understand why there might be differences in the age at which a carpenter fits the description of an older worker compared to a scientist.

Implications for Employers

To accommodate physical-cognitive age in the workplace, employers should take three things into consideration:

1. the person’s physical and intellectual capacities
2. the tasks that need to be completed (for example , routine tasks; timed tasks; physical tasks; tasks requiring problem solving based on experience)
3. supports available in the work environment (for example, ergonomic work stations)

A range of options, such as technological adaptations and changes in the assignment of job tasks, can help employees compensate for challenges associated with physical and cognitive limitations.

“Socioemotional age” reflects an understanding of human maturation. This concept recognizes that some aspects of our lives seem to unfold in stages, each of which focuses on specific developmental tasks¹¹ and on changes that occur as we renegotiate our places in the social world.

Some aging experts contend that, with age, one’s view of the horizon shifts from “time lived” to “time left.”¹² This shift in perspective may motivate older adults to revisit the meaning and purpose they seek from activities such as work. For example, among the respondents to the Sloan Center’s Generations of Talent study who were 50 and older and working in the United States, 76.1% said that having challenging work that provided a personal sense of accomplishment was “very important.” Forty-three percent stated that making a difference in the community or the world was very important, too.¹³

Most experts who think about age from the socioemotional perspective stress that our experiences with different developmental phases are neither rigidly linear nor tightly connected to specific age ranges.

Implications for Employers

Employers might find that a number of factors affect employees’ perspectives about the meaning and purpose of their work. For example, employees’ interest in tasks such as volunteer community service on behalf of the organization or mentoring junior staff might be keener at some ages than others.

“Social age” is closely linked to age bias—a concern that both older workers and younger workers sometimes express.

How old—or how experienced or how out of date—do other people think I am?

This is the fundamental question associated with the notion of social age.

Social age measures the age that others gauge a person to be.^{14, 15, 16} In the workplace, this translates to a perception by workers (or supervisors) that fellow staff are older or younger than they really are, in years. Sometimes, of course, perceptions of social age hit the mark and match chronological age.

Age bias can result in two types of negative outcomes.

- **Direct negative outcomes** are discriminatory attitudes or behaviors that reflect the negative stereotypes held by others. For example, older workers might be overlooked for promotions because of age bias in the organization.
- **Indirect negative outcomes** occur when employees internalize the negative attitudes of their colleagues. That is, employees start to believe that they might actually be “too young” or “too old” to accomplish a task, even though they have the needed competencies.

Employees who are not members of the stereotyped group may also experience the negative effects of age bias. One Sloan Center study found evidence of this “bias by proxy.” Our Citisales study found that respondents, regardless of age, who perceived that workers 55 and older were less likely to be promoted were also less engaged by their work than colleagues who did not perceive this age bias.¹⁷ This suggests that workers of all ages—even younger workers who are not the victims of the perceived discrimination—may be negatively affected by age bias against older workers.

Implications for Employers

Sets of stereotypes are attributed to people in different age groups. Many of these stereotypes reflect age bias, and negative characteristics can be associated with younger workers as well as older workers.

Employers can help to counteract age bias by focusing on the assets that workers in different age groups contribute to the company. For example, employers might find it helpful to offer leadership awards to younger workers and older workers.

“Career stage” (sometimes called career age or occupational age) assigns a person’s age in the context of his or her career or occupation. This measure of age calibrates the person’s acquisition of knowledge, competencies, and experiences against a developmental yardstick. Although the progression of mastery varies from occupation to occupation, the concept of career age acknowledges that most of us progress in our work lives from basic to advanced skills.^{18,19} The perspectives of career development theories encourage us to think about the fit between work-related challenges and the support that people with different levels of mastery and job/career capacities need to meet those challenges.^{20, 21, 22}

We used to imagine career development as being a single career in a single organization. As noted by Sterns and Miklos, we expected young adults to choose their life’s work, get jobs, move “up in the organization, through a period of stability, and then into retirement”.²³

Today, traditional ideas about career stages are being turned upside down. For example, older adults who begin new careers may consider themselves to be in an early-career stage even though they bring extensive work experience to their jobs.

In a recent study, the Sloan Center asked a group of employees, “Would you say you are in early-career, mid-career, or late-career?” Of those working in the United States who were 50 years old and older, somewhat more than half (56%) said they were in a late-career stage. However, a substantial percentage (42%) said they were mid-career, suggesting that they felt they could benefit from additional experiences that would further develop their competencies. (It’s worth noting that a small share of this group said they were early in their careers.) Employers might inadvertently overlook the development potential of some over-50 mid-career employees if they assume that these employees are late-career.²⁴

Many employers appreciate the assets that late-career employees can bring to the workplace. The Sloan Center’s 2006 “National Study of Business Strategy and Workforce Development” reported the survey responses of nearly 600 human resources managers. Almost half (46.7%) of these managers felt that late-career workers “have high levels of skills relative to what is needed for their jobs” (but only 38.4% felt that this was very ‘true’ for mid-career employees and 21.0% reported that it was ‘very true’ with regard to early career workers). Similarly, 44.4% of the respondents indicated it was ‘very true’ that their late-career employees had established networks of clients (but only 29.6% felt that way about mid-career workers and 15.8% felt that way about early career workers).²⁵

Implications for Employers

Many older workers who are in late career continue to seek challenge and want to develop new skills and competencies. Old career development paradigms, which assume that workers reach a high level of mastery and then want to coast until they withdraw from the labor force, may be missing important opportunities to engage these employees fully.

TENURE [ORGANIZATIONAL AGE]

“Tenure” is commonly understood to be the length of an employee’s relationship with an employing organization. For most of the twentieth century, tenure with an organization was considered to be a solid indicator of a worker’s experience and competency. Because the dominant career paradigm (at least for men) was to stay with an employer for most or all of one’s career, with the promise of promotions to reward growing expertise, tenure often indicated status within an employee’s occupational group.

“Organizational age”—a more expansive concept—takes into account the relationships that an employee may also have had with a supervisor and possibly a department or team.^{26, 27, 28} The perspective of organizational age is important, because it accounts for the knowledge that employees accumulate over time about the organization’s history, culture, politics, and core operations.

Implications for Employers

While older workers may bring a lot of work experience when they enter a new job at a new organization, they are unlikely to be familiar with the culture and practices of the new organization. These workers are likely to benefit from an orientation to their new work situation that is tailored to their needs, taking their years of experience into account.

NORMATIVE AGE

“Normative age” takes into account a society’s expectations of age-appropriate roles and transitions. However, some norms constrain the opportunities and choices available to workers.

Societies as well as individuals have different ideas about what is appropriate for a young person and an old person.²⁹ Individuals tend to gauge their progress against their perceptions of these standards, getting a sense about whether they are “on time” or “out of sync.”³⁰

Social pressure resulting from age norms can affect our lives at work. For instance, at some workplaces, norms might suggest the appropriate (or inappropriate) age for an employee to assume supervisory responsibilities or to hold certain positions. One study found that employees who deviated from the age-based norms for their positions were less likely to receive good performance evaluations.³¹ Also, there is some evidence that social norms influence retirement decisions.³²

Age-related expectations and norms are woven into the fabric of societies around the world. Varying from culture to culture, there are both explicit and unspoken expectations about the “right” age for certain experiences, transitions, or roles (for example, going to school; leaving the home of parents; becoming a parent). Raw data from the Sloan Center’s 2010 Generations of Talent study yield the following sample of mean ages cited by survey respondents for specific life experiences, across the eleven countries the study covered (Botswana, Brazil, China, India, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, South Africa, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States).

Implications for Employers

Many have observed that we are in an era where we are setting aside some long-held assumptions about what it means to be an older adult in favor of new, less confining expectations.

Employers can help their older workers explore their potential at work rather than assume that all older adults should either start to wind down or leave the workplace at a certain age.

GENERATIONAL AGE

The current global economic downturn (see Table 1) may have had a profound impact on the elasticity of normative expectations for age and work. For example, young adults are having trouble launching their careers, so an increasing percentage seems to be settling for any job they can get until the labor market improves. At the other end of the

Table 1. Expectations for Age-Related Behaviors: A Global Comparison

Reports of age norms in different countries	Average (mean)	Country with lowest average (mean)	Country with highest average (mean)
The age at which boys become men	22 years	Japan 19 years	China 26 years
The age at which girls become women	20 years	Brazil 18 Years	U.K. 24 years
The age at which men become old	56 years	Japan 43 years	U.S. 69 years
The age at which women become old	54 years	Japan 42 years	U.S. 69 years
The oldest age that men should change careers, if they wish to	37 years	Mexico 27 years	U.S. 49 years
The oldest age that women should change careers, if they wish to	35 years	Mexico 27 years	U.S. 49 years

Source: Sloan Center on Aging & Work, 2011³³

age spectrum, surveys indicate that high percentages of older adults anticipate postponing retirement and/or working during their retirement years. For example, according to a 2011 survey of more than 4,000 workers in the United States, more than half plan to work after they retire—9% fulltime and 44% part-time.³⁴



“Generational age” cohorts are determined by birth years, the link to chronological age is clear. Although researchers may assign slightly different birth years to mark the span of a generation, they generally agree about the following designations for the U.S. population:

Millennials/Generation Y:	born 1981-99
Generation X:	born 1965-80
Baby Boomers:	born 1946-64
Traditionalists/Silent Generation:	born 1900-45

Over the past decade, a generational perspective has become an increasingly popular way to understand some of the changes in the age demographics of the U.S. workforce. The generational dimension places the aging experience in the context of time and place. It allows consideration of the impact that societal factors on a macro scale (such as economic circumstances, historical events, and dominant cultural values) have on the ways that large groups of people who are in a particular age cohort see the world and draw meaning from their experiences.^{35, 36, 37}

How important are generational differences at the workplace?

There is some evidence that the emergence of specific technologies over the years might create differences in the ways in which generations of employees like to approach their work.^{38,39} While some researchers have examined possible differences in work orientations expressed by people across generations, the results of these studies are mixed.^{40, 41, 42, 43}

Unfortunately, it is difficult to untangle generational age (that is, characteristic ways of thinking and behaving among people born in a given period as they progress through adulthood) from other dimensions of age. For example, a lot of observations have been made about the behavior patterns of “Gen-Xers,” but it is not clear whether these patterns are signs of a generation or of the normal course of maturation. Data from one-time surveys (as opposed to longitudinal surveys) cannot show whether any differences detected will last and become enduring generational characteristics.

The Sloan Center has used generational labels for a few studies, in part to help employers keep track of the groups being studied. However, in an effort to address concerns about generational groups that span decades, we created generational subgroups. For example, in our Age & Generations study, we found that Older Baby Boomers (ages 53 through 61) felt that they received less support from their supervisors than Younger Baby Boomers (ages 43 through 52) did.⁴⁴

Implications for Employers

Employers may want to keep some of the limitations of the generational perspective on age and aging in mind when they attempt to apply it to workplace practice.

1. Major events are likely to have different effects on subpopulations within generational groups. For example, the impact of today’s recession is likely to affect older Baby Boomers in high income brackets differently than those in low income brackets.
2. Because the cultural, political, social, and economic factors that affect generations vary across countries and regions, applying generational labels to people globally can be misleading.
3. The age ranges for most generations span two to four decades. It is reasonable to question whether people at the tail end of a generation would have more in common with those in their designated generation or with those born just inside the next generation.

RELATIVE AGE

“Relative age” acknowledges that we may compare our own aging experiences with the aging experiences of those around us, such as members of our work group.^{45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50} One’s relative age depends on the answer to the question, relative to whom? For instance, an employee working with people much younger might feel old, whereas that same person working with an older peer might feel young.

Does it matter whether employees work with people who are “age-similar”? One study found that doing so can strengthen the sense of identification among coworkers and, in turn, positively affect employee outcomes.⁵¹ However, a Sloan Center’s study found that older workers felt the highest level of inclusion when they were on age-diverse teams, whereas younger workers perceived the highest level of inclusion when they were on age-similar teams.⁵² Focusing on employees’ perspectives of their relative age can help managers understand employees’ experiences of inclusion—the sense of belonging in a workplace).⁵³

Implications for Employers

Employees’ perceptions of their age may affect their sense of competency and ability to carry out assigned tasks.⁵⁴ Employees who see themselves as old, regardless of their chronological age, may feel less effective than those who perceive themselves to be young or even middle-aged.

LIFE EVENTS AGE

“Life events age” refers to important transitional experiences that shape the roles we assume. Many of these life events, such as marriage or the birth of children, also connect us to our social world.

Anticipated and unanticipated life events can shape people’s experiences of aging. Transitions into and out of such events—for example, leaving home, getting married, launching a career, assuming dependent care responsibilities, or dealing with serious illness—have an impact on employees’ work lives and can influence the age employees feel themselves to be. For example, a 40-year-old who has recently adopted a baby might feel young as a result of the new status as a parent whereas finally receiving a long-awaited promotion might make that same employee feel old.

People who study life course experiences point out that not everyone experiences all life course events, nor do these events occur on schedule.^{55, 56, 57} For instance, not everyone gets married, although marriage is a normative experience in many societies. Moreover, although it is possible to calculate the “average” age when a population group has a given life course experience (for example, the average age of parents when their youngest child enters school), the range in age is wide and can shift as cultures change.

Implications for Employers

Recognizing how life outside of work can affect life at work, employers around the world have adopted work/life policies and programs.

Younger and older employees may have an equal stake in these policies and programs. For example, younger employees who care for their parents or grandparents have needs similar to those of older employees who care for a partner or spouse. Therefore, internal communications about employer-sponsored programs should reach out to employees across age groups.

 SUBJECTIVE AGE

“You’re only as old as you feel” is a saying embedded in American culture. “Subjective age” is the overall assessment a person makes of his or her age—the feeling of being young or old.^{58, 59, 60, 61}

Subjective age takes into account such variables as how old a person looks and acts, the ages of the person’s reference groups, and even how old the person wants to be. Not much research has been done to help us understand with precision which workers will perceive themselves as old, and why.⁶² Among workers who were 50 and older whom we surveyed for our Age & Generations study, slightly more than half described themselves as adults at mid-life and slightly less than half described themselves as older adults.

The media has picked up on comments such as “Sixty is the new 40.” Like many catch phrases, this one may be far-fetched. Those of us who are 60 and older seem to give it more credit than those of us who are 40! However, the observation may have some existential validity. Indicators suggest that in general, 60-year-olds today enjoy better health and are actively engaged in a wider range of activities than were their mid-twentieth-century peers.^{63, 64, 65, 66}

Implications for Employers

The age employees perceive themselves to be may affect decisions they may make at their workplace. For example, employees who feel “young” in their 60s and 70s might want to have conversations with their supervisors about opportunities for new roles as part of their work responsibilities.



 CONCLUSIONS

Forward-thinking employers interested in leveraging the talents of today’s workforce have begun to look at ways their organizations can realize the advantages of age diversity. Viewing their policies and programs through the Prism of Age framework, employers can make sure they are supporting rather than undermining employee performance and productivity.



Table 2. Facets of the Prism of Age

	Examples of employee experience	Examples of workplace-based program or support
Chronological age	Employees might connect their chronological age to eligibility for benefits, such as retirement.	Given changes in the experiences of aging, some employers offer options such as phased retirement.
Physical-cognitive age	Although younger employees may also encounter physical challenges, older employees are more likely to experience such physiological changes as eyestrain.	Ergonomic assessments and preventive wellness programs can help employees maintain productivity.
Socioemotional age	Older workers approaching the traditional retirement years might want to focus on the legacy they would like to leave through work.	Alternative approaches to career development could expand opportunities for older workers as well as younger workers to find meaning and purpose in their jobs.
Social age	There is evidence that stereotypes (positive and negative) are often attributed to younger and older workers.	Employers might address age bias directly (e.g., with workshops that examine stereotypes) or indirectly (such as engaging an age-diverse group in a strategic project that is visible throughout the organization).
Career stage	Emergent patterns in career pathways offer some new opportunities, such as working in retirement.	Programs such as phased retirement or re-careering options offer new alternatives to older workers who want to renew their connection to work during a late-career stage.



Tenure (organizational age)	Employers and employees no longer expect to have lifelong jobs.	Employers can view tenure as an asset and design innovative recognition programs. For example, employees with short tenures could be recognized for looking at projects with a fresh eye and those with long tenures could be recognized for their insights about strengthening organizational culture (or vice versa).
Normative age	Expectations surrounding age-related roles are in flux.	As part of their diversity initiatives, employers can challenge assumptions about age norms that create barriers for workers in age groups who, contrary to those norms, have the skills and competencies required for advancement.
Generational age	Technology seems to be the most salient marker of generational differences in the workplace.	Some leading companies have started to explore ways to capitalize on generational differences, such as offering bi-directional mentoring programs. In these programs, employees from two different generations mentor one another.
Relative age	Many people feel reassured when they realize that there are people like them in the workplace.	Employers may want to audit their organizations' intranet and the materials used to support employee resource programs in order to ensure that photos and language communicate the message that employees of all ages are welcome.
Life events age	Employees across a wide range of ages might share certain life-changing experiences, such as going to school part-time.	Sharing significant life experiences can enhance employees' sense of inclusion. A 40-year-old and 60-year-old who are sending their children to college for the first time and who meet during a brown-bag lunch might discover that they have a lot in common.



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ABOUT THE SLOAN CENTER ON AGING & WORK

Established in 2005, the Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College promotes quality of employment as an imperative for the 21st-century multigenerational workforce. We integrate evidence from research with insights from workplace experiences to inform innovative organizational decision-making. Collaborating with business leaders and scholars in a multidisciplinary dialogue, the center develops the next generation of knowledge and talent management.

Since our founding, we have conducted more than 20 studies in collaboration with employers, including the Age & Generations study, the Talent Management study, and the Generations of Talent study. Among current projects are the Assessing the Impact of Time and Place Management study and the Engaged as We Age study. The center is grateful for the continued support of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

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Contact us:
The Sloan Center on Aging & Work
140 Commonwealth Avenue
3 Lake Street Building
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467
Phone: 617.552.9195 • Fax: 617.552.9202
agework@bc.edu

Authors

Marcie Pitt-Catsouphe, *Ph.D.* is director of the Sloan Center on Aging & Work, at Boston College. She is an associate professor at the Boston College Graduate School of Social Work and also holds appointments at the Boston College Carroll School of Management and the Middlesex University Business School in London. Dr. Pitt-Catsouphe received the 2006 Work-Life Legacy Award from the Families and Work Institute.

Christina Matz-Costa, *Ph.D.* is senior research associate at the Sloan Center on Aging & Work and assistant professor at the Boston College Graduate School of Social Work. She has been a lead researcher for several of the center’s studies, including the Age & Generations Study and the National Study of Business Strategy and Workforce Development. Her research focuses on the productive engagement of older adults, work-family issues, and the response of employers to the aging of the workforce.

Jacquelyn James, *Ph.D.*, a personality and developmental psychologist, is director of research at the Sloan Center on Aging & Work and a research professor at the Lynch School of Education, at Boston College. Her research has focused on the meaning and experience of work in women’s lives, gender roles, and adult development. Dr. James is past president of the Society for the Study of Human Development and serves on the editorial board of the society's flagship journal, *Research in Human Development*.

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