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## Employee Age and the Impact on Work Engagement

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Employee engagement studies are popular in contemporary research because of the complexity organizations face in nurturing the performance and productivity of multi-generations of workers. The purpose of the current study is to assess association of age and dimensions of work engagement.

**Design/methodology/approach** - In total 181 participants completed the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) to measure work engagement including the dimensions of absorption, vigor and dedication as well as demographics. One way ANOVA and post hoc tests were conducted to examine the relationship between age and work engagement.

**Findings:** Employees 50 years of age and older were found to have statistically significant higher work engagement scores than the employees under the age of 50. Statistically significant scores were also found to be higher in absorption and dedication.

**Originality/value** – The workforce is aging with older employees becoming larger populations in organizations. Understanding how age influences employee work engagement supports human capital management strategy within organizations. HR professionals can also use the findings to develop targeted employee engagement to leverage the dedication and talents of older employees.

**Keywords:** *employee engagement, age differences, work engagement, human capital*

## Employee Age and the Impact on Work Engagement

### Introduction

More and more people are working past the traditional retirement age. Human resource professionals and organizational efforts are increasingly paying attention to how to engage older employees and leverage the talents of a multi-generational workforce (Jackson and Jenkins, 2014). This study purposed to explore the influence of age as a construct influencing employee engagement to better help HR practitioners to understand how to strategically develop talent management initiatives that preserves and advance the vest talent of aged worker.

### Age and Employee Engagement

There are negative stereotypes associated with older workers being poor performers, resistant to change, and overall less engaged. Despite such perceptions, prior studies have found employees over the age of 50 to be most engaged at work demonstrating emotional and intellectual involvement that motivate the employees to do their best and contribute to the organization's success (James *et al.*, 2012; Towers Perrin, 2005).

Employee engagement in general is broad in scope and is more than simply job satisfaction, employee commitment, and organizational citizenship (Markos and Sridevi, 2010). The age of an employee and the amount of work experience an employee has should increase the likelihood of engagement. Higher engagement levels from intrinsic motivation were found in employees with 10 to 20 years in the same position and approaching retirement (Dalal, *et al.*, 2012). Age and work experience may support employee engagement throughout changes in job descriptions, globalization, increased demands for technical knowledge, and changes in workplace cultures. This higher engagement may result in older employees rejuvenated to learn new skills and be optimistic towards future career moves (Saks, 2006).

Contrary to the findings of older employees having higher engagement, older populations of employees have also been found as the least motivated and satisfied in their jobs and organization (Baral and Bhargava, 2011). Older employees may be viewed as less motivated and less growth potential and assumed to be coasting towards retirement. In the preretirement phase which encompasses planning and preparing for retirement it is expected employees gradually reduce their investment in work and disengage (Damman *et al.*, 2013). Career plateauing is a key career issue in older employees that may affect the individual investment and motivation in work (Bown-Wilson and Parry, 2009). Older employees generally are thought of as being towards the end of their career where the perceived costs and returns of their work activities and investment in the organization are diminished therefore resulting in disengagement (Damman *et al.*, 2013). The current study measured work engagement using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) to determine how employee age contributed to work engagement

### *Hypothesis*

Does an employee's age influence work engagement is the question driving the current study. Based on the assumptions and prior research, it is assumed the younger employees should be more engaged than older employees. There are three dimensions of work engagement: vigor,

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2  
3 absorption and dedication (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). Assuming age influences work engagement,  
4 then age will also influence each dimension. The hypotheses are:  
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6 *H1*: The UWES work engagement score will be higher for employees under the age of 50.

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8 *H2*: The dedication score measured by UWES will be lower for employees over the age of 50.

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10 *H3*: The vigor score measured by UWES will be lower for employees over the age of 50.

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12 *H4*: The absorption score measured by UWES will be lower for employees over the age of 50.  
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## 14 **Methodology**

### 15 *Procedure*

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18 Individuals completed a survey instrument which included the UWES to measure work  
19 engagement and demographic questions to collect data on age and years of experience.  
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### 21 *Participants*

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23 A sample of 485 employees in a private sector organization which provides support to the  
24 aviation and aerospace industry were asked to participate. In total 181 participants completed the  
25 survey, a 37% response rate. The mean age was 57 years and the ages of the participants ranged  
26 from 30 to 86.  
27

### 28 *Instruments*

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30 The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) measures work engagement and consists  
31 of 17 items that measure the vigor (5 items), dedication (6 items), and absorption (7 items).  
32 Respondents evaluated their work engagement by rating statements about how they felt at work  
33 with seven-point rating scales (0 = never to 6 = always). High scores on the full scale and all  
34 subscales indicate a high level of work engagement.  
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## 37 **Results**

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39 Significant differences concerning work engagement were observed for the age groups.  
40 Older employees were more dedicated and absorbed in their work than the younger employees.  
41 No significant difference was found in vigor. One-way ANOVA and post-hoc tests (Tukey's  
42 HSD) were conducted to examine the differences between age and work engagement.  
43

44  
45 *H1*: A significant difference ( $p < .05$ ) was found in work engagement. Employees over 50 had a  
46 higher work engagement score.  
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48  
49 *H2*: A significant difference ( $p < .05$ ) was found in dedication. Employees over 50 had a higher  
50 dedication score than employees under 50.

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52 *H3*: No significant relationship was found between vigor score and age ( $p > .05$ ).

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54 *H4*: A significant difference ( $p < .05$ ) was found in absorption. Employees over 50 had a higher  
55 absorption score than employees under 50.  
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## Discussion

The relationship between employee age and work engagement was investigated, and found employees over the age of 50 had higher work engagement scores as well as higher dedication and absorption in their work than the employees under the age of 50. This is consistent with prior research that found older employees to have higher work engagement. Prior studies have also found older employees more dedicated and engaged than younger counterparts (James *et al.*, 2012; Towers Perrin, 2005); however, there has been much variance with some studies finding younger employees more engaged (Baral and Bhargava, 2011). Thus, age is an important factor in overall work engagement as well as the dimensions of absorption, dedication and vigor.

The older employees having higher work engagement is likely as a result of increased personal competencies gained as one ages and having more experience in both work and life which provides more resources to manage demands faced at work. Such resources can be translated into job satisfaction, performance and engagement (Bakker *et al.*, 2008). For HR professionals, the findings of this study contribute to further dispelling the assumption older workers are less engaged and may even consider recruiting older workers for particular jobs.

Unfortunately older workers can face ageism at work (Cuddy *et al.*, 2005), which may lead to lower levels of work engagement (Bayl-Smith and Griffin, 2014). Fewer than half of employers provide training and programs for an age-diverse work setting (Deloitte, 2014; Matos and Galinsky, 2014). As an HR strategy, organizations may benefit from employee training in age-diversity that highlights the strengths of each age group, such as older employees' ability to leverage such personal resources to promote an age-friendly environment supporting a better utilization of age-related resources.

Employee engagement also supports revenue growth in organizations. With older employees more engaged it may also mean greater revenues for an organization. The findings from this study as well as prior studies have confirmed older employees are more engaged than younger employees which can contribute to an organization's revenue growth and can support HR strategy in hiring older employees and leveraging older employees through various human capital management strategy means. A five percent increase in engagement results in a three percent incremental revenue growth, making the older employees' higher work engagement vital to an organization's bottom line (Aon Hewitt, 2015).

The benefits of older employees include their experience, professionalism, work ethic, lower turnover and knowledge. The resources gained through experience supports greater levels of work engagement for employees as they age. This provides a significant advantage for organizations in increasing organizational performance and effectiveness. As the findings of this study confirm, older employees had higher work engagement along with higher dedication to their work and absorption in their work. For HR professionals, the findings support human capital management strategy focused on leveraging an aging workforce to support the overall organization.

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