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Summary

Connecting Older and Younger Coworkers' Hearts and Minds

Discussing similarities and knowledge can help organizations avoid problems stemming from older and younger employees failing to work well together, according to an [Academy of Management Learning & Education](#) article.

Age-diverse coworkers are "less likely to work together effectively," said [Anne Burmeister](#) of Rotterdam School of Management. The tensions and low-quality interactions between older and younger workers can result in:

- Lower performance
- Higher turnover

How can managers spot signs of potential problems between age-diverse employees?

Burmeister recommended looking for "visible divisions among age groups—the younger employees go to lunch together, the older employees go to lunch together, they don't want to work together in integrated project teams, etcetera."

Older and younger workers often "don't know about the limitations they set for themselves about interacting with each other because they don't know each other well enough or they don't really appreciate each other's knowledge," Burmeister said.

While [diversity](#) training programs are popular, specific research on age-diversity training is scarce. So, she and her coauthors developed, then analyzed, training programs designed to help workers 15 or more years apart in age to connect. Burmeister and coauthors [Fabiola H. Gerpott](#) of WHU-Otto Beisheim School of Management, [Andreas Hirschi](#) of the University of Bern, [Susanne Scheibe](#) of the University of Groningen, [Karen Pak](#) of Tilburg University and the University of Applied Sciences of Arnhem and Nijmegen, and [Dorien Kooij](#) of Tilburg University wrote "[Reaching the Heart or the Mind? Test of Two Theory-Based Training Programs to Improve Interactions Between Age-Diverse Coworkers.](#)"

"We developed and tested two types of age-diversity trainings. **Identity-oriented training** focused on helping employees of different age groups overcome their differences and prejudices and feel better when they interact with each other. **Knowledge-oriented training** focused on helping employees of different age groups to become aware of the knowledge differences they have, appreciate the differences more, and be more willing and interested in exchanging different knowledge with each other," she explained.



During five hours of training at work over a 12-week period, the authors studied the effects of the training programs on 108 age-diverse coworkers from two large international companies in Switzerland. During the training, a younger worker participated with an older colleague.

- “In the training to increase relationship quality, we had the age-diverse coworker pairs sit together and come up with a list of things they might have in common, regarding work, education, family, and other things to reflect on. Then we had them discuss things they had in common that they didn’t know about. That facilitated the process of them feeling more similar to each other. They also discussed a list of words and phrases that are stereotypically used to describe the other age groups. For example, that older workers are *slow*, or *not up to date with technology*, or that younger workers are *entitled*, or *not hard-working*. They went through them and demystified these stereotypes.”
- “In the training to help knowledge transfer, we wanted to help age-diverse pairs understand what the other person knows, to be able to use that knowledge better, and be able to understand the value of the other person’s knowledge. First, we had the participants reflect on what they think they know—their own areas of knowledge. We gave them a list of specific types of knowledge, such as job-specific knowledge, social knowledge that helps to build relationships, political knowledge, technological knowledge, and so on. Then we asked them to reflect on the knowledge of their partner. Then we brought them together and gave them a “knowledge tree diagram” to complete together showing how each pair’s knowledge is related, and how their types of knowledge branched off.

“For example, an older employee might experience the creation of infographics as a cumbersome part of their job. Learning that a younger coworker knows how to use a sophisticated illustrator software and reflecting on the impact of this knowledge on one’s own work will likely increase the perceived utility of the younger coworker’s knowledge,” the authors wrote. “Providing age-diverse coworkers with the opportunity to learn about each other’s areas of expertise, and reflect on the usefulness of this knowledge for their own work, makes them more likely to appreciate the utility of the knowledge of their age-diverse coworkers.”

After the programs yielded success, the authors conducted a pilot study that showed that integrating the two programs can magnify the positive results.

“If you see these age divides on your teams or in your organization, then it is a pretty obvious problem,” Burmeister said. “Identity-oriented training can help people work across these perceived differences. And because it’s likely that employees don’t know about the upside of having age-diverse colleagues, it would help to use the knowledge-oriented training. That will help employees realize the value of their coworkers’ knowledge, and use that knowledge effectively. Even if there are no conflicts or problems, it might still be worthwhile to reap the benefits of both training programs.”