

Age and Work Characteristics: The Role of Personality

Tatiana Gulko and Paul Deakin, OPP Ltd

Summary

Given our growing life expectancy and the recent increase in mandatory retirement age, it is more important than ever to evaluate the effect of age on organisational outcomes. This study has found that age is a pertinent factor in influencing how comfortable people are with certain characteristics of the workplace. Furthermore, the association of age with certain personality traits may partly explain this relationship. Implications, theories and research developments are discussed.

Introduction

Average life expectancy is increasing, and with this we will increasingly come to see an aging workforce. It has been estimated that the percentage of individuals over the age of 50 (in Europe and Central Asia) will rise from 28% to 40% in 2050 (World Bank, 2011, cited in Lieberman, Wegge, and Muller, 2013). Recent elevation of mandatory retirement age will create a more age-diverse workforce. It is more important than ever to evaluate the way in which age influences employees' perceptions of job characteristics.

Personality is an important variable that influences perceptions of our workplace. How does personality change over the lifespan, and what are the implications for how we work? How does getting older impact both personality and work preferences? Are differences in work preferences in different age groups partly due to changes in personality? Answers to these, and other related questions may lead to shifts in how we design the workplace. This may lead to important improvements for the employee, thus fitting the DOP Conference theme of Investigating the Future of the Individual – Participation and Engagement. The interplay of age, personality and perception of the workplace is therefore explored in this paper.

Mean scores on the Big Five traits of Conscientiousness and Agreeableness increase with age, while scores on Neuroticism decrease (Soto, Gosling, John and Potter, 2011; Terracciano, McCrae, Brant, & Costa, 2005). The research provides an illuminating account of how age plays a role in personality. However, further analysis is needed, using a larger set of traits, and to see what the age-personality link means for organisational psychology. We therefore hypothesised that age will influence some personality traits, and not others.

According to lifespan aging theories (Baltes and Baltes, 1990), characteristics of the workplace influence individuals of varying ages differently. We therefore hypothesised that age will influence how comfortable people are with different job characteristics.

Method

Participants

A nationally representative sample of working age adults with an equal gender split (n=1212) was used. Data was collected via an online panel. Participants completed the 16PF questionnaire, alongside additional questions, including age and work preferences. Age ranged from 16 to 65 (mean = 39.08).

Measures

Personality was measured using the 16PF 5th Edition Questionnaire (Cattell, & Cattell, 1995). This measures 16 personality traits, and provides a more fine-grained analysis of personality than is given by the five-factor model alone. Use of this questionnaire will provide a comprehensive account of the interplay between age, personality and job characteristics.

Participants were asked questions about their work preferences (e.g. how comfortable someone would be working in a particular environment, such as an organisation which has clear role clarity or values the skills of the individual). Age was measured as a continuous variable.

Results

Linear regression was used to explore the relationship between age, personality and job characteristics, and to identify mediation effects. Significant results are presented below (Figures 1 and 2). Personality characteristics unaffected by age were Warmth (A), Dominance (E), Social Boldness (H), Sensitivity (I), Vigilance (L), Privatness (N), Openness to Change (Q1) and Perfectionism (Q3).

Figure 1: Age and Personality Traits

Personality trait	Relationship with age
Emotional stability (C)	0.13**
Liveliness (F)	-.17**
Rule Consciousness (G)	0.11**
Abstractedness (M)	-0.11**
Apprehension (O)	-0.12**
Self-Reliance (Q2)	0.19**
Tension (Q4)	-0.10**

** - Significant at the 0.01 level

Personality characteristics unaffected by age were Warmth (A), Dominance (E), Social Boldness (H), Sensitivity (I), Vigilance (L), Privatness (N), Openness to Change (Q1) and Perfectionism (Q3).

Figure 2: Age and Work Environment

Job characteristic (How comfortable would you be working in an organisation with the following...)	Relationship with age
Role clarity	0.11**
Emphasis on employee independence	0.13**
Emphasis on employee loyalty	0.11**
People from many different backgrounds	0.09**
Employees with responsibility for many different areas	0.11**
Insecure job, but with opportunity for high pay	-0.14**
Small organisation where everyone knows each other	0.13**
Employees viewed as individuals, with unique skills	0.13**

** - Significant at the 0.01 level

Regression analyses following the Baron and Kenny (1986) approach to mediation and Sobel tests showed the following mediation effects:

- Increased age leads to more comfort in an organisation where employees have responsibility for many areas: this relationship is partially mediated by higher Emotional Stability
- Increased age leads to less comfort in an organisation where jobs are insecure, but there are opportunities for high pay: this relationship is partially mediated by lower Liveliness
- Increased age leads to more comfort in an organisation where employees have role clarity: this relationship is partially mediated by higher Rule Consciousness and higher Self-Reliance; and lower Abstractedness
- Increased age leads to more comfort in an organisation with emphasis on employee loyalty: this relationship is partially mediated by lower Abstractedness

Discussion

Age shows a relationship with level of comfort with different characteristics of the workplace. Findings suggest that older people are more comfortable in jobs with: more role clarity; emphasis on loyalty and independence; responsibility for many areas; everyone knowing one another; people from many different backgrounds; and where employees are viewed as individuals with unique skills. Older workers are less comfortable in insecure jobs that have opportunity for high pay. With age, Emotional Stability, Rule Consciousness, and Self-Reliance increase; whereas Liveliness, Abstractedness, Apprehension and Tension decrease. Personality characteristics may also explain some of the age - work characteristic interactions, as shown by mediation effects of some personality traits.

Our results are consistent with previous research. Emotional Stability, Apprehension, and Tension are all facets of the global Anxiety factor of the 16PF. The findings that Emotional Stability increases, while Apprehension and Tension decrease with age, are all consistent with trends that neuroticism and anxiety show a decline as people mature (Soto et al, 2011). This is not surprising, given that, as individuals get older, they become more efficient in emotion-regulation strategies, and alleviate some of the negative feelings they experience (Helson and Soto, 2005). Employee age is negatively correlated with customer stressors, and use of emotion control and active coping are more effective in alleviating emotional exhaustion in older workers (Johnson, Holdsworth, Hoel, and Zapf, 2013). Our findings are also consistent with longitudinal data (Roberts et al, 2006).

The finding that older workers are more comfortable in an organisation, with employees being responsible for many different areas is consistent with work of Zaniboni et al (2013), which found that older workers were less likely to have turnover intentions if they had increased skill variety. Zaniboni et al (2013) propose that a theory called *socioemotional selectivity theory* (SST; Carstensen, 1991, cited in Zaniboni et al, 2013) accounts for such a finding. This theory posits that younger adults focus more on pursuit of future-oriented activities, whereas older adults are less concerned with career development, and enjoy a job that allows them to use their wide-ranging skills and get more fulfilment.

SST can also explain our findings that younger workers are more comfortable working in jobs that are less secure but with higher pay. A job with higher pay may appeal to their future-oriented goals, which may involve financial investments in their future. This study not only supports this theory, but can arguably add more dimension to it, by adding personality as a factor. The findings that personality may somewhat explain the relationships between age and work characteristics (e.g. that higher Liveliness may partially account for our observation that younger workers are more comfortable working in jobs that are less secure but with higher pay) suggest that personality plays a role too. It may be that it is not only situational and motivational factors (e.g. younger workers wanting to focus on the future), as argued by SST, but also the gradual shifts in personality traits that come with age.

This is a cross-sectional sample and causation cannot be implied. Furthermore, cohort effects may play a role, such that individuals born in a particular generation may have been growing up in a different environment, which may favour certain traits over others, and the effect, therefore, is unique to that generation (Soto et al, 2011). Nonetheless, the findings of this study are in line with findings observed by longitudinal studies (e.g. Roberts et al, 2006).

Conclusion

This study has found that age is a pertinent factor in influencing how comfortable people are with certain characteristics of the workplace. Furthermore, the association of age with certain personality traits may partly explain this relationship. Given the imminent age diversification of our workforce, knowledge of the way in which age and personality influence perceptions of job characteristics can help employers with attraction, selection and retention of employees, as well as addressing the challenge of motivating employees of diverse age groups, perhaps with help of appropriate job redesign or employee assistance programmes. Such knowledge can also help individual employees to ensure that they craft a workplace, in which they feel comfortable and fulfilled. After all, according to the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman and Oldham, 1976), job characteristics exert powerful influences on motivation and satisfaction.

References

- Baltes, P.B., & Baltes, M.M. (1990). Psychological perspectives on successful aging: The model of selective optimisation with compensation. In P.B. Baltes, & M.M. Baltes (Eds.) *Successful aging: Perspectives from the behavioural sciences* (pp 1-34). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Hackman, J.R., & Oldham, G.R. (1976). Motivation through the design of work: Test of a theory. *Organizational Behaviour and Human Performance*, 16, 250-279.
- Helson, R., & Soto, C.J. (2005). Up and down in middle age: Monotonic and nonmonotonic changes in roles, status and personality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 89, 194-204.
- Johnson, S.J., Holdsworth, L., Hoel, H., & Zapf, D. (2013). *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 22(3), 318-330.
- Liebermann, S.C., Wegge, J., & Muller, A. (2013). Drivers of the expectation of remaining in the same job until retirement age: A working lifespan demands-resources model. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 22(3), 347-361.
- Roberts, B.W., Walton, K.E., & Viechtbauer, W. (2006). Patterns of mean-level change in personality traits across the life course: A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. *Psychological Bulletin*, 132, 1-25.
- Soto, C.J., Gosling, S.D., John, O.P., & Potter, J. (2011). Age differences in personality traits from 10 to 65: Big Five domains and facets in a large cross-sectional sample. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100 (2), 330-348.
- Teracciano, A., McCrae, R.R., Brant, L.J., & Costa, P.T. Jr. (2005). Hierarchical linear modelling analyses of the NEO-PI-R scale in the Baltimore longitudinal study of aging. *Psychology and Aging*, 20, 493-506.
- Zaniboni, S., Truxillo, D.M., & Fraccaroli, F. (2013). Differential effects of task variety and skill variety on burnout and turnover intentions for older and younger workers. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 22(3), 306-317.