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Barriers and Enablers to the Multigenerational Workforce

Catherine Rickwood, Natasha Ginnivan, Meiwei Li, Mitiku Hambisa, Kaarin J. Anstey

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ARC CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE IN POPULATION AGEING RESEARCH

UNSW SYDNEY

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INTRODUCTION

Globally, lifespans are longer today than at any other time in history. This fact changes the demographic spread of populations and increases the proportion of people over 65 years old. In Australia life expectancy of men and women has increased significantly over the past 30 years. In 1991, men were expected to live to 74.4 years, compared with 81.3 years in 2019-21. Over this same period women's life expectancy has increased by 5.1 years from 80.3 years to 85.4 years[1]. The 2023 Intergenerational Report reveals that the population is ageing due to projected low fertility rates and rising life expectancies. This is reflected in the estimated age distribution of the population over the next 40 years whereby those aged 15-64 will fall by 3.5% to 61.2% and the population over 65 years will rise by 6.1% to 23.4%[2].

The demographic shift towards an increasing older population and extended lives has led to an increase in workforce participation by older people from 6.1% in 2001 to 15% in 2021[3]. This has a number of implications for the workplace, including:

- **i.** A more age diverse workforce with up to five generations potentially represented;
- **ii.** The need for people over the age of 64 to work for financial reasons;
- **iii.** The benefits of paid or unpaid work to people's mental health and wellbeing.
- **iv.** A need to redefine 'working-age population' - the OECD and Australian Bureau of Statistics define this as being between 15-64 years of age;
- **v.** The size of the labour pool (based on the current definition of working-age).

Unfortunately, it takes over twice as long for older people to find a job than young people and almost 50% longer than those aged between 25-54 years[4]. A recent CEPAR (2021) report brought to light several opportunities for accessing the ageing population including the need for employers to have better strategies to recruit and retain older workers. The 3i framework of I*nclude, Individualise and Integrate*, outlined by CEPAR researchers, Professor Sharon Parker and Senior Research Fellow Dr Daniela Andrei, provides a broad approach for organisations to manage mature workers[5].

The results and findings presented in this report contribute to the knowledge in this area. The need to understand the enablers and barriers for creating a multigenerational workforce across age groups and seniority is considered critical. For organisations to embrace age diversity it's essential that senior executives and managers know what's required for older and younger workers to effectively and harmoniously work together for individual and collective benefit.

Through an extensive qualitative research program that included interviews with senior executives and multiple focus groups with employees aged 25+ with a leading financial institution and national retailer, we're delighted to contribute to this field of research. Findings reveal that building intergenerational mentorship and training programs for managers and teams; identifying, understanding and addressing communication differences; and introducing recruitment policies and practices that encourage and support age diversity are some of the factors critical to championing a multigenerational workforce.

On behalf of CEPAR I would like to acknowledge and thank Challenger Pty Ltd and Dymocks Limited for their support with this project. There is still much to be understood and many changes to occur for the multigenerational workplace to become the norm. This report is one step towards that transformation.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australia's population is ageing with life expectancy amongst the highest in the world. Currently, life expectancy at birth is 81.3 years for men and 85.2 years for women. This is expected to increase to 87.0 years for men and 89.5 years for women by 2062–63 with most of those years spent in good health. This fact is considered to be "one of the major forces shaping Australia's future"[6] and has implications for the length of time people will either want or need to work. Given this demographic shift, the workforce now has up to five generations working together. This affects how organisations retain, recruit, train and manage age-diverse teams.

The cultural narrative about ageing and prevalence of age-based stereotypes negatively influences workplace employment strategies. Assumptions about age lead to explicit (e.g., a young, dynamic team/organisation), implicit (e.g., being older = poor health), and self-directed ageist attitudes and beliefs (e.g., "I'm too old to learn something new") that influence HR policies and practices as well as how we perceive ourselves and older people. The need for evidence-based insights on employee attitudes and beliefs about older workers and the perceived impact on team dynamics and relationships is critical for organisations to effectively adapt and develop age-inclusive workplace strategies.

Through the support of Challenger Limited and Dymocks Limited, this research makes a much-needed contribution to a small but growing body of literature on ageing in the workplace. A series of in-depth interviews with senior executives and several age-based focus groups revealed that **there is support for an increase of older people in the workforce**. A number of considerations and recommendations for organisations and policy makers to proactively pursue age-diversity initiatives emerged and are provided.

Key findings

The retirement age

Universally, across all interviews and discussions, the majority of participants stated that they would stop working ('retire'), between their mid 60s and mid 70s. However, most envisaged a transition period where they would work a reduced number of days, or would leave a corporate environment to consult, have their own business or work in a completely different industry.

Age agnostic discoveries

Irrespective of age, participants stated that they loved work because of the personal connection/ people, the sense of achievement and fulfilment, and the ability to learn new things and be challenged.

How we perceive ourselves and others creates artificial social categories based on differences that influence our attitudes and beliefs. During our conversations we discovered that there were many similarities in how participants of all ages described themselves including: approachable, collaborative, curious, enthusiastic, driven, and hardworking. In other words, there are enough commonalities where unity can be found before commencing a conversation based on difference.

Multigenerational teams – barriers & enablers

At the heart of this research was a desire to gain insights on what prevents or supports people from a wide age-range to effectively work together. The data revealed that insights could be categorised into four main barriers and four key enablers.

Barriers

1. **Ageism & age-based stereotypes:** Conscious and unconscious bias permeated all discussions. Numerous assumptions were made about older people that encompassed their capability, the type of work suited to older people, beliefs about what older people wanted and health-related age stereotypes.

2. **HR recruitment policies & practices:** Consistently the responsibility of HR professionals and recruiters was mentioned as reasons why older people weren't retained, trained or recruited. This included job advertisement wording and external recruiters' ageist assumptions.

3. **Communication differences:** Older and younger participants recognised that communication styles differed. Younger workers preferred digital communication, abbreviations and texts, while older workers favoured face-to-face or telephone conversations. This is not necessarily a reflection of digital capability but rather how different age groups engage with another person.

4. **Management skill & confidence:** There was consensus amongst participants that the manager would need a level of skill, confidence and experience when they were managing a much older team member. This impacts not only their ability to manage, but also the older team members' perception of their manager's capability.

Enablers

1. **Leadership:** Time and again participants mentioned the importance of active, vocal, demonstrable leadership for change to occur and age diversity to be more prevalent in the workforce.

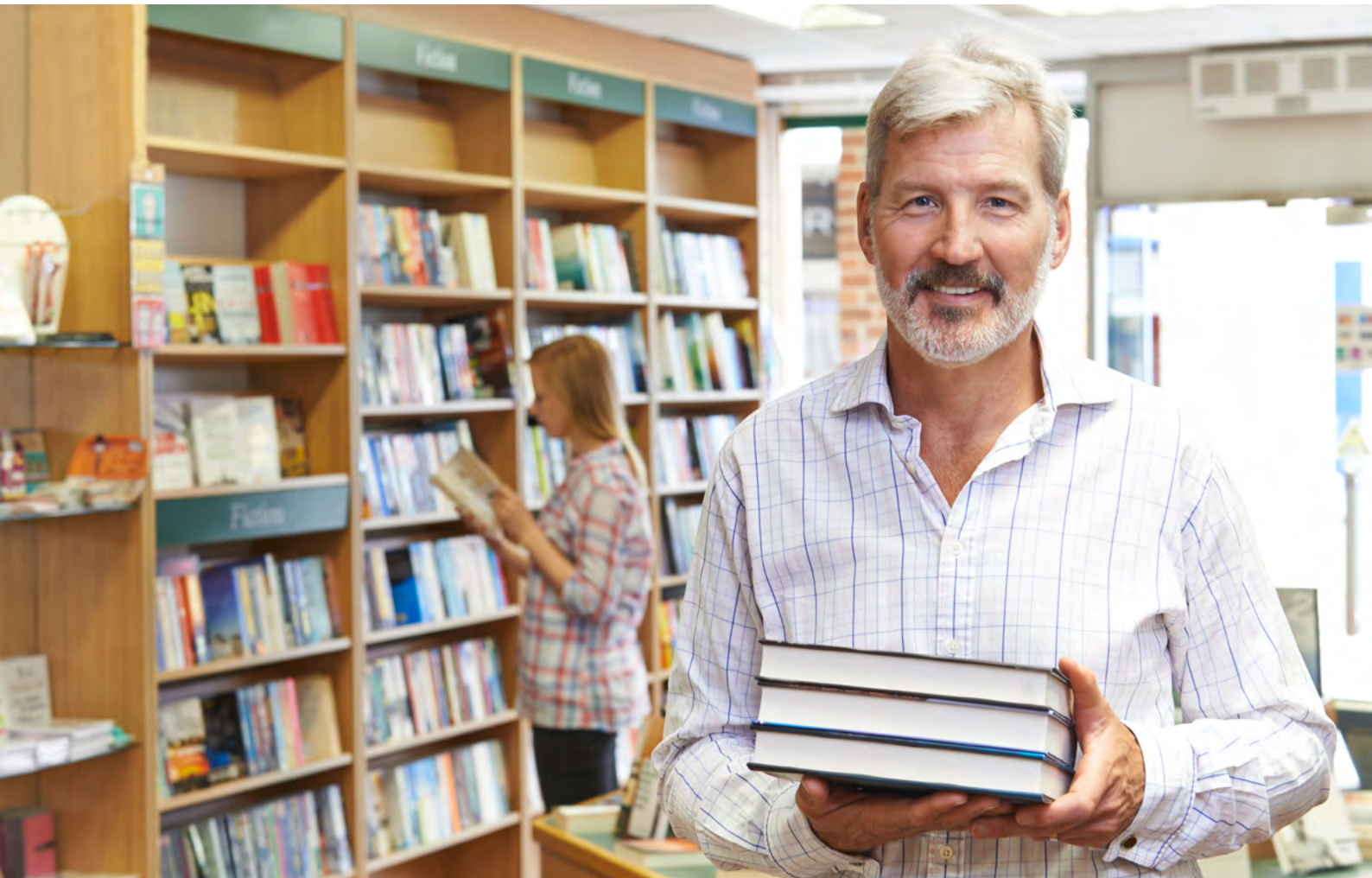
2. **Flexible work arrangements:** More part-time job descriptions, job sharing, flexible hours and remote working are all considered critical to accommodate the diversity of needs and preferences across the lifespan and generations.

3. **Leveraging experience & exemplars:** There was broad agreement and recognition that the experience of older employees was valuable. Working with an older person had a positive impact on a younger person's attitude towards recruiting older people and their inclusion in multigenerational teams. Equally, there was a suggestion of the idea that 'if you can't see it, you can't be it'.

4. **Intergenerational mentorship & training programs:** Support for older and younger workers is critical for age diversity success. Suggestions ranged from mentorship programs, technology skills training, and training on leadership and communication for managers.

Recommendations

Several policy, practical and research suggestions emerged. This included the need to redefine 'working age' from 15-64 years old to 15-75 years old; support for skills training/re-training; and the need for workplace interventions and initiatives to be age agnostic to avoid 'othering' of older or younger people. Overwhelmingly, it is essential for leadership to step forward and be vocal on the importance for action. This is followed closely by proactive and immediate changes to HR policies and practices that encompass recruitment, training and flexible work.



BACKGROUND

Teams and organisations have historically comprised people of different ages. However, lifespans today lead to an increase in the number of older people either seeking to remain or re-enter the workforce. Consequently, workplaces today can consist of up to five generations[7,8]. An effect of this is the potential for employees in their 20s, 30s or 40s to be working with or managing people in their 60s or 70s. In Australia, the median age of the labour force is between 33yo in the Northern Territory to 42yo in Tasmania[9] compared to the median age of Australia's population between 15-79 of 43 years. The Australian Bureau of Statistics defines the working-age population as being between 15-64 years[10]. Yet the qualifying age for a pension is 67 years.

Workplaces of the future will have more age diversity by necessity, whether that be due to labour shortages, or the reality of needing to fund a longer life. Organisations must adapt. When employees of a similar age or from the same generation work together, it solidifies those age-based or generational ties. However, making assumptions about or creating a team or workforce based on generational or age-based ties is limiting[11]. This changed dynamic and increased age diversity raises the potential for non-traditional team structures including younger managers supervising much older team members. Additionally, there is a greater likelihood of a larger age-span within a team as those in their 20s or 30s may find themselves working with someone in their 60s or 70s who is not their manager. Therefore, it is increasingly essential for HR practitioners, managers and senior executives to have insights on the barriers, enablers and interventions possible to support the non-traditional **multigenerational team** structure. For the purpose of this research, support for multigenerational teams is considered to be **'an organisation that actively retains and recruits workers over 55 years old'**. This is made evident through the HR policies and practices that support HR diversity and the actions of the Board and senior leadership.

Ageism, the prejudice towards someone based on their age, is largely directed towards older people. One reason for not employing or retaining older adults is due to a poor "culture fit" - a strategy designed to employ people 'like us'[12,13]. In her work on diversity, Professor Juliet Bourke reveals that diverse teams are 17% more likely to reach high-performing status, 20% are more likely to report high-quality decision-making, and 29% are more likely to achieve true collaboration[14]. Non-diversity, Bourke suggests, risks an echo chamber, which Professor Scott E. Page has calculated leads to an error rate of approximately 30%[15].

The argument for workplace diversity is evident[7,15,16,17]. The field of workplace interventions is still in a developmental stage and more research in real-world workplace settings is needed[18]. Previous research on age-diversity in the workplace has addressed work systems, performance and leadership as well as job roles[19]. Less research has been done to address how implicit bias, age stereotypes and ageism impact employees' self-concept and processes of self-categorisation within the context of their intergenerational working relationships[20].

The impact of ageism includes older people being discriminated against when applying for a promotion or a job[21,22,23,24,25,26]. Moreover, research has shown that ageism is also treated differently in the workplace when compared to sexism and racism[27]. In fact, a recent study showed that those who advocate for improvements on workplace biases concerning sexism and racism are in fact more likely to support succession programs that urge older workers retire and make way for younger employees[28]. Far less diversity, equity & inclusion (DE&I) initiatives about age bias have been implemented despite the pervasive problem of ageism in the workplace[28].

Building on previous research on social categorisation[28,29] our study will examine the influence of this for multigenerational teams in an organisational setting. We will focus on individual and interpersonal factors to explore generational perceptions[30,31,16] alongside the concept of a shared identity[32] and its potential influence on attitudes towards older or younger workers in the context of a functional team. Previous work has shown that social capital and social bonding contribute to collaboration and cooperation. Consequently, we will also explore the possible impact age-diversity may have on team experience[33,34].

An ageing workforce and its implications are an international concern[35]. Those organisations that are adapting to demographic changes are benefiting through increased profits and greater employee retention[36]. However, research shows how pervasive age stereotypes and stereotype threat contribute to barriers for older workers' engagement in paid work[37,38].

This study seeks to contribute to existing knowledge on workforce age diversity by exploring ageism, age-based stereotypes, and employee attitudes and beliefs on the inclusion of older workers for multigenerational teams.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

This project aims to explore the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours that prevent or enable organisations to foster more cooperative multigenerational teams.

This study sought to gain insights to the following questions:

1. What are the age-based perceptions of older/younger people in the workforce?
2. What are the barriers to age diversity and building multigenerational teams?
3. What perceived interventions or initiatives would enable multigenerational teams to be created and supported?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study used a combination of in-depth interviews and focus groups to investigate the attitudes and beliefs of older and younger people in two organisations: Challenger Limited, a large Australian financial services company; and, Dymocks Limited, a large Australian franchised book retailer.

Challenger Limited is one of Australia's largest active fund managers, with group assets under management of over $100 billion. The company employs over 800 people and has offices in Australia, London and Tokyo. Challenger's purpose is to provide their customers with financial security for a better retirement and in FY23, made approximately $6 billion in guaranteed payments to customers. Challenger was selected for this study as older Australians are their main customer base.

Dymocks has 50 retail stores and is Australia's leading bookseller in Australia, selling over 7 million books in 2023. It is a private, family-owned business with most stores owned and operated by franchisees. Dymocks was chosen for this study as the $411.5 billion retail sector in Australia employs 1.3 million people, accounting for 9.7% of the total workforce[39].

A total of 13 senior executives and two Dymocks retail staff were interviewed. Senior executives were excluded from focus groups on the basis that it would change the power dynamic in the discussion and potentially influence what non-executives would say and contribute. Five focus groups were held at the Challenger offices in Sydney with staff members over 25 years old. Two groups comprised staff between the ages of 25-44 and two groups with staff 45+. The fifth group was conducted with participants from the four groups who volunteered to join a conversation with people of all ages. No focus groups were held with Dymocks retail staff due to the difficulty of gathering a group of people at a mutually convenient time because of the structure of the workforce (permanent, part-time, casual) and the hours of operation (7 days a week with extended hours during the week).

Senior executive and age-based (Dymocks) in-depth interviews ranged from 30-60 minutes according to the availability of the participant. Age-based focus group discussions were 90 minutes, with the mixed-age focus group being one hour. A demographic summary of participants is provided in table 1.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Summary

	CHALLENGER #participants	DYMOCKS #participants
TOTAL	35	7
	GENDER	
Male	20	3
Female	15	4
	AGE	
18-24	N/A	1
25-44	18	2
45+	17	4
	PARTICIPATION	
In-depth interview	8	7
Focus group	27	0
	QUALIFICATIONS	
Undergraduate degree or higher	30	5

Online discussions were conducted and recorded using Zoom. In-person interviews or focus groups were recorded using an external recording device. A notetaker was present for all conversations. Software was used to automatically transcribe the interviews and group discussions. Transcriptions were reviewed by the facilitator and notetaker by listening to the recordings to ensure accuracy as language and context were considered critical for analysis. This eliminated issues associated with accents or colloquialisms that may not be correctly transcribed through an automated process. During focus groups the notetaker had documented the first few words of each speaker and allocated it against their name to ensure that comments could be correctly attributed to each person. This assisted with transcription review and eliminated any potential for comments to be assigned to either the wrong participant or the facilitator.

The computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) program NVivo 12 was used to aid data analysis. Initial nodes were determined based on the objectives of the research - identifying enablers and barriers to multigenerational teams - together with concepts and variables based on literature (e.g. implicit ageism; stereotypes; perceptions) and recurring themes or ideas that emerged from the data (eg. recruitment policies and practices; shared work ethic; supportive leadership).

RESULTS

In addition to the core project objectives, the qualitative nature of the study provided the researchers with an opportunity to have a broad ranging conversation about work. This included conversations about when participants thought they'd stop working and what they enjoyed about work. The feedback from this aspect of the discussion is presented first, followed by the self-perceptions of participants (how they describe themselves) and perceptions of either older/younger workers. Next, a summary of the factors that were considered to contribute to good or bad team experiences are provided. These insights provide context for the subsequent results on the enablers and barriers for multigenerational teams to be supported.

Retirement age

Given the average age of Australia's workforce, eligibility age for a pension and longer lifespans, participants were asked when they thought they'd stop working. The majority of participants in in-depth interviews and focus groups suggested that their 'retirement age' - the term used when asked about their stop work age - was mid 60s to mid 70s. A few younger participants suggested they'd stop working in their 40s or 50s. Many shared stories of parents or grandparents who were either still working or had worked into their 70s and 80s. Most indicated that they envisaged working a reduced number of days; others thought they would leave a corporate environment to either do something completely different or have their own business which may suggest that retirement is increasingly associated with freedom and choice about work rather than endless leisure.

I would hope to retire by thirty. Earlier the better. But realistically probably around 60, 65.

Female, 25-44

When would I stop working? I'd say 45. Yeah. Quit working at 45.

Male, 25-44

> *Probably 70 I reckon, just in terms of super and savings and might even have to keep going on. I have no idea. But it's not going to be 65 I know that for sure.*
>
> Senior Executive, Male, 25-44

I have all these grand plans of retirement, but I can't imagine not working. So I don't have a day or age or maybe there'll be a bit of a break. Maybe we'll do part time, maybe I'll go back to full time and I'll go work for a startup one time.

Female, 45+

Because I've got a mortgage and everything probably longer than I want to. I'll probably be working into my late sixties.

Senior Executive, Female, 45+

Appeal of work

To understand what made going to work appealing and provide further context to potential barriers and enablers to champion multigenerational teams, participants were invited to share one thing they enjoyed about work. Overwhelmingly, all participants said that they loved the personal connection/ people, and the sense of achievement and fulfilment that encompassed a sense of purpose, learning and challenge.

I do love being with people and sort of, you know, having unexpected things happen that wouldn't happen if you stayed at home. And so kind of that learning experience. I do love that.

Male, 25-44

I enjoy solving problems and helping other people to solve problems.

Male, 45+

> *I like working because I like interacting with people. I like the challenge. And then when you do something and accomplish something, I like that feeling.*
>
> Female, 25-44

One thing I love about work, I think it provides me with a sense of purpose … I've worked really hard through my career and studying and things like that. And so I've always enjoyed being able to sort of contribute. Solve problems.

Senior Executive, Female, 25-44

Perceptions

How we perceive ourselves and others affects how we relate to others. Social categorisation encapsulates these individual and relational perceptions. Perceptions we use to understand, predict and assess the behaviour of others[40]. The social categories we use are informed by factors including our experience, cultural background, social norms and life stage. Similarly, our attitudes towards others and the groups that we may assign them to are influenced by similar factors. Generational labels are a form of categorisation that groups people based on their year of birth. They generalise that group's attitudes and behaviour based on the cultural, social and world context and affairs during a particular period. This natural tendency to evaluate and categorise people and the associated use of generational labels influences our interactions. We make assumptions about people's capability and our ability to relate beyond perceived differences.

Underpinning explicit or implicit ageism and age-based stereotypes are perceptions - both how we perceive ourselves and how we perceive others. During focus groups participants were asked to note five words or phrases on post-it notes that they would use to describe themselves. Then, they were asked to think of five words or phrases that they would use to describe either an older or younger worker, depending on which age group they were in (i.e. 25-44 or 45+ year olds). Analysis of this exercise revealed a number of overlapping attributes across all age groups as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Intersection of self-perceptions between 25-44 y.o.'s and 45+ y.o.'s in focus groups i.e. where beliefs about oneself match across age cohorts

25-44 year old self-perceptions	45+ year old self-perceptions
Approachable	Approachable
Collaborative	Collaborative, team player, inclusive
Curious	Curious, inquisitive
Enthusiastic	Enthusiastic
Driven	Focused – works as the owner of the business
Hardworking	Hardworking
Motivated	Can-do
Solutions focused	
Energetic	Energetic
Flexible	Flexible
Friendly	Talkative/chatty
Problem solver, interested in solving the root cause, has some answers	Problem solver
Meticulous	Detailed, thorough
Organised	Versatile/organised
Positive vibes	Positive, optimistic
Thoughtful	Thoughtful
Diligent, efficient	Diligent

The extent to which self perceptions of 45+ year olds aligned with 25-44 year olds perceptions of older people revealed the following intersection of characteristics:

- approachable/sounding board/easy to talk to
- chatty/story-tellers
- experienced/wise/knowledgeable
- flexible
- respectful
- thoughtful/measured
- mature/old
- social/outgoing/friendly

In terms of 25-44 year old self-perceptions and the description of younger workers by those 45+, the characteristics that aligned were:

- curious
- enthusiastic/eager to learn
- driven/determined
- impatient
- energetic
- fun/humour
- introverted/quiet
- thoughtful
- fashionable
- knowledge/has some answers/new ideas
- open-minded

There were also numerous differences between how younger people perceived themselves and how people 45+ described younger workers and vice versa. Table 3 provides a summary of those variances.

Table 3: Variance in self-description and perceptions of those older/younger than self

25-44 y.o. self-perceptions	Description of younger workers by 45+	45+ self-perceptions	Description of older workers by 25-44 y.o.
Accountable	9 to 5	Bright	Big picture
Challenging	Balanced	Clarifier	Calm
Direct	Confident	Customer-led (VOC)	Can be narrow-minded
Easy going	Creative	Fair	Care too much about themselves
Humble	Entitled	Inclusive	Confident
Non-competitive	Fresh point of view	Innovative	Connection to the past/ stories
Resilient	Intimidated	Mediator	Cynical
Caring	Passionate	Passionate	Dislike technology
Commercial	Patient	Analytical	Honest
Empathetic	Always ready to provide input	Committed	Measured
Reliable	Apprehensive	Engaging	Not meticulous
Respect time	Doesn't want to do the hard yards	Financially focused on results	Not to be underestimated
Supportive	Fire and forget	Happy to admit when wrong	Old-school
	Helpful	Kind	Patient
	Needs a surprising amount of hand holding	Empathic	Quirky
	Over-confident	Team player	Relaxed
	Quick	Thorough	Resilient
	Rigid		Sounding board for anything
	Savvy		Supportive
	Short sighted		Tech non-savvy
	Smart/tech savvy		Trustworthy
	Unreasonable		A bit slow but it's endearing
	Wants to climb the career ladder without the process of spending time in the relevant roles to get there		Carefree
			Conservative
			Driven
			High level not technical
			Less socially active
			Serious more than fun
			Set in their ways/inflexible
			Slow
			Stable
			Stand off-ish
			Well-travelled

Team Experience

In order to gain insights on the factors that contributed to a good or bad team all participants, including senior executives, were invited to share their views based on personal experience and/or observations. The factors that senior executives and age-based focus group participants considered contribute to a positive or negative team experience were distilled and presented to the mixed age focus group. Table 4 summarises the points presented to the group and those they considered missing.

Table 4: Factors that contribute to a positive or negative team experience

BEST TEAMS	WORST TEAMS

Presented with:
• Non-political environment
• Collaboration
• Goal clarity & common goal
• Trust
• Empowered
• Supportive of each other incl flexibility for life circumstances
• Personal & professional relationships/ friendships
• Strong leadership
  • Management supports team during good & bad times
  • Management treats people fairly
• Being yourself and not pretending to be something that you're not
	Presented with:
	• Poor leadership
	  • Management by fear
	  • Culture of blame
	  • Dominating & controlling leader
	  • Short-term decision making
	• Ego-driven
	• Bullying
	• Micro-management
	• Ambitious person plays politics
	• Humiliation of individuals in front of others
	• Not being heard
	• Lack of respect
	• Rigid structure with no room for innovation or creativity
	• Lack of trust

Participants added: • Open environment • Honesty in tough conversations • Accountability • Humour • Expertise • Opportunity for career progression • Diversity – age, gender, sexuality, cultural	**Participants added:** • Lack of accountability • Narrow-mindedness

When examined in the context of the barriers and enablers for multigenerational teams, strong leadership, the ability to have personal and professional relationships/friendships, diversity, and the importance of collaboration, goal clarity and a common goal overlap with some of the comments made about considerations for multigenerational teams.

Multigenerational Teams

Data analysis revealed eight (8) broad themes or topics that could be categorised into enablers and barriers. First, the themes for enablers will be presented, followed by themes for barriers.

Enablers

Participants were invited to share their ideas for training and support that they envisaged would assist them cooperatively work within, and/or manage multigenerational teams. Participants also made suggestions in the context of the more specific conversations about less common team structures - that is, a younger manager with significantly older team members, or the idea of having a significantly older person on the team. Four themes were identified by participants as enablers for multigenerational teams to be supported

1. Leadership
2. Flexible work arrangements
3. Leveraging experience & exemplars
4. Intergenerational mentorship & training

Each of these themes will be discussed in turn.

Theme 1: Leadership

Different generations may have differing leadership expectations[41]. Thoughtful leadership and building a collaborative team that considers the needs of older and young workers enables employees to learn from each other and leverage their unique talents, experiences, and strengths. The importance of this was evident as participants cited their experience with leaders who exemplified qualities that led to a positive team experience.

But that's the case with any manager. It's not about their age; it's about their skills, experience, and how they do the job….if you find yourself either making a lot of the decisions … or if they're making decisions that you don't agree with, then that becomes the issue. It's not about their age …

Female, 45+

And so those skills that he's got combined with his traits, his personal leadership qualities, make him a really effective and strong leader that that you gravitate towards regardless of his age.

Male, 45+

> *Yeah, so I think you have to have visible, clear and unanimous support from the C-suite and the board ... We support it. We'll make mistakes, but that's okay. Like we really believe in this and we think it's going to be good for everyone. So, I think the leadership is critical.*
>
> Senior Executive, Female 25-44

Moreover, participants agreed that leadership was essential for the active recruitment and retention of older people.

… I think most managers would have mentors and their go to people. Obviously, the manager above you. So I would hope that that person can sort of give me some more understanding of what the older person might be going through, because obviously I'm not married, don't have kids, whatever, so don't know what that's like.

Female, 25-44

Oh, I think it starts with the leader. I think it is behavioural. I think that you might have the best policy in the world, but if you have a leader who doesn't value an older worker, it destroys everything.

Senior Executive, Female, 45+

Theme 2: Flexible work arrangements

Offering flexible work arrangements, such as part-time work, job sharing, flexible hours, and remote work enables employees greater choice to accommodate varying generational needs and preferences. This includes parenting, grandparenting, care-giving, side-gigs or volunteer work. Support for flexible work was evident throughout the study with participants of all ages.

Not enough corporate roles for part-time there. If you think about [it] most corporate jobs [are] full-time and I would say somebody who's 60 might not necessarily want to be working full-time. They might want to work part-time because their priorities are slightly different.

Male, 25-44

I just think the added flexibility of the workforce will make a big difference… So, I think that flexibility to work from home. I think also the flexibility to wind down and recognise that yeah, I still want to have a part in a team but I just don't want to work 60 hours a week. But I still want to have a valid… contribution to the team and work one day, two days, three days, four days or whatever it is.

Female, 45+

> *So, I was going to say, being open to job sharing, permanent part-time arrangements, things like that, the sorts of things that an organisation needs to do to foster an environment where it's more able to employ older people.*
>
> Male 45+

I think the second thing is and we're still working this Monday to Friday week, you know, 9 to 5 or 8 to 6 or whatever it is, that doesn't necessarily suit everyone. And, you know, I mean, I think that perhaps as people get older, you know, they're less likely potentially to want to work full time, and why should they?

Senior Executive, Female, 25-44

Theme 3: Leveraging experience & exemplars

The value of older employees' experience was a consistent theme. Similarly, the experience of working with an older person was shown to have a positive impact on attitudes towards recruiting older people and their inclusion in multigenerational teams as different age-groups are able to learn from each other.

But that said, like, now after these meetings, it's like, yeah, you would hire them [older people], but you also still have these sort of preconceived notions about how they're going to perform. So yeah, it's just … an education thing I guess.

Male, 25-44

You'll be able to leverage their experience … they've come through it all. Have done business cycles up, down, whatever. And for me, it'd be from the first time going through something where you just leverage them, their experience, their knowledge.

Male, 25-44

> *I think they'd bring into that team more than work. They'd bring in a whole… set of life experience, which can be a huge benefit to any team.*
>
> Male, 25-44

So, I think maybe people are reluctant to hire that old person because they don't know what it's like already to be working in that sort of dynamic maybe. I'm learning Excel from someone who is, like, could be my grandma …. Seriously, … it's been really great being able to work with that sort of person. … If I were a manager now hiring, I would be … definitely more open to hiring an older person because I have experience working with them, and it's not all bad.

Female, 25-44

Theme 4: Intergenerational mentorship & training programs

Establishing mentorship programs, buddying up younger workers, technology skills training for older workers, and training on leadership and communication for managers can bridge generational gaps and boost overall competence.

[I heard about a company] in Sydney … they take those experienced people and who are maybe a little bit far behind [with] the technology. They do a course to upskill them and re-feed back to the company.

Male, 25-44

There's a two-way street of learning that can occur very effectively between younger members and older members.

Senior Executive, Female, 45+

> *I think mentoring is a good example. A good example of learning through someone else is the best way you learn one thing if you can kind of make that happen.*
>
> Male, 25-44

Maybe like a buddy program. It's like the interns. The interns and the externs. We get a young person and an old person. They're paired together. So you teach them IT and they can teach you how they stay calm.

Male, 25-44

I think leadership programs where you … link team effectiveness and team success to a mix of skill sets. … The whole concept that sits under diversity is you reflect the community that you work in and your customer set.

Senior Executive, Female, 45+

Cautionary comments were made about introducing training or programs such as mentoring that are solely focused on age.

No [doesn't agree with mentoring]. Because you then call it out as being something different. And then I think you would kind of exacerbate the problems because then you feel like you're enforcing something unusual to happen. I think it just needs to be if someone is physically, mentally capable of doing a job … age shouldn't be part of it.

Senior Executive, Male, 25-44

Mixed aged discussion group feedback

Participants in the mixed age discussion group were presented with the main ideas for organisations to support multigenerational teams that were discussed in the age-based focus groups. They were then asked to rank these with the highest priority at the top. If there was an important idea they felt was missing they were free to add this to the list. The group were impressed by the ideas that previous participants had suggested and had nothing to add. Following some discussion amongst themselves, they agreed on the following ranking:

1. Business case that age diversity is beneficial for the business & teams
2. Recruitment policies & practices
    - Quota (for recruiters)
    - More part-time roles
    - Job sharing options
    - Tech training
3. Management leadership on the topic e.g. visible action similar to female leadership
    - Management training for leading age diverse teams
4. Experience working with an older person
    - Buddy system that pairs younger & older people together

> *So I feel like … if we can pull up proof points, case studies, evidence, you know, of … how it benefits the teams, the organisation, you know, the culture, you know, there's so much in there. But I think in corporate Australia it's almost like you have to have a business case. So … it's not just let's do it to be nice, but actually it's going to benefit your organisation in a whole bunch of different ways.*
>
> Senior Executive, Female 25-44

Barriers

Four themes were identified as barriers for multigenerational teams to be supported:

1. Ageism & age-based stereotypes
2. HR policies & practices
3. Communication differences
4. Technology gap

Each of these themes will be discussed in turn.

Theme 1: Ageism & age-based stereotypes

Conscious and unconscious bias was evident throughout the conversations. Consequently, numerous assumptions were made about older people across various areas. This led to five sub-themes associated with ageism and age-based stereotypes:

- Self-directed ageism and health-related stereotypes relating to age
- Capability of older people
- The type of work suited to older people
- Organisational culture
- Social integration

Additionally, participants mentioned the benefits of having older people in a team.

Explicit and implicit ageism and age-based stereotypes were evident through most conversations. **Self-directed ageism** and stereotype threat associated with revealing age was more prevalent amongst older women:

I don't even want to say my age. I'm 58 and they hired me three years ago at 55.

Female 45+

> *I do think it's … bad that like I do not disclose my age because I believe that I will be discriminated against.*
>
> Senior Executive, Female, 45+

Although I guess the big issue is that I'm probably self-conscious about my age. I don't like it disclosed because I think that I will be stereotyped. I do believe people pigeonhole based on age. And I've seen and heard examples where others have basically said, you know, they're on their way to retirement there. And implicitly, therefore, they're, you know, not risk takers, not innovative, their energy's lower. And so I have seen and heard comments of that nature. So I'm absolutely self-conscious about disclosing. I would not disclose my age … in any forum at work ever.

Senior Executive, Female, 45+

The current dominant narrative about **older age being synonymous with a decline in physical and/or cognitive health** is pervasive. Consequently, as people approach what they perceive to be older age, the idea of poor health and ageing is often internalised. Although there are health considerations in later life, stereotypes and internalised ageism overstates the degree to which it is occurring to most people.[42]

I don't want to get dementia. … I know that I need to keep using my brain to keep it.

Senior Executive, Female, 45+

… they [parents] both retired when they were around 65. And I think I would foresee health could be a problem for working beyond that.

Senior Executive, Female, 25-44

I mean, it'll depend on health and things like that. … there are certain appointments … like health-related appointments … how do you fit in with the team?

Senior Executive, Female, 45+

So I think you're sitting at a desk 5 days a week. It actually affects you. There's a limited amount of time that I can actually work in the evenings if I have to. I just think if you get older, you can't push yourself too far and I think as an older person … it'd be harder to do it potentially and maybe that's the perception of people who hire as well, right?

Male 25-44

There were also **assumptions** made about the **capability of older people**.

That could be a general perception of being judgemental about them not being go-getters or not so driven …

Female 45+

I guess the first thing that comes to mind is that they might be conservative a little bit … And I feel like there would be challenges around them accepting you know, some innovative way of doing things or following you as a manager on your idea.

Male, 25-44

> *So that would mean if I've got someone older on the team, what is their willingness to accept new ideas?*
>
> Male, 25-44

… a risk and maybe why some organisations don't hire older people is because the fear is they're not in tune with the times… if you don't have individuals that really understand, you know, social media, marketing and the digital aspects of what's happening in business and someone's still adjusting to, you know, using Excel and Word. … I think that's an issue … just from a business perspective that can present big risk.

Senior Executive, Male, 25-44

I think maybe the older people. I don't know if this is necessarily true, but like maybe they might not be as open to learning technology and, you know, keeping up to date. So, I don't know, maybe just more encouragement to just be like, it's okay, like you can do it.

Female 25-44

Older people are often kept at a social distance, particularly in language. Use of "them" reveals an underlying age-denialism as though the 'them' [older people] they're referring to would never be themselves. This was evident in a number of conversations, including when talking about the **type of work that may or may not suit an older worker**:

I reckon the advantages are you can give them tasks that you know need to be done on a consistent basis. Maybe others don't feel like. You know, they want to do more new, different things and change up. But these people are stable, focussed, want to learn how to do something, do it well … support that.

Male 25-44

One of the sort of obvious challenges is in a store … there is the physical ability to carry out all of the tasks that a younger member of the team would be able to carry out.

Senior Executive, Male, 45+

> *I think the biggest barrier would be technology. Really. All organisations use new technology that they might not be used to.*
>
> Female, 45+

Organisational culture and social norms were considered to influence attitudes towards older people. Participants suggested that this was evident in how the behaviour of older people was rationalised, as well as them being considered an early target during workforce restructuring.

Do you think it's more when there's like cost cutting issue and you need to, you know, cut staff and your older employees are probably going to be your more expensive employees and you know that sooner or later that junior … is going to be kind of ready to kind of step up so, you know, get rid of the older person.

Female, 45+

You could get someone cheaper [and] younger to do it. I think that's definitely the thinking …

Female, 45+

… like a fear would be I get made redundant in the next five years. I'm a 50-year-old guy with a lot of suitable experience …

Male, 45+

… age gets blamed for things that you probably wouldn't blame on age if they weren't that old. You'd just say it was something else. I think age becomes the kind of scapegoat excuse for people when it's not necessary. For example say a 30 year old manager forgot to update something on their rosters and you were like oh that's just, you know, they probably had too much on their mind or they were … out too much this week. The 60-year-old if they were in the same position we'd be saying, I wonder if they're getting on?

Senior Executive, Male, 25-44

Concern was expressed about **how older people would integrate socially** into a team:

The other side where you just don't have the shared experiences. You don't have the common jokes, you know … You don't have that [with] the person who's 40 years older than you. So, you can't really connect to that level or have the banter that you would with people your own age.

Male, 25-44

> *… the much younger people they generally are more, as I say, easy going and can have more fun. Right. And I think that is a positive thing because it will make the team a bit happier than all of us sitting there grumpy in our own ways.*
>
> Senior Executive, Female, 45+

There was some awareness that **older people could be an asset**, and occasionally a positive experience was shared.

Just like the knowledge that they can bring. So for example, I work with someone who is much, much, much older than me and she'll tell me like, you know, the history of what they used to do with super and how they used to process certain things. And it will just solidify my understanding for what we currently do right now, because I understand how things sort of changed over time. And I'm like, you can't just Google that. Like someone needs to tell me.

Female, 25-44

Theme 2: HR Recruitment policies & practices

Once the concept of older workers was introduced to conversations, participants commented on reasons why there was not a greater representation of older people in organisations. This ranged from remarks about organisational HR policies and practices, including job advertisement wording, to external recruiter bias and ageist assumptions.

In fact, it actually really frustrates me when people won't consider candidates who are … perceived as being older … They don't want to be the manager, the leader. They don't want to have that in their life. But they still want to contribute and they still want to work and exercise their brain.

Senior Executive, Female, 25-44

The resume goes … straight into the overqualified bucket. They are gonna wanna promotion in six months, they are gonna want more money.

Female, 45+

> *And if you're dealing with recruiters, the external recruiters, it's not just the internal but external recruiters, you will need to basically say, give me a gender mix, but also give me an age mix.*
>
> Male, 25-44

And if you're employing someone, you're like … Well, you're 58, so if you stick around for five years, then you're going to go into autopilot. So now 58's the danger zone … how many productive years am I going to get out of this employee?

Male, 25-44

It seems to be harder to know if there are other people out there because somehow the process of recruiting just doesn't help … elderly people to submit their CV. So, you already have a pre-selected pool. ... If you can't see CVs from older people, how can you employ?

Male, 25-44

I think it just needs to be if someone is physically and mentally capable of doing a job … age shouldn't be part of it.

Senior Executive, Male, 25-44

I think it's daunting. I think the whole hiring process for an elder person in any industry, maybe more so in the finance industry … The employer is asking you to produce the same amount of output as someone who's 40, 50 years younger than you.

Female, 25-44

Theme 3: Communication differences

Different generations may have varying communication preferences. For example, younger workers prefer digital communication, abbreviations and texts, while older workers prefer face-to-face or telephone conversations. These differing expectations across generations can lead to misunderstandings within teams.

I think it just depends on the communication that you use, because I think it's also the difference in generation. So, I can't understand like those who are 20. They're all using these words that I don't understand and I'm not that much older than them.

Female, 25-44

So, I think communication is one that's quite important because what you might say, they might not clearly understand it.

Female, 25-44

> *But it's just sometimes I notice clearly that the way the online interactions are, are very similar with the younger people and then quite different with the older people.*
>
> Female, 25-44

It's the communication piece … being aware of communication styles and how different they can be between older and younger people. … I'd much rather somebody call me rather than send me multiple messages on Teams you know. So just being aware of those different styles in communication is probably an important thing.

Male, 45+

Theme 4: Management skill & confidence

Participants were aware that having an older team member may be a challenge to a significantly younger manager. There was general consensus amongst participants that the manager would need a level of skill, confidence and experience in this dynamic. This impacts not only their ability to manage, but also the older team members' perception of their management capability.

But yeah, it doesn't worry me in the slightest [if they're younger], as long as they know what they're doing, because I would find it frustrating that if I sort of didn't feel that they were knowledgeable enough and had a wide enough lens to do that job.

Female, 45+

Yeah. Look, I think if … it's a leader then they'd probably have been promoted on … the merit of their capabilities or potential. So I like to think that there's an understanding and awareness of, … the dynamics with … having to motivate and lead someone who's a decade, two or three … older than themselves. There might be a little bit of initial anxiety or pressure. You know, how am I going to handle this with someone who is old enough to be my dad or mom or whatever?

Male, 45+

> *I think that that can be a bit of a worry about managing somebody older than you. Literally, because you're sitting there thinking, oh, this person's got so much more experience than me. That … can be a level of respect built into age, which you have to get past as a boss because … you can't just give someone respect purely because of their age.*
>
> Male, 45+

… it's more about the fact that you're looking for somebody that's going to fit the team and if you've got no experience of working with an older person, you're not going to bring an older person into the team.

Male, 45+

Some personality types may not be easy to manage because they may not accept [a] younger manager. They may say, I'm experienced, I've lived so many years I know better how to do these things. It could be a challenge for a manager to, you know, manage the outcomes of that person.

Male, 25-44

You know, there's a certain level of hesitancy from younger people towards older people as well. Or, you know, a lot of young people didn't want to step on their toes.

Female, 25-44

DISCUSSION

This study was concerned with gaining insights on the barriers and enablers for older and younger people to effectively work together in multigenerational teams that could comprise five generations. Key to this comprehension was the need to acquire knowledge on age-based perceptions and reasons beyond the financial for why people work. By doing so the researchers sought to understand both the similarities and differences between age-groups to identify the potential tensions or frictions for multigenerational teams in the workplace. As organisations are composed of single or multiple teams, participants were also invited to share their experience of ingredients they considered contributed to a good or poor team experience. This knowledge, combined with the specific conversations on multigenerational teams led to a number of key findings.

General insights

Despite the pension age in Australia being 67 years old, the majority of participants considered that they would stop working by their mid-60s, with some younger workers envisaging not working by their 40s or 50s. However, a number of participants suggested that they would work into their 70s or for as long as they could. This was particularly evident amongst those who had parents that were either still working or had worked into their 70s or 80s. Although this was universally referred to as 'retirement', it was common for participants to suggest that they would 'do something else' such as have a business, work in an entirely different environment or seek more flexible work. That is, the stereotypical retirement of endless holidays and relaxation was not mentioned. Retirement was considered to be about greater freedom in choice of work, including the hours worked, and how one integrated this into one's life.

Across all ages, the main reasons people sought to work were for their interactions with others, the challenge, ability to learn new things, make a contribution and solve problems. This collective attitude to work was supported by how participants described themselves. The common characteristics of those 25-44 and 45+ are detailed in Table 2. Examined in the context of why people work it's evident that the core qualities required to meet these needs are present in both age groups based on self-perceptions. For example, being collaborative, enthusiastic, hardworking, friendly, a problem-solver and curious were mentioned by all ages. There were also numerous traits common to how older people described themselves and how younger people described older people, and vice versa. There were a long list of qualities or characteristics where self-perceptions between younger and older people and their perception of the other age-group differed. Some are based on stereotypes, such as '9-5', short-sighted and ambitious, or narrow-minded, dislike technology and set in their ways. Other traits are more positive age-based observations including creative, savvy and passionate or honest, patient and supportive. These perceived age-based similarities and differences can be used as a foundation to initiate conversations and build interventions to support a multigenerational team environment.

Multigenerational teams: barriers

Beyond individual perceptions and social categorisations lies the need for people to work together. When the concept of having an older worker on a team was introduced several concerns and issues were raised. It was evident that ageism and age-based stereotypes infused many comments. However, this was interspersed with either observations or personal experiences of working with or envisaging working with an older person. There is evidence to suggest that women are more likely to experience age discrimination in the workplace than men[43]. The results from this research revealed that concern about one's age was more prevalent amongst older women. Whilst this doesn't confirm findings from previous studies, it does suggest that women are aware of a cultural bias about older women at work[44]. This cultural bias and social norms were prevalent throughout the discussions. For example, a number

of concerns were raised about a person's health as they enter their 50s and 60s. Assumptions were also made about the capability of older people, the type of work that may suit them, technological capabilities, their ability to be innovative and that older people may be less driven. Another worry raised was the ability for older people to socialise and integrate with a younger team. Would it work? This reflects both real or imagined differences in age and life stage. Differences in communication style and preferences for interacting with fellow workers were also raised particularly in digital or online communication. Organisational culture was found to have an impact on attitudes towards older people as it was considered to influence decisions when a company downsized. Age was also suggested as a reason for behaviour or simple errors that would be overlooked or explained in another way if the person was younger. These insights expose the degree of ageism and age-based stereotypes that influence attitudes and beliefs towards older people or that are internalised as a person ages.

Comments about the recruitment policies and practices of an organisation as an inhibitor to more age diversity recurred frequently throughout conversations with both Senior Executives and in focus groups. This was referenced in the context of the organisation itself as well as the practices of external recruitment companies. There was consensus that external recruiters were ageist which is why older people are not included in the pool of applicants for review and potential interview.

Multigenerational teams and greater inclusiveness of older people inherently leads to less familiar hierarchical structures whereby younger managers will have responsibility for leading a team that may include a person significantly older than themselves. Issues raised included the confidence and experience of a younger manager, the perception of a manager's skill by an older team member, and the willingness of an older team member to listen to a younger manager. This highlights the need for management training and support and should be overlaid with the factors deemed to contribute to a positive or negative team experience (Table 4).

Multigenerational teams: enablers

Despite the issues and concerns raised in the discussions there was unanimous support for multigenerational teams and a greater number of older people to be included in teams amongst both senior executives and focus group participants. However, the support and success of HR strategies and policies designed to increase the number of older people in a workforce were leadership, flexible work policies and practices, intergenerational mentorship, training and the experience of working with an older person. Alternatively, exemplars that enabled employees to observe harmonious and effective age-diverse teams would assist them to overcome age-based stereotypes.

At an organisational level, leadership that proactively and demonstrably encouraged and supported increased age diversity for multigenerational teams was identified as crucial. At a team level, the skills and experience of the manager were recognised as a necessary prerequisite for them to be respected by an older team member and conversely manage people who are significantly older than themselves. This aligns with one of the barriers being management skill and supports the identification of 'leadership' being a factor for a good team experience (Table 4).

Although a post-COVID world has led to greater workplace flexibility, it was suggested that more could be done. This included more job descriptions that are for part-time positions and increased acceptance and use of job sharing.

Lastly, intergenerational mentorship and training was strongly supported by all participants, irrespective of age, gender or seniority. The idea of quotas was controversial. Some thought it might work, and others disagreed with this idea or placed a broad caveat on any intervention designed to increase the number of older people in an organisation. The cautionary remark was an awareness that too great a focus on older people risks emphasising them as a problem or difficult to integrate into teams. It is for this reason that this study sought to understand the views of employees of all ages and was concerned with multigenerational teams (vs age diversity) and the intersection of relationships between different age groups.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

At the moment implicit age bias is 'the norm' from the sheer absence of policy on mature age workers and the ongoing reports of age discrimination and ageism. Changing culture and normalising multigenerational workplaces will take time, but is achievable with the right frameworks and continued communications with an emphasis on reframing what ageing, longevity and work can and will look like in the future.

Policy

Lead by example: Increase the availability of part time roles, job sharing and flexible work practices that enable people of all ages to work according to their life stage and other responsibilities, including caring for children, elderly parents, unwell partners or voluntary activities.

Measure: Introduce interventions that support greater age diversity and effective multigenerational teams. Measure the impact and publicly report on the outcomes.

Redefine 'working age': The ABS defines this as 15-64. This is incongruent with pension age eligibility and misrepresents the disparity between the median age of people employed and the median age of the total working age population. The 'working age' needs to be redefined, for example to 15-70 or 15-75. Ideally, reporting of the revised working age would be adopted by governments and reported in Labour Force Statistics and publications such as the Intergenerational Report.

Support skills training/re-training: As older people may want/need to continue working, providing employment pathways through affordable skills training is critical. This may be to either update technology skills and/or scaffold knowledge and build capability to support career transitions to work based on the individual's life stage. E.g. blue collar workers transitioning to office work; teachers, nurses or care workers transitioning out of the class room or health sector. The provision of subsidised University and TAFE courses that support reskilling for mature workers would be beneficial.

Practical

Leadership: Vocal and demonstrable leadership on the recruitment and retention of older people is critical for greater inclusion and increased HR diversity. Regular reporting of HR policies and practices and their impact in senior executive or board meetings and annual reports would visibly and publicly reveal the positive effect of age diversity.

HR Policies & Practices: A number of initiatives would positively influence age diversity and the effective integration of older people into teams. This includes:

- **i.** Introduce interventions that increase awareness of ageist assumptions and stereotypes.
- **ii.** A requirement that external recruitment companies provide a minimum of two suitable candidates above a certain age, for all roles (e.g. 50 or 55).
- **iii.** Review all job advertisement for implicit or explicit ageist language e.g. 'young, dynamic team'; 'go-getter'; fast-paced, rapidly changing environment; 'digital native'
- **iv.** Where feasible, increase the number of part-time roles and job sharing through a review of all current and future job vacancies.
- **v.** Include ageism in management and leadership training.
- **vi.** Develop intergenerational mentoring programs to support older and younger workers in their roles, whether that is for technology or management skills.
- **vii.** Evaluate the impact of increased age diversity on teams, including performance and wellbeing as well as economic and productivity outcomes.

Note: ***It is recommended that all initiatives are age-agnostic*** to avoid 'othering' of older people. Ageism training is beneficial for older and younger people as it increases awareness of the similarities and differences between age-groups and provides a common ground for understanding and the building of harmonious working relationships.

Further Research

Quantitative study: As an exploratory project this field of research would benefit from building on this knowledge by constructing a quantitative study utilising the findings and insights from this work.

Replication: As the study was only conducted in two companies, findings would be enhanced with replication in more white-collar and retail organisations to ascertain the broad applicability of results. Similarly, undertaking the project in an organisation with blue-collar workers would reveal the contextual similarities and differences.

International: Replicating the study in other countries would enable cross-cultural comparisons for the benefit of multinational companies seeking to create age diverse workforces globally.

CONCLUSION

Globally populations are ageing leading to an unavoidable shift in demographic structures. Irrespective of cultural background, gender, disability or sexuality we all age. The practical reality is that for financial reasons many people will need to work beyond the traditional retirement age of 65. Furthermore, work provides social connection, purpose and meaning and the opportunity to learn new things all of which alleviate age-related concerns associated with loneliness, depression, physical and cognitive decline. Inevitably workplaces will need to be reimagined to be more inclusive of older people. Multigenerational teams that embrace people in their 50s 60s 70s or 80s with managers in their 20s 30s or 40s will become more prevalent. This study is a first step towards better understanding what prevents and assists these non-traditional team structures to succeed. Age-based assumptions, stereotypes and a cultural narrative lauds youth at the expense of age. Proactively implementing policies, practices and strategies backed by strong leadership is critical for the harmonious workplace of the future. This report provides government, policy makers and organisations with evidence to build an age diverse workforce and be change agents for current and future generations in this important area. And change is essential to a better future for all.

APPENDIX

METHODOLOGY

Ethics

The recruitment process and emails were approved by the UNSW Ethics Committee.

The research team worked with the HR departments at Dymocks and Challenger for participant recruitment. Employees were invited to participate in the focus groups on three occasions. The HR team were provided with the recruitment email and email reminders. Two reminders were sent before being considered lost to follow up. Each reminder included instructions for participants to withdraw their consent to participate in future rounds of interviews or focus groups or from further contact.

Employees who wanted to participate were asked to send an email expressing interest to the research team. Interested employees were then sent an email with a letter providing details of the focus group or interview and a link to the Participant Information Statement in Qualtrics.

Discussion Guide

The discussion guide themes were developed based on work from Beaton et. al. (2008)[32], Birkinshaw, Hamel, and Haslem (2019)[45], Fasbender & Gerpott (2022)[46], Kunze, Boehm, and Bruch (2013)[47], North and Fiske (2015)[11], Posthuma and Campion (2009)[48], Turner, Oakes, et. al. (1994)[29]. The same discussion guide was used for all conversations to ensure consistency and support analysis, with the exception of the mixed-age focus group. The senior executive and age-based focus group guide was developed based on commonsense (eg. Share one thing you love about work; At what age do you think you'll stop working?; What support or training would you want if you were in a scenario of either reporting to someone younger or having someone older reporting to you?) and concepts from literature including social capital, social bonding and perceptions (eg. What's important to you when working with others?; When you think of an older/younger person, what are the first five words or phrases that come to mind?; You have a much older person in your team (say 60s, 70s, 80s) and you're their manager. What do you think that would be like?).

The discussion guide and content for the fifth group (mixed age discussion) was based on participant comments from the previous four age-based focus group conversations. Initially, participants were asked to share one thing they'd learned or found interesting from the previous group they had attended. Subsequently, the facilitator shared words or phrases that had been made in the earlier focus groups. This included comments about older or younger people in general; the idea of having someone much older on the team or reporting to someone much younger than themselves; and the tools or resources that were suggested to be helpful for multigenerational teams to be actively supported and encouraged.

Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), NVivo Version 12 plus[49]. Initial nodes were determined inspired by the research objectives informed by literature related to ageism, age stereotypes, perceptions towards older workers[50,51,52] and earlier research on age-diversity in workplaces[53].

Coding was undertaken in NVivo to identify similar concepts, ideas, recurring themes, and patterns from the focus groups and in-depth interviews. A series of preliminary analyses and queries were carried out including crosstab, word frequency, matrix coding, and node query[54] to identify the relationship between nodes within age group, gender and occupation. Following preliminary analysis, inductive content analysis[55] was employed to reduce the extensive data into concepts and subsequently identify the categories and themes that emerged from this examination[51].

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