

Wrong numbers

Why a focus on age can mislead
workforce development

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The chaos and opportunity of COVID-19

the working environment. The unprecedented containment measures used to curb the spread of the virus forced organisations to rapidly enact radical new solutions have all been implemented rapidly and at scale for an extended period.

THIS PERIOD OF disruption provides an opportunity to examine how employees of intense change. Such an examination can serve to lens to segment, manage and develop the workforce.

The Deloitte European Workforce Survey collected the opinions of more than 10,000 employees in seven countries across Europe. This article, the pieces, analyses the role age plays in the modern workplace.

Considering that the COVID-19 crisis has been



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It could be assumed that older employees, set in their ways and used to routines, would struggle to adapt to the rapid changes needed in response to COVID-

HALF THE RESPONDENTS below age 30 experiencing at least one change reported drops constantly as age increases, to the point that only one in three respondents age 60+ who experi-

Fear of the unknown

5b' Yl Ua]bUh]cb' cZ gdYW] WwUUb[Yg' ZcfWX' Vmi 7CJ 8!%- 'g\ck g' X] YfYbWg' between age groups disappear once factors such as the type of occupation or the

THE SHARE OF people reporting at least some
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CbYg[b]UWbhUFYUk\YfYc'Xf'Ya d'cnYgg'Ya' to have a harder time adapting is to a temporary loss of job or of being furloughed, particularly if their tenure at the current employer has been relatively short. This is possibly due to their fear cZ'cg]b[h'Y^cV'UbXh YX] W'hYgh YmM d'Ww to encounter with seeking another. This fear is not unfounded....³ Gi hU'UjbzU YX] YfYbWg' disappear once other factors related to the organisation or the personal situation are considered.

The value of trust

What emerges from the survey is that a key element in the ability of employees to explain how trust from leaders and colleagues were among the top factors imposed. If employees feel a legitimacy in their role, have a sense of belonging to the organisation and feel involved, they show a capacity to manage the situation.

HOWEVER, THERE ARE two areas where an age gradient emerges: an increase in autonomy and the assumption of more leadership responsibilities. In both cases, the likelihood of respondent increases. In particular, the increase in managerial responsibilities and autonomy placed upon young employees, often experienced for the first time, means many have struggled to deal with the situation.

Notably, younger respondents in organisations where older employees dominate the hierarchy and issue orders are more likely to report difficulties. Forty-three per cent below age 30 working in hierarchical cultures; only 27 per cent in the same age group in collaborative cultures. Older workers are generally higher up in the hierarchy, issuing orders that younger workers execute.

Intriguingly, this could indicate that programmes targeted at generations may have a misleading age approach, may not be preparing the workforce to adequately deal with the challenges of a changing work environment.

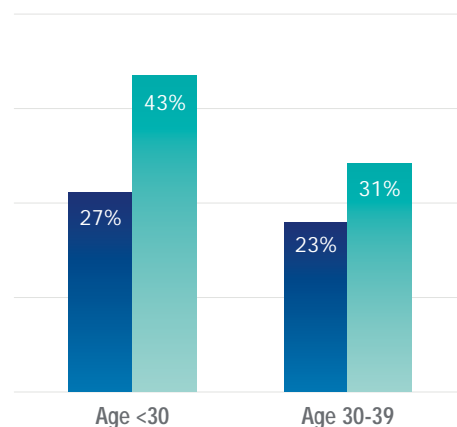
According to the 2020 Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends report, leadership development and learning are among the programmes most likely to be informed by age and generations criteria.

Yet, according to the European Workforce Survey, 'adapting to more leadership responsibilities' as the most important capability for them to thrive in the labour market post-COVID-19. When organisations use generations as a segmentation criterion, they could be preventing employees from acquiring these capabilities. They could also be preventing employees from collaborating.

FIGURE 3

Share of employees reporting some difficulties adapting to more leadership responsibilities, by company culture type and age

- Colleagues of different ages work often together, each bringing their own contribution and elaborating/building on the ideas of the other
- Older workers are generally higher up in the hierarchy, issuing orders that younger workers execute



Source: Deloitte European Workforce Survey, 2020.

WHILE TIME IS more relevant as age
increases, younger employees are more

The New Age workforce

The complexity of their workforce. Employees are not a monolithic block. Nor do traditional demographic characteristics such as age necessarily predict intervention programmes.

A MORE PROMISING APPROACH to understand and intervene with the workforce is to focus on attitudes and beliefs. As discussed in the previous chapter, employees are clustered based on their expectations and concerns about the post-COVID-19 work environment, three major groupings emerge.⁵

First, there are employees who see long-lasting changes in the work environment and are concerned about a deterioration in the interpersonal relationships at work. These we dub **SURFERS**. Second, there are employees who foresee no major shifts in their jobs nor have major concerns about the future work environment. These we refer to as **GROUND**ED. Finally, there are employees who see change coming and are concerned about their ability to survive in the future labour market. They fear rising insecurity and a reduction in opportunities. We call these **JUGGLERS**.

These groups skew towards certain age groups. For example, the **GROUND**ED tend to be older, engaged in administrative or technical occupations, and working in large companies (1,000+ employees) with an open-ended contract.

In comparison, the **JUGGLER** is more prevalent among younger employees in sales or customer service, as well as skilled trades and a significant proportion in small- to medium-sized enterprises, particularly in retail and hospitality.

However, while these groups skew towards certain age groups, they do not overlap. Looking at employees through these behavioural and attitudinal lenses provides a more meaningful tool to understand the workforce and to target possible interventions and strategies, making them more personal and dynamic.

For example, **GROUND**ED employees are less likely to see the need to develop new skills and capabilities (irrespective of age). If organisations want to reskill or upskill these employees, offering a rich learning curriculum will be pointless if it does not address the need for developing new capabilities.

Inclusivity as a competitive advantage

As stated in the 2020 Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends report (section 'Knowledge Management – creating context for a connected world'),

HOWEVER, UNTIL NOW, organisational policies and incentives have often used age to their preferences. But the COVID-19 crisis and the European Workforce Survey highlight how employee perceptions and needs are more complex than simple demographic delineations allow.

What enhances workforce understanding is encompassing the complexity of the employees that constitute that workforce: Do they work far from home? How long have they been working within the structure? What types of transport and infrastructure do they have access to? What are their main responsibilities? Were they trained to have the



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1. Author analysis based on data from Eurostat, Labour Force Survey (LFS) annual survey results on employment
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