Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 20, 1993

THE OLDER WORKER QUESTIONNAIRE: AN EXERCISE ON OLDER WORKER STEREOTYPES AND BEHAVIORS

R. Bruce McAfee, Old Dominion University
Claire Anderson, Old Dominion University

ABSTRACT

Few exercises have been developed that focus on teaching students about older worker stereotypes and behaviors. This paper describes an exercise that addresses twenty issues relating to older workers. In the exercise, students are divided into groups of three or four and asked to decide if a statement is either true or false regarding older workers. Ultimately, they present their answers and the rationale for them. The instructor then presents the correct answers and debriefs the exercise.

INTRODUCTION

Over the next forty years the composition of the workforce and the population will change rather dramatically. The percentage of the U.S. population over age 65 will increase from the current 12% to about 22% in 2030. The median age will increase by 6.3 years from 33.0 years old in 1990 to 39.3 years in 2020. The average age of workers will increase from the present 32 to about 40 by 2000 (AARP, 1990).

Stereotypes, and a lack of factual information regarding these older people, have been with us for a long time. Tuckman and Lorge (1953) found, for example, in a survey of psychology students that there was a high level of agreement that old people are unproductive, have to go to bed early, need a nap every day, are in the "happiest" period of their lives, and cannot manage their own affairs. Later, in 1975, the National Council on the Aging reported the results of a survey of 4,254 adult Americans (Harris, 1975). Old people were generally perceived to be useless and inactive, spending much of their time watching television or "doing nothing."

Research has shown that in simulations where identically qualified younger and older employees are depicted, younger employees are more likely to be hired, promoted, trained and evaluated favorably.
(AARP, 1990)

The exercise presented here focuses on older worker characteristics and stereotypes. It can be conducted in 50 to 75 minutes and is designed for use in various graduate and undergraduate classes that focus on age discrimination or stereotyping such as Human Resource Management and Organizational Behavior. The specific objectives are:

1. To familiarize students with typical stereotypes and behaviors regarding older workers and the managerial implications of these.

2. To provide students with factual information regarding older workers.

3. To provide students with an understanding of how erroneous stereotypes can be reduced.

4. To familiarize students with the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA).

CONDUCTING THE EXERCISE

During the class period prior to the class meeting in which this exercise will be discussed, students are told to complete the Older Worker Questionnaire (see attached). We devised this questionnaire to address 20 issues regarding older workers and students are asked to indicate whether each is true or false.

At the start of the exercise, students are divided into groups of three to four by the instructor. They are told to analyze and discuss each of the 20 items and, if possible, to arrive at a group consensus regarding the correct answer (20 minute time limit). After all groups have finished their assignment, the items are discussed. To facilitate this, the 20 items are divided up among the groups such that one group presents their analysis of Item 1, another group presents Item 2, another presents Item 3, etc.. The instructor presents the correct answers (see attached) along with an explanation after each group presents its answer. Students record the correct answers along side both their own and their group's answers and then make comparisons.

DEBRIEFING THE EXERCISE

One possible way to begin debriefing the exercise is to define the term stereotype. Cherrington (1989) has defined it as, "the process of using a few attributes about an object to classify it and then responding to it as a member of a category rather than as a unique object." After providing a definition, the instructor may want to discuss the issue of whether stereotypes are always harmful. Journalist Walter Lippman (1922) is said to have coined the term and stated that stereotypes are "pictures in our heads" that we use to comprehend the world around us. They result from a useful and not necessarily undesirable "economy of effort."

After discussing the concept of stereotyping, the instructor may want to address the issue of how to interpret the students' incorrect answers on the questionnaires. Do they really reflect stereotypes? Or, do they simply reflect a lack of knowledge regarding older workers? Or, did students miss the questions because of a reverse bias, i.e., they erred on the side of the older workers and credited them with abilities they don't have? There is no one answer to these questions. Indeed, it varies from student to student and from question to question. We asked students to reflect on the answers to each missed question and try to determine which explanation applies. The point we make here is that while not all-incorrect answers reflect stereotypes, some undoubtedly do.

At this point we recommend that instructors discuss the effect stereotypes can have on both the manager's and the older employee's behavior. The argument we make here is that managers act based on their perceptions and that their behavior in turn affects how the other person often responds. To illustrate, one researcher told a welding instructor in a

vocational training center that five employees in his training program had unusually high aptitudes. These five had been chosen randomly and did not know how they had been described. Nonetheless, their performance changed substantially. They were absent less often than were other workers, learned basic welding skills in about half the usual time, and scored a full 10 points higher on a welding test. These gains were noticed by everyone, including other trainees (Snyder, 1982). The point here is that the trainer's perceptions of the five welders caused him to act differently toward them which, in turn, caused them to act differently in return. Instructors may want to present other examples of research that demonstrate this concept also. Some instructors may want to digress at this point in the discussion and address the issue of stereotypes that relate to younger workers. This may "hook" the students and get them to identify more with older workers who are stereotyped. One could ask students to give examples of stereotypes that older workers have of younger ones. How do these stereotypes affect the behavior of these younger employees?

The issue of how harmful stereotypes can be eliminated or reduced is worthy of discussion. Students could be asked to suggest alternative ways. Alternately, the instructor can tell the class that the AARP (1990) suggests six possible approaches:

1. Develop workshops to heighten everyone's awareness about age stereotypes. Use cases and exercises to illustrate how stereotypes influence managerial judgments. Use reverse role-plays, where participants play the role of older employees.

2. Appoint several employees as advocates of older workers. Charge these employees with assessing the special needs of older workers and making policy recommendations.

3. Designate one or more employees to participate in conferences and seminars on industrial gerontology. Have these individuals report current research findings.

4. Encourage human resource management professionals to work with AARP, the National Council on the Aging, and other organizations concerned about older workers.

5. Keep managers informed about the Age Discrimination in Employment Act. Monitor decisions to ensure that older workers have equal opportunities for promotion, training, and career development.

6. Develop and implement a systematic performance review program. Provide older employees with honest performance feedback. Provide career counseling so that older workers can assess their career options.

Instructors may want to conclude the discussion of the exercise by examining the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) of 1967. The purpose of this act is to promote employment of older persons based on ability rather than age, to prohibit arbitrary age discrimination in employment, and to help employers and workers find ways of solving problems arising from the impact of age on employment. It applies to private employers with 20 or more employees, to all public employers, to all labor organizations with 25 or more covered employers, and to employment agencies serving one or more covered employers. The act applies to most individuals age 40 and over, including U.S. citizens working overseas for U.S. firms. The act prohibits discriminating against workers in hiring, firing, compensation, or any other aspect of employment because of age. It also prohibits indicating an age preference in notices or advertisements for employment and retaliating against any employees for complaining about age discrimination or helping the government investigate a charge of age discrimination. The Act allows an employer to use age as a bona fide occupational qualification. Instructors may wish to discuss some specific legal cases if discussed in the course textbook also.

EXPERIENCE WITH EXERCISE

We have used this exercise with three different groups, two undergraduate Organizational Behavior classes and a graduate OB section. In one undergraduate class, we followed the procedure described in this paper. That is, the instructor asked students to complete the questionnaire individually. This was followed by group discussion in which students discussed each question, reached a consensus, and presented their decisions. The instructor then gave and explained the answers and the exercise was debriefed. This is the approach to the exercise that we recommend.

We tried variations on this exercise with the other two classes. In one undergraduate section, we followed the same steps outlined above except we omitted group discussion of the questionnaire items. While this had the benefit of speeding up the exercise, it eliminated the ability of student's to hear the opinions of other classmates and to engage in consensus decision making. In the third class (graduate OB section), we shortened the exercise even more and changed its major purpose (to stimulate student interest in reading the textbook coverage of attitudes, values, and stereotypes). Students completed the questionnaire individually in class and handed them to the instructor. The questionnaires were scored and returned to the students at the beginning of the next class. No discussion of the answers took place but students could see which items they missed and determine the correct answers by looking at their results. Subsequently, four questions from the questionnaire were placed on the bottom of the next regular exam, unbeknown to the students. This was done to determine to what extent learning had taken place. Using the questionnaire in this way had the advantage of reducing the time needed to conduct the exercise to about 10 minutes. On the other hand, none of the four original goals for conducting the exercise were met.

As a final note, it should be mentioned that scores on the instrument were quite low and remarkably similar for all three groups (x=12.27, 12.57 and 12.85 correct out of 20 questions).

Note: Copies of the questionnaire, the answers, and the references are available from the authors.