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Emotional management in the workplace: Age and experience as key influences

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Emotional management in the workplace

Age and experience as key influences

Statistics show that populations are aging in many countries around the world. Growth in the number of older employees in the workplace is one major consequence of this demographic shift. As such individuals have become important assets to their firm, leaders should strive to ascertain how to maximize the value they provide.

How age is conceptualized determines its impact on attitudes and behaviors regarding work. Such as, involvement and satisfaction with the job and commitment toward the firm can vary depending on the way in which the employee's age is articulated. Past research has identified subjective age and social age among the different conceptualizations. But, chronological age and age reflected by work experience are often most relevant in workplace contexts. The two are often used interchangeably on the grounds that employees with higher levels of work experience tend to be older. But that assumption does not always hold. Older people whose career has varied might not be classed as holding extensive experience of any specific job.

Emotional labor: which strategy?

Growing importance is being attached to emotional labor in the workplace. Its significance is particularly strong within service industries and other environments which involve customer contact. The term is used to describe how employees manage their emotions at work in line with the company's requirements. Employees can use different approaches toward emotional labor, and age is perceived as a potentially significant determinant of what strategies are deployed.

Various job-related factors can influence emotional labor. Among them are time constraints and level of independence pertaining to the overall role or to specific tasks.

At work, employees are routinely faced with situations where stress can occur. Finding ways to minimize any resulting anxieties is an obvious aim. Management of emotional labor typically involves either:

- *Deep acting*: Which refers to emotions being regulated or controlled prior to their development. This strategy allows for changes in how a situation is perceived.
- *Surface acting*: The emphasis here is on being reactive as opposed to the proactive nature of deep acting. As emotion is regulated once it has emerged with surface acting, feelings are subsequently managed rather than being adjusted beforehand.

Deep acting is generally regarded as the most effective strategy for maintaining control and exhibiting the emotions that firms regard as most desirable.

Chronological age and work experience

Compared to their younger counterparts, older people recognize that their time is more limited. Widening their horizons is, therefore, not usually uppermost on the agenda. Being fulfilled emotionally is more important, so the natural inclination is to seek out experiences which generate positive feelings. This focus on positivity also influences how emotions are regulated. As a result, older employees will usually lean toward deep acting, as the antecedent orientation of this approach enables any negative feelings to be controlled before they take effect. Surface acting is by comparison more associated with suppression of true emotions.

In many contexts, it would, therefore, seem that propensity toward surface acting would lessen as chronological age increases. However, gender and specific cultural norms might mean a contrasting tendency emerges in certain situations. One possible reason is the difference in expectations of how men and women should express their emotions socially.

Positive emotions and attitudes will perhaps likewise increase as work experience accumulates. People with a longer tenure in a job tend to become more attached to an organization. Such individuals are also likely to enjoy benefits associated with their seniority, and it is understood that replicating this situation elsewhere could be difficult. Logic informs them that fewer opportunities exist at this stage of their career. The most probable outcome is an increase in commitment toward their current firm where they might already enjoy considerable autonomy.

This indicates that those with high levels of work experience would be motivated to further strengthen their positive relationship with the firm. They, thus, become more likely to use deep acting as a strategy for emotional labor. Not in all cases though. The level of independence which rises with work experience arguably results in older employees having more freedom to decide how to regulate their feelings. Some workers might not want to engage in any form of emotional acting. Total avoidance of emotional labor is a possibility in these cases.

The role of emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) is regarded as potentially affecting how chronological age and work experience influence selection of emotional labor strategies. This closely linked construct essentially relates to an individual's capacity for understanding and managing his or her emotions. It appears that EI grows with age and experience and those rating high in EI are typically more:

- in sync with their feelings and those of others;
- likely to form positive relationships and work effectively in team environments; and
- adept at conflict management.

People with high levels of EI are less inclined toward suppression. Deep acting is more preferable, as this enables them to regulate their feelings as required and exert more influence over the emotional behavior of others. Hence, it might be concluded that EI can play a significant part in ensuring that the favored deep acting emotional labor strategies are adopted.

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When deep acting is seen as important, firms should seek to identify in their ranks and/or recruit emotionally intelligent older employees with significant work experience. Chronological age might need to be the only consideration if performance of emotional labor is the sole aim. Older employees in general should tick the right boxes in those circumstances.

The obvious value that more mature workers bring to the company needs to be appreciated. Initiatives which positively influence attitude, motivation and commitment on such individuals are therefore important. It would make sense to identify the job-related factors deemed most significant by older employees and then act accordingly. Increasing the scope to engage in teamwork or mentoring are examples of effective interventions. Others might attach greater weight to flexible working or reward programs.

Companies could consider how individual traits and demographic variables might serve as antecedents to emotional labor. Some awareness of any additional interactive effects among the key factors would be useful too. Whether associations evolve over time is also potentially significant.

Comment

The review is based on: "The role of chronological age and work experience on emotional labor: The mediating effect of emotional intelligence" by Hur *et al.* (2014). Hur *et al.* provide a compelling account of the importance of emotional labor in the workplace. They identify age-related factors which best predict effective management of emotions and strategies which make it likelier that outcomes desired by the organization will materialize.

Reference

Hur, W.-M., Moon, T.-W. and Han, S.-J. (2014), "The role of chronological age and work experience on emotional labor: the mediating effect of emotional intelligence", *Career Development International*, Vol. 19 No. 7, pp. 734-754.

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