

The Value of Multi-generational Teams and the Role of Older Workers: Evidence from an Online Experiment

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Abstract

Stereotypes of declining productivity among older workers largely stem from studies measuring output at the individual level. Yet emerging evidence points to age-related advantages in wisdom, mentoring, and soft skills, suggesting that older workers' contributions may be more accurately assessed in team-based contexts. This study examines whether older workers hold comparative advantages in collaborative work through relational strengths and intangible competencies. Guided by social capital theory, human capital theory, and the resource-based view of the firm, we conducted an RCT with 354 participants randomly assigned to multigenerational or unigenerational (younger-only or older-only) teams to complete simulated big-box retail store tasks. Results show that multigenerational teams perform at least as well as younger-only teams, with preliminary mediation analyses indicating that older workers' soft skills are central to these outcomes. These findings challenge deficit views of aging and underscore older workers as underutilized resources, with implications for labor policy and organizational practice.

Keywords: older workers; human resource management; population aging; team performance; multigenerational teams; randomized controlled trial; soft skills

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1. INTRODUCTION

Population aging is a persistent global phenomenon. Increasing longevity and declining fertility rates have shifted the age distribution of populations around the globe—especially in the developed nations. Faced with a shrinking tax-base for public programs to support the growing older population, one of the feasible solutions for the aging countries to deal the lack of financial base is to *promote longer working-lives*.

‘Working at old age’ not only helps policymakers in aging countries relieve tax burdens but also benefits workers themselves. For one, working at old age helps boost older individuals’ financial independence and financial security (Gruber and Wise, 2008; Maestas and Zissimopoulos, 2010; Munnell and Rutledge, 2013). Existing literature has also demonstrated that working at old age improves non-financial gratifications such as aspirations for purposeful aging, social recognition, and re-inclusion (Deller et al., 2009; Scherger et al., 2012; Zhao and Burge, 2020). Indeed, a growing number of aging individuals are recognizing the benefits of working at old age and expressing desire to extend their working lives (Maestas and Jetsupphasuk, 2019).

Despite aging individuals’ aspirations, we still observe low labor force participation of older adults. Specifically, across the industrialized nations, the share of older workers aged 50 and over in the labor force continues to decline (Loretto et al. 2006; OECD, 2020). This may be because older workers’ continued employment is *decided primarily by the demand side*: Employers ultimately decide on whether to hire aging individuals, and this decision depends on how they evaluate the workers’ productivity.

The caveat here is that productivity—as considered by employers—is often measured at the *individual level* (i.e., independent work setting). Using this traditional notion of productivity, older workers are often deemed less capable than the younger counterparts. However, by not exploring other types of productivity, we may be dismissing important contributions older workers can make in the workforce. An older worker’s team-level productivity could be vastly different from his individual-level productivity.

Conjecturing that older workers’ strengths lie in facilitating team work and collaborating with other generations, we measure and compare performances of multi-generational teams (consisting of older and younger workers) and uni-generational teams (consisting of only young workers, and of only old workers) by conducting a pre-registered randomized-controlled trial on Prolific. In doing so, we explore specific roles played by older workers in teams by measuring the extent of soft skills they utilize in the team operations.

Our findings aim to shed light whether older workers hold comparative advantages in facilitating collaborative work, mentoring, and other team-work relevant soft skills over younger workers. In doing so, we expand the literature on measuring the performances of multi-generational teams in the manufacturing sector (e.g., Börsch-Supan & Weiss 2016) by exploring teams in services sector. Older workers' performances in services sector is important in a sense that this industry (1) often comprises a dominant share of GDP/employment in aging economies, and (2) includes less physically-demanding jobs than manufacturing or agriculture industries, which make this sector a viable employment venue for aging workers.

Our results are expected to carry important labor- and organizational- policy implications—encouraging employers and policymakers to rethink how older workers are utilized, supported, and evaluated in the workplace. Structuring jobs and teams to harness age-diverse skill sets could not only boost overall productivity but also extend the effective working lives of older adults. Such strategies may help mitigate fiscal pressures associated with population aging, facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer, and foster more inclusive, adaptive, and resilient labor markets.

2. BACKGROUND

Prior studies provide some insights into the hardships experienced by the aging workers themselves. Likewise, the question of ‘how to improve the labor market outcomes of aging workers’ is often answered by workers themselves. Aging workers report that those with deteriorating physical and mental health tend to suffer from low employability, and are more likely to be pushed out of the labor force (Aguila et al. 2021; Aguilar-Navarro et al., 2007).¹ When the primary skills of older individuals are more automatable (i.e., the machines are more likely to replace the skills), older individuals are more likely to walk out of the labor force due to reduced rewards to working and a worsening sense of skill-obsolescence (Lee, 2024).

Yet, workers do not enjoy as great agency in the labor market as employers in that employers primarily decide who to hire, retain, promote, or let go. Therefore, the hardships of older workers in the labor market must be assessed by understanding how employers perceive

¹ As noted earlier, while poor health lower older workers' employability, a number of recent literature has revealed that the mental and physical capacity of older workers have substantially increased over time—rendering more and more of individuals over age 65 to be capable of making meaningful contributions to the society (Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham, 2006; Quinby and Wettstein, 2021).

these workers. Unfortunately, literature reveals very little about the difficulties faced by employers in hiring or retaining older workers, nor are employers' evaluations of the value of older workers sufficiently documented. Few existing studies reporting on employers' age-based discriminations in hiring often engage in a qualitative discussion on the overall trends and ways to measure discrimination (Lahey, 2008; Marchiondo et al., 2016; Neumark, 2018; Stypinska and Turek, 2017), rather than focusing more on the drivers. Without achieving a greater understanding employers' valuation of the aging workforce, older workers may not be able to extend their working lives even if many desire to do so (Maestas and Jetsupphasuk, 2019).

One of the most persistent stereotypes employers hold toward ageing employees, evidenced in the literature, is that older workers are *less productive and costlier to retain than the younger counterparts* (Roscigno et al., 2007). Indeed, much of the existing literature exploring the employers' perception of older employees emphasize declining physical capacity or the depreciation of technical skills (Fritzsche et al., 2014; Godinho et al., 2016; Kenny et al., 2008). At the same time, less attention has been paid to the unique values older workers bring to organizations. Case in point, recent research shows that wisdom, foresight, mentoring capacity improve with age (Bal et al., 2015; Chiesa et al., 2016), and that older workers' accumulated experience, relational strengths, and intangible competencies may generate positive spillovers at the team levels (Azoulay et al., 2020; Börsch-Supan & Weiss 2016).

Yet, as evaluating older workers' productivity in team operations is a relatively new idea in the literature, empirical research is limited. In one study, Börsch-Supan and Weiss (2016) used data on truck production from Mercedes, in the automobile manufacturing sector, to examine the performances of unigenerational- and multigenerational- teams. The authors found that multigenerational teams performed better, reporting that the multigenerational teams produced trucks with less human errors than the unigenerational counterparts. Despite its important contributions, this study's experiment-based design has a limited transferability—precluding us from knowing how teams of different generational mixes perform in non-manufacturing industries. Building on Börsch-Supan and Weiss (2016)'s study, we evaluate the performances of unigenerational and multigenerational teams in services sector by simulating a big box retail store tasks in an online experiment. Exploring how older workers perform in service sector is especially relevant in that service sector jobs are often more suitable for older individuals, who may prefer less physically demanding work over manual labor—making this industry a key outlet for their continued employment.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

We conjecture that older workers' accumulated experience, relational strengths, and intangible competencies may generate positive spillovers at the team levels. To frame this inquiry, we draw on three complementary theoretical perspectives—social capital theory, human capital theory, and the resource-based view of the firm—to develop hypotheses about how older workers' contributions can be understood and measured.

Social Capital and Team Composition. *Social Capital theory* emphasizes that networks, trust, and interpersonal relationships generate resources that facilitate cooperation and collective outcomes (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). In workplace settings, we posit that workers' social capital adds relational value—which, in turn, help strengthen norms of reciprocity, sustain collaboration, and reduce conflict. Older workers, who often possess relational experience, may promote cohesion and cooperation particularly in multigenerational teams where differences in work styles and expectations might otherwise cause friction. By fostering trust and enhancing the team atmosphere, older workers' social capital can strengthen overall performance. From this, we formulate a hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (Team Composition): Multigenerational teams (both old and young) can outperform—or at least perform on par with—teams composed exclusively of younger workers by leveraging older workers' relational skills

Human Capital, Resource-Based View, and the Value of Soft Skills. Conventional *Human Capital theory* (Becker, 1964; Mincer, 1974) frames productivity as a function of individuals' stock of skills, which are assumed to depreciate with age. We challenge this view by recognizing that certain forms of human capital—such as wisdom, tacit knowledge, and soft skills—often increase in value as workers age. These competencies enhance communication, judgment, and collaboration in ways that are not easily reproduced by younger colleagues. The concept of the *Resource-Based View of the Firm* (RBV) further underscores the strategic significance of such skills. According to the RBV, firms gain sustainable competitive advantage from resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991). Older workers' soft skills meet these conditions: They are intangible, context-specific, and resistant to automation or imitation. Taken together, insights from Human Capital theory and the RBV suggest that older workers'

soft skills represent enduring and strategically advantageous resources for organizations.

From these observations, we formulate another hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 (Soft Skills): Older workers' soft skills translate into comparative advantages, and can help boost outcomes when utilized in team operations.

3. DATA AND METHODS

We draw on data from a preregistered randomized controlled trial (RCT) conducted online through an online platform, *Prolific*. We recruited participants via Prolific and randomly assigned them to multigenerational teams or to unigenerational teams. The analytic sample consists of 354 participants, organized into 177 two-person teams. Of these, 178 participants were assigned to multigenerational teams (comprising one younger and one older worker), 102 participants were assigned to unigenerational teams composed exclusively of younger workers, and 74 participants were assigned to unigenerational teams composed exclusively of older workers. Of note, we defined “younger” and “older” participants based on a threshold of 55 years of age. The study protocol was preregistered in advance to ensure transparency of design and reduce risks of ex post specification searching. All participants were anonymized and identified using masked unique IDs to safeguard confidentiality.

3.1 Experimental Design

The experimental task was designed to simulate decision-making and coordination challenges in a big-box retail environment. Teams were required to complete two sequential activities: (1) identifying inventory discrepancies, and (2) proposing a restocking plan aimed at maximizing profit under resource constraints. These tasks required both analytical problem-solving and collaborative decision-making, thereby allowing us to observe how team composition influences performance in contexts with clear business relevance. The main intervention consisted of randomly assigning participants to teams by age composition. Randomization ensured that pre-existing individual-level differences were not systematically correlated with team assignment, allowing us to isolate the effects of team composition.

3.2 Outcome Measures

Our primary outcomes are team-level performance indicators (KPIs), which include measures of accuracy in identifying inventory discrepancies, decision quality in formulating restocking plans, and cost efficiency in resource allocation. These outcomes capture both the technical and strategic dimensions of team performance. In addition, we administered pre-

and post-experiment surveys to capture individual preferences regarding teamwork and teammate age composition. This design enables us to assess whether exposure to different types of teams shapes participants' stated attitudes toward working with older or younger partners.

3.3 Mediator Variables

To evaluate the mechanisms underlying team outcomes, we investigated the specific contributions of older team members by measuring a broad set of soft skills—operationalized as mediator variables: attentiveness, leadership, conflict resolution, empathy, communication abilities, and problem solving abilities. These variables allow us to assess whether older workers' contributions to team outcomes operate through relational and interpersonal competencies rather than solely through technical skills. By incorporating these mediators, the study design enables a more nuanced test of the theoretical framework linking social capital, human capital, and resource-based advantages to team performance.

3.4 Estimation Strategy

Conjecturing that older workers' strengths in soft skills enhance their productivity in team operations—and that these contributions may be more evident when measured at the team level rather than the individual level—we employ a series of complementary estimation strategies. First, we use analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare the main productivity outcome measures across different team types in order to identify group-level differences. We subsequently conduct ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions to estimate the relationship between the outcome variables and team types, allowing us to control for covariates and further test the robustness of the observed patterns.

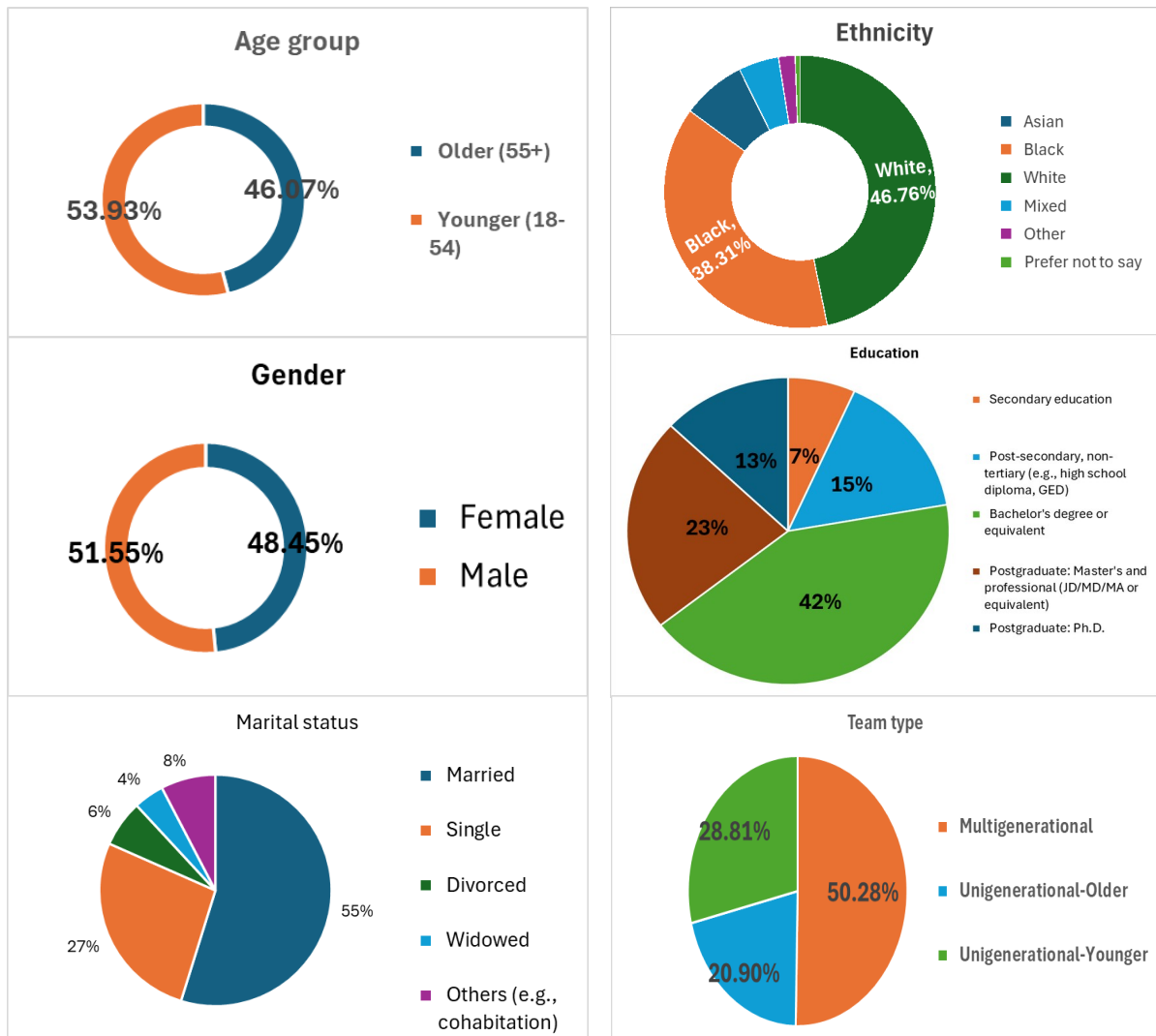
In the next step, we apply difference-in-differences estimation to examine the impact of team composition and the experimental intervention on participants' perceptions of working in teams and of collaborating with coworkers from different age groups. This design enables us to capture the causal effect of multigenerational versus unigenerational team structures on attitudinal shifts regarding teamwork and age-diverse collaboration.

Lastly, we incorporate text analyses using large language models (LLMs) to systematically identify and measure the extent to which older workers' soft skills were leveraged in ways that contribute to team successes and/or failures. These insights are integrated into Karlson–Holm–Breen (KHB) mediation analyses, which allow us to decompose the total effect of team composition into direct and indirect components, thereby isolating the mediating role of soft skills in explaining team-level outcomes.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Summary Statistics

Figure 1. Descriptive Statistics



In our sample, age and gender distributions are relatively balanced. Among all teams around half is multigenerational, there are slightly more unigenerational (only young) than unigenerational (only old) teams, constituting the rest half of teams. Most of the participants are black and whites (ethnicity classification stipulated by Prolific), constituting over 80% of the sample. Slightly over half are married, 27% are single. None of the participants have primary school or below education, and the majority have a bachelor's degree or equivalent, followed by postgraduates (masters)

4.2 Comparing Team Performances of Multigenerational and Unigenerational Teams

As shown in **Figure 2**, the ANOVA results show that multigenerational teams and unigen-type 1 (only young) teams perform better than unigen-type 2 (only old) teams, while

there are no significant difference between multigenerational and unigen-type 1 teams. The results are further substantiated by the OLS regression results shown in **Table 1**: Multigenerational teams (both old and young) can perform equally as well as unigen-type1 (only young; reference) teams—as can be inferred from the fact that multigen teams’ performance in task 1 (column 1) and task 2 (column 2) are not significantly different from the unigen-type 1 teams. In short, In other words, multigenerational teams demonstrate performance outcomes that are comparable to those of unigenerational teams—for both tasks. Both the ANOVA and the regression results support *Hypothesis 1*, which builds on social capital theory to suggest that older workers’ accumulated relational strengths can facilitate more effective teamwork in mixed-age contexts. The results seem to indicate that older workers generate positive spillovers through enhanced cooperation, relational trust, and team cohesion.

Figure 2. ANOVA Results

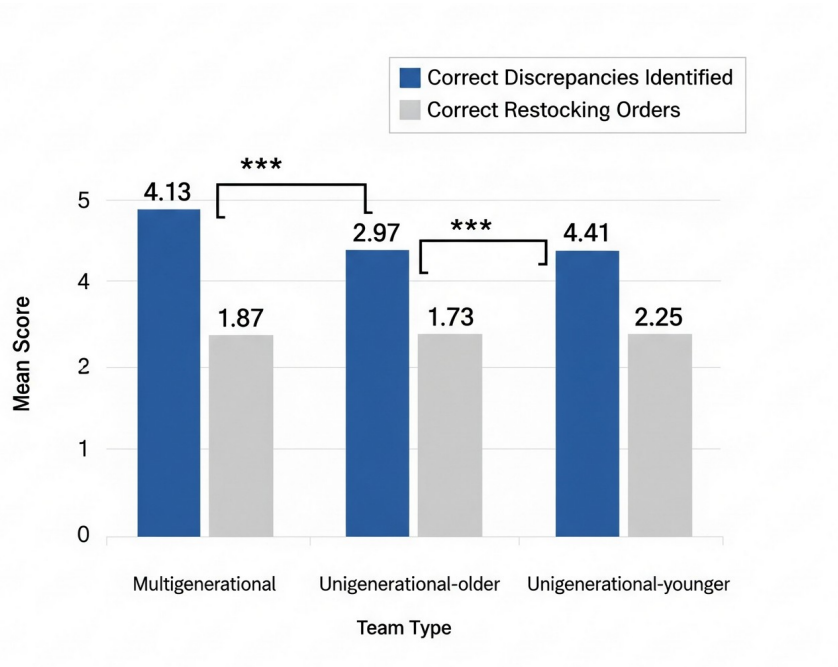


Table 1. Regression Results

	Number of correct discrepancies identified (total: 7; mean)	Number of correct restocking orders	Difference score in preference for teamwork	Difference score in preference teamwork inspiration	Difference score in preference for working with similar age	Difference score in preference for working with below 50 years old	Difference score in preference for working with 50+
IV: Team type (ref: younger unigenerational teams, below 55)							
Multigenerational teams	0.129 (0.38)	0.344 (1.54)	0.373** (2.33)	0.286* (1.66)	-0.085 (-0.74)	-0.045 (-0.43)	0.141 (1.22)
Older unigenerational teams (55+)	-1.129*** (-2.73)	-0.426 (-1.55)	-0.011 (-0.05)	-0.072 (-0.34)	-0.363** (-2.56)	-0.138 (-1.07)	-0.181 (-1.26)

Notes: *p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01; controlled for demographic variables

4.3 Expected Findings

Through our mediation analyses, we expect to collect evidence supporting our second hypothesis—namely that older workers’ soft skills function as valuable, rare, and inimitable resources that enhance team productivity. Specifically, these analyses are anticipated to reveal that older workers’ skills such as conflict resolution, emotional perceptiveness, and atmosphere maintenance significantly contribute to team outcomes, thereby offsetting or even outweighing any limitations in technical speed or task-specific knowledge.

Taken together, our findings are likely to challenge conventional views that equate aging primarily with productivity decline. We expect to demonstrate that the productivity of older workers is multidimensional: while individual-level productivity may show signs of depreciation with age, team-level productivity can remain stable or improve when organizations harness older workers’ soft skills and social capital. These anticipated results will contribute to a growing body of literature reframing older workers not as liabilities, but as assets whose strengths are most evident in collaborative, service-oriented, and age-diverse work environments.

5. DISCUSSION

One of the potential areas in which older workers are more competitive than younger workers lies in their possession and utilization of *soft skills*. Having accumulated years of experience and insights, older workers may be better than younger workers at aiding fellow, less-experienced workers via formal training, informal training (i.e., peer-to-peer mentoring), facilitating group dynamics, overseeing production processes to prevent production errors and accidents, and engaging in conflict resolution. Results from our study will help identify the additional value older employees bring to the companies vis-à-vis exercising their soft

skills. This aspect of their human capital, if promoted sufficiently, could help improve their employability and labor market outcomes at old age.

For policymakers, the results would underscore the need to design interventions that encourage the retention and integration of older workers, particularly in service-sector roles where teamwork and relational skills are crucial. This may involve providing incentives for employers to maintain age-diverse teams, or supporting lifelong learning programs that allow older workers to complement their existing strengths with updated technical competencies. Such measures could simultaneously alleviate fiscal pressures linked to population aging and expand the pool of experienced labor available to employers.

For employers/managers, such insights would be useful for optimally organizing teams for future operations—to help boost team performance and profits. If we could further identify the particular roles older employees play in the team operations (i.e., aside from completing the tasks, what kinds of soft skills they are exercising to contribute to the teamwork), this project will generate a holistic understanding of what older employees have to offer, as well as insights on how to design future on-the-job training programs to benefit both the ageing employees and the companies. Furthermore, the anticipated findings suggest the importance of shifting evaluation frameworks away from narrow, individual-level productivity metrics toward broader assessments that recognize contributions to team performance. Rather than focusing solely on technical speed or individual output, employers could design performance reviews and promotion criteria that explicitly account for soft skills and collaborative impact.

In this research, we propose a perspective rare in the literature, focusing on the unexplored and underappreciated potential of aging workers rather than assuming that they are a vulnerable group requiring more social safety-net and financial assistance. With insights generated from our studies, we hope to challenge the long-standing rhetoric that older individuals are societal burdens, and propose a new narrative that older individuals are productive and capable—and yet underused—human resources. We hope to make a case for hiring/retaining aging individuals based on the clear and yet previously overlooked benefits the older workers bring to the economy.

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