

AGE AND A SUBJECTIVE EVALUATION OF THE OCCUPATIONAL SITUATION. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM POLAND

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Abstract

Research background: Employees of different ages have different needs and capabilities regarding their professional work. Effective age management requires a proper diagnosis of these elements.

Purpose: The article aims to compare the occupational situation of employees of different ages. An attempt was made to verify how representatives of different age groups (young, mature and older employees) perceive their occupational situation.

Research methodology: Data were collected through an online survey (CAWI) conducted among a representative sample of 1,067 full-time employees in Poland. Respondents rated the different elements that make up their job situation. As the research progressed, the results were aggregated. The mean score in each age group was calculated. Finally, a series of non-parametric analyses of variance (Kruskal-Wallis test) were carried out to check for any differences between the groups.

Results: Of the 24 components of the occupational situation analysed, only 12 showed statistically significant differences between the groups. Some results confirmed intuitive assumptions (e.g. regarding work experience) and some contradicted them (e.g. regarding familiarity with modern technologies).

Novelty: Many common opinions about the occupational situation of younger and older employees are not reflected in reality.

Keywords: occupational situation, age management, young employees, older employees

JEL classification: J24

Introduction

The occupational situation of employees is an important theoretical and practical issue. The question of how this situation is affected by chronological age is of particular importance today, especially in connection with the progressive ageing of the labour force in the economy (macro level) and thus also in connection with the ageing of employees in companies (micro level).

The issue addressed here is closely related to a broad stream of research on age management – the concept that emphasises the need to combine the diverse potentials of employees of different ages (Kołodziejczyk-Olczak, 2014; Przetacka, 2009; Ratajczak, 2020; Szaban, 2013). This is because it is assumed that older employees are fundamentally different from younger ones in some respects, in terms of, i.e. their professional qualifications, level of motivation or ability to perform certain tasks. However, the author by no means suggests that they are somehow better or worse than younger employees. Rather, the point is to prove that as an employee grows older, the occupational situation naturally changes. Both older and younger people have their specific advantages and disadvantages. It is therefore necessary to create conditions for the effective cooperation of an age-diverse team, taking into account the specific needs and capabilities of individual employees. In this way, individual limitations are levelled and strengths are enhanced.

The aging process affects an employee's work situation. The biological life cycle is constructed in such a way that the top of our physical capacity is reached during the reproductive period. After it is exceeded, over time, a series of regressive transformations occur, causing a decrease in psychophysical performance, as well as the deterioration of sensory functions and adaptive abilities of the body (Bortkiewicz, Makowiec-Dąbrowska, 2008). However, the impact of these transformations on professional work leaves many aspects unclear (Skirbekk, 2004; Slowey, Zubrzycki, 2018). Undeniably, reduced physical capacity limits the ability to perform some tasks, but it definitely does not mean a simple translation into work capacity or productivity. This is because with age, other qualities or aptitudes (such as work experience) are developed that can compensate (sometimes even more than that) for psycho-physical limitations.

Effective age management requires a proper diagnosis of the needs and professional problems of employees of different ages. Unfortunately, very often these elements are not properly recognized. Intuitive assumptions tend to dominate research findings. This can be evidenced by numerous myths and stereotypes relating to both older and younger employees,

which, after empirical verification, often turn out not to be reflected in reality (Van Dalen *et al.*, 2010). For instance, such a stereotype might be the widely held opinion that older and younger employees are distinguished by their level of absence due to sickness. It is widely believed that older employees use sick leave at a much higher rate than younger employees. Meanwhile, it turns out that sickness absenteeism among older employees is neither higher nor lower, but simply different. According to the sickness absence pattern, young employees use sick leave relatively often, but each break from work is generally short, while older employees use sick leave infrequently, but each break is generally quite long (Jurek, 2021b).

Such stereotypical knowledge creates space for conjecture and speculation about the occupational situation of employees of different ages. It is widely believed that younger employees are relatively well educated, have up-to-date theoretical knowledge, know foreign languages reasonably well, and are familiar with modern technologies. However, these positive qualities go hand in hand with stereotypical opinions of their lack of loyalty towards their employers, no commitment, excessive financial aspirations, it is said they are resourceless, have underdeveloped social skills, and lack creativity in solving unusual problems. As for older employees, they are mainly associated with outdated professional qualifications, working in outdated sectors or companies, low motivation to work, aversion to change, technophobia and unwillingness to learn new things. On the other hand, as for the positive qualities of older employees, these are primarily: extensive work experience and industry knowledge, highly developed interpersonal skills, consistency in action, and a low tendency to engage in unproductive activities.

Most of these opinions are purely stereotypical and not supported by research. The article attempts to change some of this by empirically testing intuitive assumptions. The aim is to compare the occupational situation of workers of different ages. Three basic aspects of the occupational situation were analysed: (i) conditions of employment; (ii) professional skills, and (iii) employer characteristics. The data was collected via an online survey (CAWI), which was conducted in December 2021 with a representative sample of 1,067 respondents. Individuals taking part in the survey were full-time employees working in Poland. Respondents were to evaluate various elements of their occupational situation, such as: satisfaction with working conditions, quality of relations with co-workers, career prospects, professional skills, reputation of their employer (company).

The respondents were divided into three age groups: (i) younger workers; (ii) mature workers and (iii) older workers. The results obtained in these groups were compared to see if the self-assessed professional situation differed according to age. The research sought to answer the

three following questions. First, how do representatives of different age groups perceive their work situation? Second, are there significant differences in these perceptions, and if so, what are they? Third, are common stereotypes about the professional characteristics of younger and older workers (their weaknesses and strengths) reflected in the workers' opinions?

1. Data source and sample characteristics

The source material used in this article is from a survey study conducted in December 2021 by the research agency BBiAS. The information was gathered using the CAWI method, that is via an online survey. The territory covered by the research encompassed the whole of Poland, and the participants were full-time employees in productive age (in Poland from 18 to 60 women and 65 men). The research sample was 1,067 respondents. The structure of the sample due to the selected personal and work-related characteristics of respondents is presented in Table 1.

The random sampling was made up of national panels of respondents. It can be assumed that the randomized character of the sample provides grounds for a generalization of the results. The maximum measurement error was $\pm 3\%$ with a reliability level of 95%.

Table 1. Sample characteristics of respondents due to personal and work-related factors

Characteristic	Description	Percent
1	2	3
Gender	Female	49.9
	Male	51.1
Age	18–24	17.7
	25–34	30.4
	35–44	25.6
	45–54	18.7
	55–64	7.7
Education	Primary	1.9
	Secondary	11.4
	Vocational	30.6
	Post-secondary	12.3
	Bachelor	13.4
	Graduate and higher	30.5

1	2	3
Place of living	Village	17.6
	Small town (up to 20 k citizens)	12.0
	Medium city (between 20 k and 100 k citizens)	29.4
	Big city (between 100 k and 500 k citizens)	22.5
	Metropolis (more than 500 k citizens)	18.5
Marital status	Single	29.2
	Married	43.8
	Divorced	6.2
	Separated	1.5
	Widowed	1.5
	Partnership	17.8
Number of children	None	52.2
	1–2	39.8
	3–4	6.9
	5 and more	1.0
Subjective assessment of own financial situation	Definitely good: I have enough for living and I am saving	16.6
	Rather good: I have enough for living but I am not saving	26.2
	Average: I live frugally, so I can afford to buy everything	45.5
	Rather bad: I can afford only the most basic expenses	10.1
	Definitely bad: I cannot afford even the most basic expenses	1.5
Subjective assessment of health condition	Very good	19.6
	Good	49.1
	Average	26.4
	Bad	4.0
	Very bad	0.8
Character of work	Blue-collar position (mainly physical work)	44.99
	White-collar position (mainly intellectual work)	55.01
Form of ownership	Public entity	28.49
	Private entity	71.51
Size of enterprise (number of employees)	Micro (up to 10)	18.93
	Small (11–50)	29.33
	Medium-sized (51–250)	25.96
	Large (above 250)	25.77

Source: own elaboration.

2. Research method

The research process requires detailing and operationalizing two key concepts: “age of the employee” and “occupational situation.”

Metric age divides an employee’s working life into different stages. Unfortunately, the scientific nomenclature has yet to specify the details of such periodization (Jurek, 2021a), and as a result, both the number of stages in the working life cycle and the thresholds separating one stage from another are defined quite broadly. This study adopts a division into three stages according to the following pattern:

- young employee (YE): up to 34 years old,
- mature employee (ME): between the ages of 35 and 44,
- older employee (OE): aged 45 and over.

As for occupational situation, the concept is very broad and undefined. It also consists of a great variety of elements. This study lists a set of 24 components of occupational situation and groups them into 3 main domains, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Components of occupational situation: a conceptual approach

Employment conditions and work atmosphere (EC)	Professional qualifications (PQ)	Characteristics of the employer (CE)
EC1: quality of relations with superiors	PQ1: professional potential (assessment of own situation on the labour market)	CE1: corporate reputation
EC2: quality of relations with co-workers	PQ2: creativity and innovativeness	CE2: style of management
EC3: satisfaction with remuneration	PQ3: work experience (practical skills, knowledge of the industry)	CE3: organizational culture
EC4: satisfaction with non-material working conditions	PQ4: interpersonal skills (leadership skills, teamwork)	CE4: corporate social responsibility
EC5: stability of employment	PQ5: familiarity with new technologies (e.g. use of computers)	CE5: modernity and dynamic development
EC6: satisfaction with position held	PQ6: knowledge of foreign languages	CE6: commitment and concern for the affairs of employed employees
EC7: prestige of profession/work		
EC8: opportunities for promotion		
EC9: opportunity to fulfil own passion and professional interests		
EC10: motivation to work and level of engagement in working tasks		
EC11: a sense of agency and an effect on events within the company		
EC12: accordance between work and personal interests		

Source: own elaboration.

Respondents to the survey rated individual components of their work situation. Evaluation was done on a five-point scale: 1 – very bad, 2 – rather bad, 3 – average, 4 – rather good, 5 – very good. Subsequently, in the course of the research work, aggregation of the obtained results was carried out. The mean score and standard deviation were calculated for all of the distinguished age groups, that is, among young, mature and older employees. Finally, a series of nonparametric analyses of variance (Kruskal-Wallis test) were conducted to verify any intergroup differences.

3. Results

Employees in Poland assess their occupational situation differently. This assessment can be influenced by a number of socioeconomic factors, such as gender or education level, as well as other factors, such as occupation and work ethos. This study focuses on only one factor, namely chronological age. An attempt was made to see if belonging to a certain age group affects the evaluation of specific components of the work situation. The results obtained are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Self-assessment of occupational situation among young employees (YE), mature employees (ME), and older employees (OE)

Component	Mean score			Kruskal-Wallis test	Multiple comparisons		
	YE	ME	OE	p	YE-ME	YE-OE	ME-OE
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
EC1	3.87	3.61	3.73	0.00	0.00	0.14	0.84
EC2	4.08	3.85	4.04	0.01	0.02	1.00	0.23
EC3	3.31	3.23	3.26	0.55	–	–	–
EC4	3.50	3.34	3.29	0.01	0.21	0.02	1.00
EC5	3.84	3.86	3.78	0.42	–	–	–
EC6	3.64	3.66	3.68	0.85	–	–	–
EC7	3.37	3.39	3.44	0.57	–	–	–
EC8	3.10	2.97	2.96	0.14	–	–	–
EC9	3.26	3.16	3.23	0.52	–	–	–
EC10	3.65	3.43	3.51	0.02	0.03	0.28	1.00
EC11	3.30	3.25	3.21	0.65	–	–	–
EC12	3.42	3.45	3.41	0.89	–	–	–
PQ1	3.54	3.48	3.59	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
PQ2	3.68	3.57	3.67	0.18	–	–	–
PQ3	3.67	3.81	4.02	0.00	0.09	0.00	0.04

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
PQ4	3.70	3.60	3.73	0.31	–	–	–
PQ5	4.08	3.91	4.02	0.01	0.02	0.51	0.68
PQ6	3.27	3.11	2.88	0.00	0.24	0.00	0.05
CE1	3.64	3.53	3.64	0.26	–	–	–
CE2	3.53	3.29	3.52	0.00	0.01	1.00	0.03
CE3	3.70	3.47	3.61	0.02	0.02	0.74	0.50
CE4	3.71	3.51	3.60	0.01	0.02	0.33	1.00
CE5	3.64	3.44	3.52	0.30	–	–	–
CE6	3.58	3.33	3.48	0.00	0.00	0.65	0.26

Source: own elaboration.

In the domain of employment conditions and work atmosphere (EC), all employees, regardless of age, rated their chances for career advancement the lowest (EC8), with older employees rating the lowest score (2.96). In contrast, the highest rated element was, for young and older employees, the quality of relationships with co-workers (EC2), and for mature employees, job stability (EC5).

Out of the twelve items in the studied EC domain, only four of the opinions of employees from different age groups were significantly different from each other. These included: quality of relations with superiors (EC1), quality of relations with co-workers (EC2), satisfaction with non-material working conditions (EC4), and motivation to work and level of engagement in working tasks (EC10). As for the latter, contrary to popular belief, the lowest level of motivation and commitment is not at all a characteristic of the oldest employees, but (at least in the declarative sphere) of mature employees.

In the professional qualifications (PQ) domain, foreign language skills (PQ6) were rated lowest in all three age groups. In addition, there were statistically significant differences in the evaluation of this competence, with by far the lowest ratings among the oldest employees. This means that knowledge of foreign languages is a weakness in general for all employees in Poland, regardless of age, although – according to popular opinion – it is least developed in the oldest employees. As for the highest rating, again the same element was indicated in all age groups, i.e. familiarity with new technologies (PQ5). It was rated highest among young employees, and lowest – contrary to popular belief – not by the oldest, but by mature employees (between these two groups was significant difference in evaluation). This means that all employees in Poland, regardless of age, consider familiarity with modern technologies to be their strong point, however, the trait is by far the most developed among young employees, and relatively the least developed among mature employees.

Of the six professional qualifications assessed, two more (in addition to the two mentioned earlier) were found to be significantly different across the age groups – professional potential and work experience. As for work experience, according to popular opinion, it is rated highest by older employees and lowest by younger employees. This seems perfectly reasonable; as older employees have had more time to build up their experience than young people who are just at the beginning of their careers.

In the other two cases there were no statistically significant differences between the age-groups. This means that, contrary to popular belief, chronological age (at least in the declarative domain) is not associated with either interpersonal skills (PQ4), which are considered to be the strengths of older workers, or creativity and innovativeness (PQ2), which are considered to be the strengths of younger workers.

In the characteristics of the employer (CE) domain, the lowest rated characteristic was, among young and mature employees, style of management (CE2), and among the oldest employees, commitment and concern for the affairs of employed employees (CE6). As for the highest rated attribute, among the youngest employees it was corporate social responsibility (CE4), and among mature and older employees it was corporate reputation (CE1).

Employees perceive the characteristics of their employers differently depending on their age. There was a statistically significant intergroup difference for as many as four of the six traits studied. The only similarly perceived characteristic were corporate reputation (CE1), and modernity and dynamic development (CE5).

4. Discussion

In the survey respondents made self-assessments of various components of their occupational situation. Therefore, the subject of the survey was not the actual state of affairs, i.e. the actual occupational situation, but the subjective impressions and declarations of respondents in this regard. This is important to note, as the declarations may or may not reflect the actual state of affairs. Subjective perceptions may differ from reality for various reasons. First, people generally tend to show unrealistically positive views of their traits or prospects (Roy, Liersch, 2013; Santos-Pinto, Sobel, 2005). They tend to perceive themselves as better than average. According to W. De Bondt and R. Thaler (1995, p. 389): “Perhaps the most robust finding in the psychology of judgment is that people are overconfident.” This also applies to various aspects of the occupational situation (Santos-Pinto, de la Rosa, 2020). Secondly, according to the findings of cognitive psychology, people do not perceive reality in

a vacuum, but their perception depends on the context (Todorović, 2010). Just as the perception of brightness changes depending on the colour of the background, the assessment of one's own situation can also change depending on the "background" against which the assessment is made. Therefore, subjective feelings are not authoritative. It can be suspected that people in a fairly weak occupational situation make high self-assessments if the reference point is set very low, i.e. if those in their immediate surroundings are in a dramatically poor occupational situation. In contrast, people with a reasonably good occupational situation may make low self-assessments if the benchmark is set very high, i.e. those in their immediate surroundings are in an excellent occupational situation. The third conclusion is that some people seem to have limited awareness of their own limitations and weaknesses, which may be a manifestation of low emotional intelligence. This is confirmed, for example, by the results of the survey conducted by Ł. Jurek (2014). The respondents in his survey were young executive and managerial staff. It turned out that young people considered personal culture as one of their main strengths, while managers considered a lack of personal culture as their primary weakness.

The potential inadequacy of subjective declarations severely limits the interpretability of the obtained results. Nevertheless, they still seem to have some scientific value. First of all, they give a general impression of how employees feel about their own work situation. It should also be noted that many components of this situation are qualitative, which means that they are difficult to operationalise and quantify. In some cases, they are very difficult (and sometimes impossible) to measure objectively. In such situations, recourse to subjective judgements is a legitimate method of assessment.

Conclusions

The study investigated the perceptions of 24 items of occupational situations. Age was found to be related to only some of these items, as significant intergroup differences were found in half (12) of the cases. The effect of age is least common in the perception of working conditions (a statistically significant intergroup difference was found in 4 out of 12 items surveyed) and most common in the perception of employer characteristics (a statistically significant intergroup difference was found in 4 out of 6 items surveyed). It was also found that in some cases the results contradicted common myths and stereotypes. Age is not associated (at least in the declarative aspect) with either interpersonal skills, which are considered to be the strength of older employees, nor with creativity and innovativeness, which are considered to be the main strength of younger employees.

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