Recruiting Older Workers: The Implications of Generativity for Organisational Attraction

Valerie Caines
Research School of Business
The Australian National University
valerie.caines@bigpond.com

Prashant Bordia
Research School of Business
The Australian National University
prashant.bordia@anu.edu.au
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ABSTRACT

Organisations are reliant on employees to gain a competitive edge (Lado & Wilson, 1994) however, with the ageing population competition for talent is increasing. Encouraging people to work beyond the conventional retirement age is an apparent solution however studies report that older employees are unenthusiastic (Shacklock & Shacklock, 2005) leading to skills shortages and the challenge of attracting older workers. This paper proposes that Erikson’s (1950) generativity theory can offer valuable insight into the factors affecting attraction of older workers. Organisations may be able to increase their attraction of older workers by accommodating generativity needs, which include the desire to create a legacy for the future, teach and mentor others and contribute to society and the community.

Keywords: organisation attraction, generativity, older workers.
INTRODUCTION

Organisations are very reliant on human resources to enable them to gain a competitive edge (Lado & Wilson, 1994). Talented people are always in demand (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2009) regardless of the economic environment and as a consequence organisations are required to compete for talent in what has commonly been referred to as the “war for talent” (Chapman, Uggerslev, Carroll, Piasentin, & Jones, 2005). With the emerging ageing population the war for talent will become tougher with a potential shortfall of 1.4 million workers by 2025 (VECCI, 2009). In Australia, the median age of the population has risen from 32 in the 1991 Census, to 37 in 2008. As a consequence the median age of the Australian workforce is also rising with the median age of workers across all industries being 40 years in 2008 (McCrindle Research Pty Ltd, 2008). One solution to the skills shortage would be to encourage people to work longer, beyond the widely accepted retirement age of 65 years.

Unfortunately several studies have reported that at the present time many people do not want to work beyond 65 (Shacklock & Shacklock, 2005) leaving Australia with a large potential skills shortage and raising the question of how to attract and retain workers, in particular those in middle and older age groups.

In the past decade, there has been increasing research devoted to understanding organisation attractiveness (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Highhouse, Lievens, & Sinar, 2003; Berthon, Ewing, & Hah, 2005). These studies describe factors that influence organisational attractiveness, including generous remuneration and benefits, training opportunities and job security. However, there is limited research exploring the moderating impact of individual dimensions, such as age. That is, the research fails to show how an individual’s ageing-related needs may moderate the relationship between organisation dimensions and organisation attractiveness.

There are several age-related changes that are likely to influence the salience of organisational attractors. As age increases, intrinsic values are likely to become more important to the individual
(Lippmann, 2008) resulting in more value being placed on the intangible dimensions of a job or organisation. In addition, ageing is related to a decrease in the importance of extrinsic rewards such as pay, promotion, and benefits (Jurgensen, 1978; Murray & Syed, 2005; Clark & Arnold, 2008) and an increase in the desire for intrinsic rewards (Clark & Arnold, 2008).

Taking a psychosocial development perspective, in particular the role of generativity (Erikson, 1950), we can gain valuable insights into the attraction of older workers. Generativity refers to the concern for guiding and promoting the next generation (Erikson, 1950) and is a need that is particularly salient in mid-life (McAdams & de St Aubin, 1998). The link between generativity, work and career has been acknowledged in career related research and is strongly argued by Clark & Arnold as deserving a “central place in the study of middle career” (2008, p. 474). This view is also supported by the fact that generative behaviour occurs in the work setting and individuals who have a strong desire to behave generatively, but are unable to, experience frustration or dissatisfaction (Hofer, Busch, & Chasiotis, 2008). Despite this only limited research attention has been devoted to generativity in a career or work context of the older workforce. We aim to address this gap by developing insights into organisation attraction of older workers via the theoretical lens of generativity theory. In the following sections, we begin by introducing the concept of organisation attraction. Next, generativity theory is presented and finally, the two literatures are drawn together with the theoretical proposition that generativity concerns are likely to moderate the relationship between various job and organisational characteristics and organisation attraction.

**ORGANISATION ATTRACTION**

In recent years, organisation attraction and employer branding (often referred to as organisation image: Lievens, Van Hoye, & Anseel, 2007) have received a growing amount of research attention. Organisation attractiveness is a term used to describe the degree of attraction an individual has toward an organisation. It comes about as a consequence of the perceived benefits that may be realised by working for a specific organisation (Berthon et al. 2005). These benefits can be tangible (i.e.
instrumental job or organisation dimensions), such as pay, location, training, working hours or intangible (i.e. symbolic job or organisational dimensions), such as job security or an opportunity to do exciting or honest work (Highhouse et al. 2003).

Research exploring organisation attractiveness has predominantly been undertaken in the context of early recruitment research, often with university students or graduates, seeking to understand the factors influencing a potential applicant’s decision to seek attachment to an organisation and how organisations may be able to persuade an applicant to pursue employment (Connerley, Carlson, & Mecham III, 2003). Early references to the possible relationship between the organisation and the individual were made by Barnard (1938) using an interactionist perspective, exploring the balance between individual’s needs and the organisation’s characteristics (Turban & Keon, 1993). In the 1970’s industrial psychologists moved their attention from how organisations make their decisions about applicants for a job to the applicants themselves and how they made a decision about a job offer (Fisher, Ilgen, & Hoyer, 1979). More recently the concept of organisation attractiveness has been generally discussed in vocational behaviour (Horvath, Wasko, & Bradley, 2008), applied psychology (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003) communication (Bergstrom, Blumenthal, & Crothers, 2002), and marketing research literature (Berthon et al. 2005).

Theoretical insights into organisation attraction are derived from Vroom’s (1964) expectancy theory and signaling theory (Rynes & Lawler, 1983). Expectancy theory illustrates the process of decision-making an individual undergoes when considering an organisation for employment by exploring the total motivation to join this organisation. The motivation is described as a function of the attractiveness (valence) of an organisation and the individual’s expectation (expectancy) of being admitted to the organisation (Knox & Freeman, 2006). Signaling theory is drawn on to explore the signals an organisation sends to individuals during the pre or very early recruitment phase and how that impacts the individual’s choices and hopes (Rynes, 1991).

Another widely discussed perspective is that individuals have different needs and will therefore seek an organisation and job that will meet those needs (Schneider, 1987). The attraction-selection-
attrition model (ASA) developed by Schneider (1987) aimed to establish a link between the individual’s own personality traits and the organisation they seek to work for. It argues that organisations are seeking a homogenous workforce because people who are attracted to them and continue to work with them find the organisation’s personality similar to their individual personality (Shaubroek, Ganster, & Jones, 1998) and those that do not fit leave. This model seeks to define a relationship between attractiveness, organisation image and turnover. Schneider’s ASA model continues to be widely referred to in discussions regarding person-organisation fit. The concept of person-organisation fit (P-O) suggests that the degree of perceived fit between the person and the organisation will impact upon the perceived level of organisation attraction (Chapman et al. 2005).

Consequently, where applicants have their needs satisfied - that is, when their values and the organisation’s values are in alignment - it leads to favorable outcomes for both parties (Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009). It could therefore be expected that individuals will be attracted to organisations with trait inferences similar to their own (Lievens, Van Hoye, & Schruers, 2005).

The overall themes emergent from the research are that the degree of attractiveness perceived by potential or actual employees will influence applicant and employee behaviour toward the organisation (Davies, Chun, da Silva, & Roper, 2004). Some of these factors an organisation can directly and fairly easily influence such as the job dimensions and recruitment practices (Connerley et al. 2003). However, the level of organisation attraction can also be significantly influenced by factors that are not as easy for the organisation to change or control such as perceptions of competence and sincerity (Highhouse et al. 2003; Lievens et al. 2005). Researching these factors in the current labour market is all the more significant and appealing given the current complex demographic conditions discussed earlier.

The instrumental and symbolic framework illustrates the ways in which consumers’ associate tangible (instrumental) and intangible (symbolic) meanings to a product. Instrumental dimensions are the attributes of the product described in terms that are tangible, such as size, colour and price (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). In an organization, instrumental aspects are those job and organisation dimensions
that are tangible such as remuneration and benefits, work location, promotion and training and development. There have been a number of studies which have confirmed the hypothesis that the instrumental attributes of an organisation influence a potential employee’s perception of an organisation (Turban & Keon, 1993) including, job pursuit intentions (Lievens et al. 2007). Some of the earliest research includes a large longitudinal study by Jurgensen which began in the 1950’s. This study found that pay and advancement were important determinants of attractiveness to an organisation from a potential employee’s perspective and that instrumental preferences appeared to remain consistent over time (Jurgensen, 1978; Turban, Eyring, & Campion, 1993).

In reality however, organisations may find it difficult to differentiate their offering based on instrumental attributes especially within an industry where regulation is high, such as award-based pay rates or standard working hours, offering limited opportunities for differentiation (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Additionally, an implication of the instrumental-symbolic framework is that employees cannot be attracted to an organisation on instrumental dimensions alone. Employees are also attracted by symbolic dimensions (Highhouse et al. 2003). Symbolic dimensions are the product’s intangible attributes (Aaker, 1997) such as luxurious, ethical, exciting, and reliable. In a recruitment context the symbolic dimensions of an organisation are articulated by employees describing the organisation or job in personality terms such as honest, prestigious, exciting, cool, young (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003).

The use of the instrumental and symbolic framework (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003) is relatively novel and has proven to be a valuable construct to explore the value proposition aspect of employment branding (Lievens et al. 2007). Lievens and Highhouse’s (2003) study examined organisation attractiveness at the early recruitment stage in the banking sector. The sample consisted of 275 final-year students and 124 people currently working in the banking sector and both groups were part of the applicant population targeted by banks. The results of this study demonstrated that symbolic organisation dimensions explained additional variance over and above instrumental organisation
dimensions. It was also noted that symbolic dimensions were more useful to differentiate between the banks.

**INTRODUCING GENERATIVITY**

The effect of age on behaviour has been explained using life-span development approaches. The study of life span seeks to look at the psychological trends including movements in a person’s motivations and needs as they progress through the life span (Frenkel-Brunswick, 1973). Early qualitative research conducted in 1933 in Vienna by Charlotte Buhler, discovered five distinct periods of life span including; when a child lives at home, when independent activity is commenced, choice of vocation (20’s – 30’s), a period of crisis (40’s) and finally the fifth and last phase that begins in the 60’s, characterised by sickness, retirement and the pursuit of hobbies. Like Buhler’s (1933) research, many of the theories of life span development viewed older age as a time where the psychological and emotional aspects of a person are characterised by a perception of decline.

One of the most influential exceptions to this is the theory of psychosocial development proposed by Erikson (1950). Erikson’s view of midlife and maturity (65 years plus) included many positive changes such as generativity or the desire to create positive changes benefiting others. Erikson’s psychosocial development theory spans across the entire lifespan. The “Eight Stages of Man” (Erikson., 1950) are described as: trust versus basic mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity versus role diffusion, intimacy and isolation, generativity versus stagnation and ego integrity versus despair (Peterson & Stewart, 1996).

Generativity, the seventh of the eight stages of psychosocial development is strongly associated with midlife, most likely because this was the time in life when adults are expected to take on roles with responsibility for younger people, such as parenting or teaching (McAdams & de St.Aubin, 1992).

Generativity refers to an individual’s concern for the next generation that lead them to behave in a variety of ways that are aimed at developing and nurturing the next generation, in what has been described as a parental type of behaviour (Erikson., 1950). Generativity is characterised by activities
such as teaching, supporting others, building, and creating things to help others. In contrast those individuals who do not progress well to the generative stage at middle age develop behaviours associated with stagnation which is characterised by dissatisfaction, frustration and feeling stuck (McAdams & de St.Aubin, 1992). Both generativity and stagnation are powerful drivers of behaviour during middle life (Erikson, 1973) including assigning time and energy on building communities or organisations, teaching, working towards social change and raising children (McAdams, 2006).

Generativity is a very complex psychosocial construct, described by Erikson (1950) as an instinct and a drive. It has been further defined by McAdams and de St. Aubin (1998) to include seven features; inner desire, cultural demand, concern, belief, commitment, action, and narration (Peterson & Stewart, 1996). The seven features can be grouped into four groups: motivational sources such as developmental expectations, a need to be needed or concern for the next generation; thoughts and plans including goals; behaviours such as creating; and narration of an individual’s life story as they tell it (McAdams & de St.Aubin, 1992). These features are all built around a psychological rationalisation for the goal of providing for the next generation (Urien & Kilbourne, 2007). An individual can express generativity in a number of ways and in a number of settings including work life, professional, volunteering, parenting, political and religious activity (McAdams & de St.Aubin, 1992). Generativity can be expressed through plans and goals an individual has which are aimed at assisting the next generation and actions where an individual seeks to do something that will result in assisting and teaching (guiding/coaching) the next generation. Terms used to describe generative action include being a responsible parent, mentor, responsible citizen, leader, mover and shaker, producing things, and doing things where the outcome is aimed at benefiting the next generation (McAdams & de St.Aubin, 1992).

Generativity challenges many of the negative stereotypes of older people such as withdrawal from the community and decline in the ability to contribute to the workplace (Hedge, Borman, & Lammlein, 2006). Unlike early life span research that focuses on crisis and decline in older age (Frenkel-
Brunswick, 1973) recent research has taken a more positive view of life span arguing that people’s attitudes and motivations are not in fact stagnant in adulthood but change throughout the entire lifespan (Frenkel-Brunswick, 1973) and can include positive changes in attitude such as generativity (Hooker & McAdams, 2003; Warbuton & Gooch, 2007).

A large proportion of the generativity research to date has been in the areas of mental health, religious and political involvement and parenting (North Western University, 2009). Recent research in other settings includes a study by Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2005) to examine consumer sensitivity to corporate social responsibility. This study found that generativity significantly predicted an individual’s sensitivity to corporate social performance. Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2005) also report a strong link between an individual’s generative concern and their actions. Likewise an individual’s degree of generativity has been shown to predict eco-friendly behaviour (Urien & Kilbourne, 2007). A longitudinal study of mid-life women found that generativity was linked to work satisfaction from a motivational perspective for professional women, expressed as helping others and mastery of skills (Peterson & Stewart, 1996).

To date we could only identify very limited research that considered generativity in relation to the workplace which presents an enormous opportunity given the already identify link between generativity and work behaviour (Peterson & Stewart, 1996; Clark & Arnold, 2008) and the median age of the workforce being at the age the generative stage commences (McAdams, Hart, & Maruna, 1998).

**GENERATIVITY & ORGANISATIONAL ATTRACTION**

In the workplace context, there have been studies looking at middle career employees which indicate that individuals that were generative in their work reported greater job satisfaction and subjective career success (Clark & Arnold, 2008). Erikson (1950) argued that generativity is an instinct and drive affecting all people in mid-life to some degree. An individual’s work domain and professional
activities are very important settings where generativity can be expressed (Clark & Arnold, 2008) and will therefore impact upon employee’s preferences at work. This view is supported by evidence that generativity influences consumer behaviour (Giacalone, Paul, & Jurkiewicz, 2005) and self-reported job satisfaction (Clark & Arnold, 2008). This is likely because the work setting allows generative expression such as nurturance, leadership, mentoring, and societal care (Clark & Arnold, 2008). As generativity occurs in mid-life it will also be strongly linked with mid-life employees.

Person-environment fit (PE) is one theory that may explain why organisation dimensions and their attractiveness may be influenced by an individual’s degree of generativity. The degree of PE fit can influence a number of stages of an employee’s organisational lifespan (Chapman et al. 2005; Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009) including the decision to join, attitudes whilst employed and the decision to terminate their employment. Essentially an individual is seeking to have their needs met and as a consequence those with a high degree of generativity concern will seek out organizations whereby their generative needs can be met.

**Proposition 1:** Employees who have strong generativity concerns will have greater attraction to organisations that make available opportunities to perform generative behaviours, such as contributing to the community/society, teaching, mentoring or coaching of younger employees.

Likewise, men in middle career stages display a decreased interest in extrinsic rewards such as salary, an increase in the desire to nurture, a desire to achieve others’ respect and a desire to identify with the organisation they work for (Clark & Arnold, 2008). As a consequence the organisation dimensions that lead to organisation attraction may be more likely to be symbolic dimensions, especially those relating to generativity, for older workers.

**Proposition 2:** Generativity will moderate the job and organisation dimensions that lead to organisation attraction for older workers such as, decreasing role of instrumental dimensions
such as pay and increasing role of symbolic dimensions such as ethical work, training/coaching others, honest work, and corporate social responsibility.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

This paper proposes that generativity theory be used to better understand when and how older workers are attracted to organisations. Incorporating generativity into human resource management strategies will increase older workers’ attraction to organisations and assist in addressing the skills shortage.

Examples of human resource management approaches that will support generative needs include: job design for older workers that incorporates opportunities to mentor, train others and contribute to the wider community, opportunities for personal development, reduced focus on upward promotion or improving job performance and more focus on life stage relevant skills (Calo, 2007), review of total employee reward to focus on and emphasise non-financial rewards (Clark & Arnold, 2008). These are practical ways that can support generativity.

The ideas stated in this paper require further theoretical development and empirical examination. For example, empirical studies will enable a better understanding of the specific instrumental and symbolic organisation dimensions that appeal to older employees. Organisations may then be able to differentiate their offerings by segmenting employee groups so that they can target groups with key messages, roles and opportunities that are relevant to the future employees’ needs (Schneider, 1987). This would be particularly valuable in the older worker segment and will inform organisations how to best approach tasks such as job design, career management and learning and development for older workers.

We hope that the propositions stated in this paper contribute to the explanation and prediction of organisation attraction for older workers and provides a useful framework for future research.
REFERENCES


