

# Demographic dissimilarity and absenteeism in blue-collar teams

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"Diversity" is a central buzzword in business and labour-related vocabulary, functioning as either a mark of distinction or open flank of today's employers. Many people believe it is sufficient to hire a small

number of currently under-represented groups such as women in classic "male" professions, older employees in young teams (or the reverse, of course). The initially uncomfortable situation makes everybody reflect on and abandon their prejudice, leading to a burst of creativity and productivity in the now "diverse" team. But is this way of bringing diversity to the workplace a recipe for success?

This is the question that Florian Kunze and his Ph.D. student Max Reinwald set out to answer. They want to understand how teamwork is implemented in today's [work environments](#), and how it can be improved given a better understanding of the dynamics in diversely composed teams. This is a topic of high academic interest that has yielded dozens of pertinent studies.

"Unfortunately, much of the work done to date has resulted in unclear or even conflicting statements," Reinwald says. "For instance, some studies have found that male-dominated teams function more effectively once one or two women join them, but others have found the opposite, while others could not find a significant effect either way. It is quite hard to form an opinion based on current results. And all the while, there is this sure conviction that diversity is automatically of benefit to companies."

Reinwald and Kunze are skeptical about this popular conclusion, which is based on little evidence. They believe that the existing studies' inconsistencies might have their roots in the fact that most only focus on one point in time, instead of observing the workplace behavior of employees who do not fit their teams demographically over time.

Looking to change this, the two researchers set out to observe more than 800 teams in a big Swiss-based service company over the course of seven years—a study of rarely attempted length and scope. They focused on the gender and age of new employees, two easily perceived characteristics that are prone to invite prejudice. Reinwald and Kunze's

hypothesis: The more unequal a new team member, the earlier and the more easily they will find themselves in situations where they will be subject to discrimination. These so-called anchoring events then go on to shape the subjects' perceptions of teamwork for years to come.

To measure dissatisfaction and lack of integration, the researchers counted absences from work (except regular holidays, training, mother's leave etc.). They expected more dissimilar team members to accrue more days of absence.

"We evaluated 2,711 persons in total: date of team entry, team composition, team swaps, absenteeism—all completely anonymously, of course," Kunze reports. "The trend is pretty obvious. During their first year on a new team, new members remain inconspicuous regardless of their fit. But after that, the curve rises, and quite steeply, in many cases. After a few years, women in purely male teams, and older employees in very young teams are absent almost twice as much as their colleagues in teams where they have a good fit. It comes down to about eight annual days of absence compared to four, which is pretty significant."

Reinwald says, "Of course non-average team members don't automatically and constantly skip work. We have not been looking into individual workloads and performance, or into individual work biographies—that remains for a follow-up study to tackle. Moreover, our study is limited to a blue-collar environment, where prejudices towards women and older co-workers are more pronounced. But all in all, I think we can safely draw the conclusion that women in male-dominated, as well as [older employees](#) in younger environments, experience more discrimination. And this experience of discrimination increases over time."

Reinwald and Kunze hope that their results will give companies and organizations looking to increase diversity some pointers on how to do so

successfully. Employees that do not fit their teams demographically require increased attention and support, especially when just starting out—and team leaders ought to be sensitized to and prepared for these needs. This way, negative anchoring events and instances of discrimination can be mitigated. Companies might want to keep that in mind if only for selfish reasons: after all, a badly integrated [employee](#) can easily net them losses in the four-figure range each year, for no good reason at all.

**More information:** Max Reinwald et al, Being Different, Being Absent? A Dynamic Perspective on Demographic Dissimilarity and Absenteeism in Blue-Collar Teams, *Academy of Management Journal* (2019). [DOI: 10.5465/amj.2018.0290](https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2018.0290)

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