

Why older workers might be more stressed than younger ones

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Older workers tend to feel more stress than younger workers when their employers don't provide them with the support and resources needed to do their jobs well, according to a new Portland State University study.

The study, published online in April in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, is part of a larger project aimed at improving employee health, safety, work-life balance and well-being.

The research team—made up of Lale Yaldiz, a Ph.D. candidate in industrial-organizational psychology, and PSU psychology professors Donald Truxillo, Leslie Hammer and Todd Bodner—surveyed 243 municipal public works employees between the ages of 24 and 64 over the course of a year.

The study found that both younger and [older workers](#) had lower levels of overall stress when they were given more autonomy on the job, had good relationships with their bosses and felt they were respected and treated fairly at work. But when such resources were lacking, older workers reported significantly higher stress levels a year later than their younger colleagues.

"These are things that employers should provide to all employees, but may be especially important for older employees," Truxillo said. "You don't want to have a company policy that says, 'We treat young people this way and old people that way,' but it does show you that age-sensitive human resource systems should be in place where you maybe train managers on how to be aware of the needs of their different workers."

Yaldiz said the findings suggest that older workers place a greater value on having autonomy and a supportive work environment than younger workers because those resources allow them to adapt to the psychological and physical changes that come with aging. For example, older workers tend to prioritize emotional needs and care more about having socially meaningful interactions and mentoring their colleagues than younger workers whose focus tends to be on gaining the skills they need to advance in their careers.

The authors say the findings are especially important as the number of workers who are 55 and older continues to grow. The U.S. Labor Bureau estimates that older workers will account for nearly a quarter of the workforce by 2020.

"With the workforce becoming more age-diverse and older at the same time, it is important to understand the differences between younger and older workers to help them cope with the demands of their work lives more effectively," Yaldiz said.

Among the study's recommendations:

- Rather than require that employees complete tasks a certain way, employers should, when possible, give workers the flexibility to bring their different skill sets, strengths and years of accumulated job experience to the table

- Training for supervisors should emphasize leadership skills about how to build strong relationships with workers of all ages so they feel like trusted and valued members of their team

- Since older workers appear to be more susceptible to stress in the face of unfairness, organizations can help workers by being transparent about how decisions are made and implemented, not discriminating, valuing [employee](#) input when making key decisions and providing channels for employees to voice concerns

Bodner said that in many ways, it's common sense.

"When you come down to it, focusing on bottom lines and ignoring these human [resource](#) factors have really bad results and can be more expensive down the road," he said. "By not focusing on the human side, it's a short-term gain but a long-term loss."

The researchers suggest that future studies should look at diverse [worker](#) groups across industries, jobs, gender and ethnicities to generalize the study findings, and explore the types of resources that are important to younger employees' well-being.

More information: Lale M. Yaldiz et al, Do resources matter for employee stress? It depends on how old you are, *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jvb.2018.04.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.04.005)

Provided by Portland State University

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