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COMMENTARY

Knowledge transfer comes of 'age': Key themes and directions for future research

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Abstract

As workforces age, understanding how knowledge flows between younger and older employees has become a central concern in organizations. This reflective commentary synthesizes the development of research on age and knowledge transfer since the seminal contribution by Burmeister et al. (*Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 2018, 91, 518). Moving beyond age as a control variable, the literature conceptualizes knowledge transfer as a structured, relational and context-dependent process shaped by age-based norms, motivation and identities. I summarize key themes that have emerged in the field, including multi-level antecedents and expanding consequences ranging from employability and successful aging at work to organizational performance. The commentary highlights methodological advances, including dyadic designs, field experiments and multi-level studies, while identifying persistent conceptual blind spots. Building on these insights, seven directions for future research are proposed as follows: (1) emphasizing age as a continuous and multifaceted construct, (2) exploring emotions as central mechanisms, (3) differentiating knowledge types and behaviours, (4) capturing micro-dynamics and temporal fluctuations, (5) broadening the outcome scope, (6) digitization and (7) methodological pluralism. By integrating lifespan and knowledge transfer perspectives, this commentary argues that knowledge transfer across the lifespan and between different age groups constitutes a critical vehicle for sustaining both organizational effectiveness and meaningful working lives.

KEYWORDS

age, age-diverse knowledge transfer, intergenerational knowledge transfer

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Practitioner points

- Knowledge transfer between younger and older employees is shaped not only by individual motivation but also by age-related norms and expectations about who should teach and who should learn. Organizations should be aware of these implicit role assignments and actively encourage bidirectional exchange.
- Knowledge exchange benefits both younger and older employees when it aligns with their developmental goals—supporting younger employees' growth and older employees' sense of generativity.
- Age-inclusive HR practices, age-diversity climate and integrated knowledge transfer training can foster knowledge transfer across different ages by reducing stereotypes, strengthening contact quality and increasing knowledge utility.

Knowledge transfer between employees is a central element through which organizations maintain continuity, adapt to change and build sustainable competitive advantage. As workforces age and careers lengthen, questions about how knowledge flows between younger and older employees have become salient. Over the past decade, research in occupational and organizational psychology has moved from viewing age as a control variable to conceptualizing age from a lifespan perspective and as a meaningful lens through which knowledge transfer processes can be better understood.

Knowledge is commonly understood as a combination of contextualized information, skills and expertise that enables organizational functioning. *Knowledge transfer* refers to the process through which such knowledge moves from one individual to another, allowing recipients to use, adapt or build upon it (Bartol & Srivastava, 2002). Importantly, this definition emphasizes that knowledge transfer is inherently relational and processual rather than a static act of dissemination (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022a). In age-diverse contexts, knowledge transfer between younger and older employees is often referred to as age-diverse or intergenerational knowledge transfer, terms that deliberately focus on age-related differences (Figure 1).

Age itself is a multifaceted construct. While chronological age (i.e., the number of years since one's date of birth) remains the most common operationalization in organizational research, lifespan scholars have long argued that age encompasses multiple meanings, including functional age, subjective age, psychosocial age and organizational age (Kooij et al., 2008) and various aging experiences (e.g., gaining self-knowledge, personal growth or social loss). Moreover, the use of generational categories has been criticized for its conceptual ambiguity, weak empirical foundation and tendency to foster stereotypes (Rudolph & Zacher, 2017). In response, research on knowledge transfer has thus relied on comparisons between younger and older employees or on age differences within dyads and teams, thereby acknowledging age as a socially meaningful characteristic while avoiding generational essentialism.

Within this evolving landscape, the article by Burmeister et al. (2018), published in the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, represents a foundational contribution. At the time of its publication, research on knowledge transfer had largely focused on individual motivation and willingness to share knowledge, often treating knowledge sharing as a discretionary, prosocial behaviour. Burmeister et al. (2018) challenged this view by introducing a normative and relational perspective on age and knowledge transfer. From this relational perspective, knowledge transfer unfolds within interpersonal relationships between co-workers and is shaped by interaction dynamics, role expectations and mutual perceptions between knowledge senders and receivers. Conceptualizing knowledge transfer as a dyadic process involving both a knowledge sender and a knowledge receiver, the authors demonstrated that age systematically shapes how individuals are perceived in these roles. Older employees were more likely to be seen as knowledge senders, whereas younger employees were more often perceived as knowledge receivers, reflecting deeply ingrained age norms in organizations.

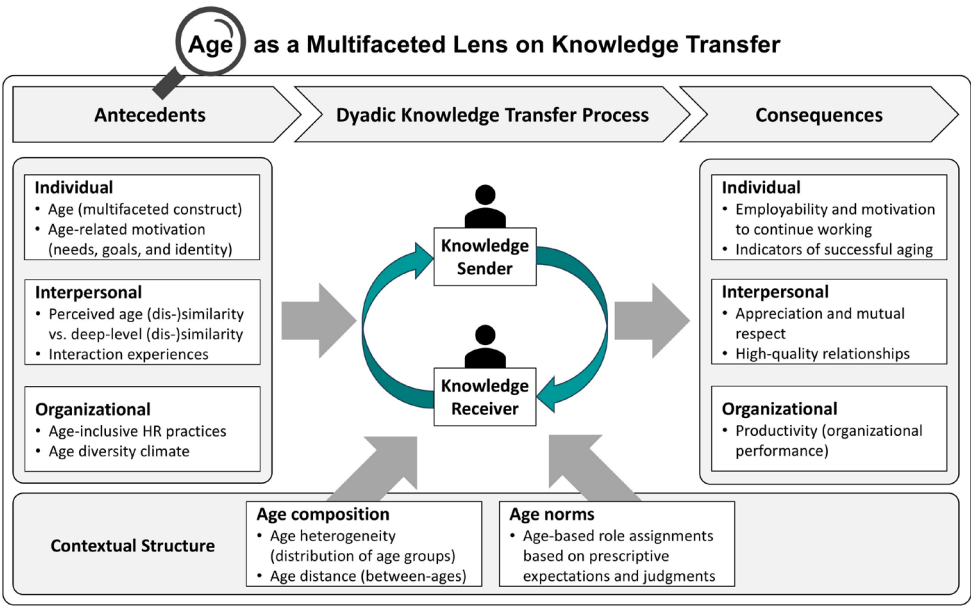


FIGURE 1 Literature synthesis of knowledge transfer through a multifaceted age lens.

Crucially, this work highlighted that knowledge transfer is not always the result of individual choice or intrinsic motivation. Instead, it is embedded in normative expectations about what employees of different ages are supposed to contribute or learn at work. These expectations can create opportunities for knowledge sharing but can also constrain learning, particularly when individuals' skills, interests or career goals do not align with age-based role assignments. By foregrounding these normative prescriptions, Burmeister et al. (2018) laid the groundwork for a research stream that recognizes age-diverse knowledge transfer as a socially structured, relational and context-dependent process.

OVERSERVED THEMES: HOW THE LITERATURE HAS EVOLVED SINCE

Since the publication of Burmeister et al. (2018), research on age and knowledge transfer has expanded in scope, theory and method. A clear pattern emerging from the accumulated evidence is that age-diverse knowledge transfer is no longer treated as a simple form of discretionary knowledge sharing but is increasingly understood as a structured, relational and context-dependent process. Across studies, a multi-level perspective on antecedents and consequences helps to organize the growing body of research.

With respect to antecedents, research has identified influences at the individual, interpersonal and organizational levels. At the individual level, age-related motivations and identities play a central role. Older employees' engagement in knowledge sharing has repeatedly been linked to generativity striving, that is, a motivation to guide, support and contribute to the development of younger people (Fasbender et al., 2021; Lu & Zhou, 2025; Wang et al., 2024). At the same time, research has emphasized that employees are not only knowledge senders but also active knowledge receivers and that engaging in such bidirectional knowledge transfer can be motivationally beneficial when knowledge roles align with age-related needs and goals (Burmeister et al., 2020). These role dynamics are often shaped by age norms rather than by motivation and competence alone, echoing the normative perspective introduced by Burmeister et al. (2018).

At the interpersonal level, perceived similarity and dissimilarity between younger and older co-workers have emerged as considerable antecedents. Studies show that perceived age dissimilarity can activate older workers' generativity striving and thereby promote knowledge sharing, whereas perceived deep-level dissimilarity, such as differences in values or work styles, tends to undermine generativity and reduce both tacit and explicit knowledge sharing (Lu & Zhou, 2025). Such effects unfold within dyads, reinforcing the view that knowledge transfer is relational. Research on intergenerational contact further indicates that frequent and positive interactions between age groups can create opportunities for bidirectional knowledge exchange, benefiting both knowledge sharing and knowledge seeking (Chen et al., 2025; Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b).

Organizational factors have also received increasing attention. Age-inclusive HR practices and age-diversity climates have been shown to shape how age differences are interpreted and whether knowledge transfer is experienced as safe and valued (Rinker & Fasbender, 2025). When organizations ensure that employees of all ages have equal opportunities to learn, contribute and advance, age-diverse knowledge transfer is more likely to occur through enhanced development striving (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b). At a broader level, evidence from firm-level research suggests that workforce age composition matters for knowledge exchange and performance, but such benefits depend on the degree of age distance. Specifically, age heterogeneity (i.e., equal distribution of all age groups) can foster complementary knowledge exchange between different ages, and thus firm performance, but only if age distance (i.e., average distance between all employees' ages) is not too excessive (De Meulenaere & Kunze, 2020).

Turning to the consequences, the literature has gradually moved beyond treating knowledge transfer itself as the ultimate outcome. At the individual level, age-diverse knowledge transfer has been linked to outcomes such as employability, motivation to continue working and indicators of successful aging at work (Chen et al., 2025; Pfrombeck et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). At the interpersonal level, positive knowledge exchange experiences can foster mutual respect, appreciation and high-quality intergenerational relationships (Rinker & Fasbender, 2025). At the organizational level, evidence suggests that age-diverse knowledge transfer can contribute to productivity under certain conditions, particularly when age diversity is managed effectively (De Meulenaere & Kunze, 2020).

Across these antecedents and consequences, several theoretical perspectives have dominated the literature. Social identity and self-categorization theories provide the backbone for understanding age-based group dynamics, often complemented by intergroup contact theory to explain when age differences become bridges rather than barriers (e.g., Burmeister et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2025; Lu & Zhou, 2025). Lifespan and motivational theories, including generativity and self-determination perspectives, are frequently used to account for age-related differences in goals and needs (e.g., Burmeister et al., 2020; Fasbender et al., 2021). More recently, stress appraisal and social comparison theories have been introduced to explain the emotional and defensive reactions that can accompany age-diverse knowledge exchange (e.g., Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022a; Rinker et al., 2025), thereby broadening the field beyond predominantly positive assumptions.

Methodologically, the field has also matured. Dyadic survey designs, often combined with time-lagged data and dyadic analysis (e.g., Actor–Partner Interdependence Modelling), have become a hallmark of age-diverse knowledge transfer research, enabling scholars to disentangle sender and receiver perspectives as well as actor and partner effects (e.g., Burmeister et al., 2020; Fasbender et al., 2021). Field experiments and randomized controlled interventions have provided rare but valuable causal evidence on how organizational practices can improve age-diverse knowledge transfer (Burmeister et al., 2021). Experimental online tasks have further been used to isolate micro-level mechanisms such as social comparison and stress appraisal (Rinker et al., 2025). In addition, multi-wave survey designs have allowed researchers to differentiate between tacit and explicit knowledge sharing and to model the affective, cognitive and motivational mechanisms (e.g., Lu & Zhou, 2025; Pfrombeck et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). Finally, firm-level and multi-level studies have expanded the outcome scope to include organizational performance indicators, linking micro-level knowledge exchange to firm-level consequences (De Meulenaere & Kunze, 2020).

Taken together, the post-2018 literature reflects a shift from asking whether age matters for knowledge transfer to examining how, when and with what consequences age-related mechanisms shape knowledge transfer. This evolution sets the stage for a more integrative and forward-looking research agenda.

FUTURE OUTLOOK: SEVEN KEY DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Building on these insights, the following research directions can be grouped into three broad priorities for future research: refining how age is conceptualized and used, deepening understanding of the mechanisms and dynamics through which knowledge transfer unfolds, and expanding the scope and contexts of age-diverse knowledge transfer research (see [Table 1](#) for an overview).

Refining the conceptualization and use of age

(1) Age as a Continuous and Multifaceted Construct. First, building on the literature's predominant focus on chronological age, future research needs to engage more fully with age as a continuous and multifaceted construct. Despite the centrality of age in this literature, studies often focus on older or younger employees as homogeneous groups or contrast them descriptively. Age as a continuous variable and its underlying processes still need further attention to better understand its impact on knowledge transfer. Incorporating multiple meanings of age, such as subjective age or aging experiences, could help explain why employees of the same chronological age differ in their engagement in knowledge transfer. Doing so would also allow researchers to disentangle age effects from cohort or career-stage effects and to better capture within-age-group heterogeneity (Kooij et al., 2008; Rudolph & Zacher, 2017).

Understanding the mechanisms and dynamics of age-diverse knowledge transfer

(2) Emotions as Central but Underexplored Mechanisms. Second, although recent studies have begun to examine cognitive and motivational mechanisms, emotions remain a largely underexplored yet theoretically critical component of age-diverse knowledge transfer. Conceptual work has suggested that age-related emotions, such as fear of losing status among older employees or fear of losing face among younger employees, may shape willingness to engage in knowledge exchange (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022a). Empirical research, however, has only begun to examine emotional mechanisms, often indirectly through constructs such as embarrassment or stress appraisal (Pfrombeck et al., 2024; Rinker et al., 2025). Future studies should more explicitly investigate discrete emotions, emotional ambivalence and affective trajectories over time to understand how emotions facilitate or inhibit knowledge transfer across different ages.

(3) Differentiating Knowledge Types and Knowledge Behaviours. Third, the literature has treated knowledge transfer as a uniform behaviour, suggesting the need for future research to differentiate between types of knowledge and forms of knowledge behaviour. Existing work often implicitly relies on a tacit–explicit distinction (e.g., Lu & Zhou, 2025), yet contemporary work contexts involve a wide range of knowledge types, including task-specific, digital, social and meta-cognitive knowledge (cf. Gerpott et al., 2017). Different types of knowledge may vary in their relevance, transferability and implications across different ages. Moreover, research has largely neglected behaviours such as knowledge hiding or hoarding, despite evidence that these behaviours are integral to understanding barriers to effective knowledge exchange (Rinker et al., 2025). Integrating these behaviours into models of age and knowledge transfer would provide a more nuanced picture.

TABLE 1 Future research directions.

Focal area	Future research direction	Recommendations
Refining the conceptualization and use of age	(1) Age as a continuous and multifaceted construct	• Capture heterogeneity of age • Examine different conceptualizations of age (e.g., subjective age, aging experiences) • Distinguish age effects from career-stage and cohort effects
Understanding the mechanisms and dynamics of age-diverse knowledge transfer	(2) Emotions as central but underexplored mechanisms	• Investigate discrete emotions, emotional ambivalence and affective trajectories over time to understand how emotions facilitate or inhibit knowledge transfer across different ages
	(3) Differentiating knowledge types and knowledge behaviours	• Distinguish different knowledge types (e.g., task-related, digital, social, meta-cognitive knowledge) • Investigate whether different knowledge types are exchanged across age groups in distinct ways • Examine diverse knowledge behaviours beyond sharing, such as seeking, hiding or hoarding
	(4) Capturing micro-dynamics and temporal fluctuations	• Study knowledge transfer as a dynamic process unfolding over time • Examine cycles of seeking, sharing, reflecting and adjusting • Use experience sampling or measurement burst designs to capture daily fluctuations
Expanding the outcome scope, context and methodological approaches	(5) Broadening the outcome scope of age-diverse knowledge transfer	• Expand individual outcomes to actual behaviour and long-term outcomes (e.g., retirement adjustment, continued employment) • Investigate interpersonal outcomes (e.g., mutual trust and workplace friendships) • Study organizational outcomes (e.g., innovation, turnover)
	(6) Digitization, distance and the changing nature of knowledge transfer	• Examine how digital technologies and AI reshape knowledge exchange across ages • Study knowledge transfer in remote and hybrid work environments • Investigate digital skill gaps and technology-related inequalities across age groups
	(7) Towards greater methodological pluralism and integration	• Combine dyadic survey designs with experiments, qualitative studies and social network approaches • Use experience sampling and longitudinal designs to capture temporal dynamics • Conduct multi-level studies linking dyadic processes to team and organizational outcomes

(4) Capturing Micro-Dynamics and Temporal Fluctuations. Fourth, given that knowledge transfer unfolds through ongoing interactions between co-workers, adopting a more dynamic view is essential for advancing the field. Knowledge transfer is not a one-off event but unfolds over time, often involving cycles of seeking, sharing, reflecting and adjusting. Theoretical approaches rooted in self-regulation or conservation of resources could be a starting point for capturing such intraindividual processes; however, further theoretical development and new perspectives that fundamentally challenge, complement

and advance our current understanding are warranted. Methodologically, experience sampling designs and measurement burst designs could illuminate fluctuations in effort, motivation and strain linked to knowledge transfer across different phases of the workday and/or one's career.

Expanding the outcome scope, context and methodological approaches

(5) Broadening the Outcome Scope of Age-Diverse Knowledge Transfer. Fifth, while the existing literature has primarily focused on antecedents and knowledge transfer processes, the outcome space of age-diverse knowledge transfer remains relatively narrow. At the individual level, research exists on employability, motivation to continue working and indicators of successful aging at work (Chen et al., 2025; Pfrombeck et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024), yet actual behaviour and long-term outcomes such as retirement adjustment, continued employment and post-retirement engagement warrant further investigation. At the interpersonal level, age-diverse knowledge transfer may influence mutual trust and the development of workplace friendships. At the organizational level, while limited research exists on productivity (De Meulenaere & Kunze, 2020), links to innovation, absenteeism and turnover remain largely speculative and require systematic empirical testing (Rinker & Fasbender, 2025).

(6) Digitization, Distance and the Changing Nature of Knowledge Transfer. Sixth, despite growing interest in contextual influences on knowledge transfer, digitization and other megatrends require greater attention in age-diverse knowledge transfer research. Digital technologies (including artificial intelligence), enterprise social media and remote or hybrid work arrangements have fundamentally altered how knowledge is created and shared. While some studies suggest that digital platforms can support older employees' generativity and successful aging at work (Wang et al., 2024), there may also be new forms of inequality, overload or exclusion (Fang et al., 2026). Future research should examine how temporal and spatial distance, digital affordances and technology-related skill gaps interact with age to shape knowledge transfer opportunities and outcomes.

(7) Toward Greater Methodological Pluralism and Integration. Seventh, although the field has made important methodological advances, continued methodological pluralism will be critical for the field's development. While survey-based dyadic studies have yielded valuable insights, combining them with objective data, experiments, experience sampling, measurement burst designs, qualitative approaches, social networks and multi-organizational designs can strengthen causal inference and theoretical integration. Such pluralism would also facilitate cross-level analyses linking micro-level and dyadic interactions to team and organizational outcomes, thereby enhancing the practical relevance of research on age-diverse knowledge transfer.

In sum, research on age and knowledge transfer has come of age itself. What began as a concern with preserving expertise in aging workforces has evolved into a sophisticated research domain that illuminates fundamental aspects of work, learning and development across the lifespan and exchange between different age groups. By addressing the conceptual, methodological and contextual complexities outlined, future research can further deepen our understanding of how knowledge transfer across the lifespan and between younger and older employees contributes not only to organizational effectiveness but also to meaningful and sustainable working lives.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Ulrike Fasbender: Conceptualization; methodology; validation; investigation; funding acquisition; visualization; writing – review and editing; writing – original draft.

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The author declares no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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