

# Nothing but a number



**W**e listen to the Queen, currently enjoying her platinum jubilee. We watch David Attenborough, who is well into his 90s. We see Naomi Campbell – a new mother aged 50-plus – walk down the catwalk with girls less than half her age. In these cases, and many more, chronological age has little relevance and reflects only the passage of time.

Despite such salient role models and heroes, our industry can still be over-reliant on chronological age to guide consumer research and recruitment. Many researchers believe there is a need for a more sensitive and enlightened approach to thinking about age, and to give more weight to factors such as lifestyle, quality of life, experience, life stage and even how old people feel, rather than how many years we've been around.

A recent review found that a lot of research is still conducted using chronological age. Yet, we've known for ever such a long time that chronological age is an unhelpful way of categorising people; in fact, many in the industry now recruit against contextual factors rather than age. That's because a single number masks the breadth of diversity across older people.

Although we start off very similar as children, we encounter diverse life experiences as we go off on many different tangents. Robert Butler, a psychiatrist who directed the National Institute on Aging in the 1970s, commented, even at that time, that getting older "brings more individuality and diversity than uniformity".

What's more, we are living longer than ever before, meaning paths diverge ever wider. Just 100 years ago, in 1922, life expectancy was only late-50s, while a 40-something today can expect to live until their mid-80s and the new alpha generation has a reasonable chance of living to 100. That means divergent life experiences will be even greater, with a wide variety of opportunities, experiences and tangents.

Such choices and life events can also impact on our lifestyle, which, in turn, impacts on our health and physical ageing. Those in sedentary jobs, or jobs that carry health risks, are more likely to age faster in biological terms. Some diseases and illnesses can also accelerate physical or cognitive decline. A recent study found that those hospitalised with Covid during the first lockdown suffered cognitive impairment equivalent to the loss of 10 IQ points – or 20 years of ageing seen between age 50 and 70 – that they are never likely to regain completely. Equally, chronic stress and lack of social contact can accelerate ageing. Loneliness can

lead people to die much earlier than people with healthy, quality relationships and social contact.

By the time people reach their 50s and 60s, there is already such a wide divergence in life experience, cognitive ability, physical prowess, health, behaviour and beliefs that chronological age becomes meaningless. In fact, in some less developed societies, people often don't even know their age, and their peers relate to them – and place them – according to their life experience, life stage and knowledge.

Yet, in the West at least, we remain wedded to this now arbitrary number. Behavioural scientists describe this as anchoring – giving too much weight to a single piece of information to make quick judgements and decisions.

We tend to assume that, past a certain age, people's cognitive ability declines. Yet, staying in work has been found to lessen cognitive decline in several studies across different locations. One study even found that returning to work after briefly retiring boosted cognitive function again. Therefore, recruiting a 70-year-old participant who is in work may lead to very different insights from someone of the same age who is retired.

Retirement is a relatively modern concept; in parts of Japan, there is no such word – and we may be reverting to a world where retirement is a relatively smaller phase of life than it has been recently. The pandemic led to a blip of earlier retirement, but, before then, people had been staying in work for longer, either because they had to for financial reasons, or because they wanted to.

With the recent rise in state pension age in the UK, the latest figures show that the male employment rate at age 65 rose to 42%, the highest it has been since the 1970s. Similarly, the female employment rate rose to 31%.

We also assume that younger entrepreneurs tend to be more successful. However, analysis by Pierre Azoulay and colleagues at MIT's Sloan School of Management found that older entrepreneurs have a substantially higher success rate. They concluded that entrepreneurial performance rises sharply with age before peaking in the late-50s. Founders of high-growth start-ups were 45 years old on average when they started the company.

If we reject chronological age as a useful segment, what can we draw on instead? Other indicators, such as the following, may be much more useful: subjective age – simply how old someone



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feels or thinks of themselves; biological age – biomarkers can show degradation and damage to tissues, and changes in metabolism; social age – influenced by the perception and expectations of different ages in a society's culture. Some societies view being older positively, others much less so; psychological age – emotional development and maturity, cognitive ability and experience.

These indicators can reveal far more about someone than their chronological age. A 2019 company study measured a number of indicators across a sample of 229 employees and was able to identify three types: youthful, mature and veteran. They asked employees questions about their cognitive and physical age, how old they looked and felt, how able they were to work productively, their health, and how engaged they felt at work. The three groups scored very differently across these indicators. Of course, these are all self-reported findings; if we could observe and record actual behaviour, that would also give us a set of more objective indicators.

As researchers, how can we research the older audience in new and exciting ways, inspired by these insights from behavioural

science? Can we cut ourselves free from misleading chronological age and consider other pieces of information as well, to create a multidimensional picture?

Think about how we might segment by subjective age, asking questions such as “How old do you feel?”

Recruiters can get a sense of biological age and psychological age by asking people what life stage they are at – for example, grandparents, still in paid employment, voluntary work, hobbies, and so on. We can also take into account someone's family history, diseases and past and present lifestyle, including factors such as diet, alcohol consumption and smoking.

We can assess how physically active and able they are, whether they have suffered any disabling illnesses or injuries that may take years off their physical life or cognitive abilities, their mental aptitude, and quality of social connections. Most biomarkers need a clinical assessment, but a few – such as blood pressure – are often known by the participant or are easy to measure. Ultimately, we need to build new dynamic frames and anchor points for an industry that is still over-reliant on the concept of chronological age.