

Chapter 8

Developing an Intergroup Communication Intervention Curriculum: Enhancing Workforce Skills Across Generations

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a community-based participatory research project that embraces opportunities to augment the skills necessary to excel in an increasingly diverse workforce, especially in terms of proficiency in communication, social interaction, and technology. The Intergroup Communication Intervention (ICI) provides needed technology skills training to older adults in a community setting to improve intergroup relationships, foster positive civic attitudes and skills, and reduce ageist attitudes of younger adults. Participants build workforce skills necessary for future success as the project advances group and interpersonal communication skills across generations using technology pedagogy to bridge the divide. The ICI approach is systematic and grounded in theory. Analyses across the project's last three years demonstrate how communication processes ignite the powerful bonding that can occur over technology. This chapter encourages future research with similar goals of using longitudinal, communication studies to enhance community, competencies, and the future workforce.

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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Census projects that the 65 and older population will increase by over 67% between 2015 and 2040 and represent 21% of the total population by 2040 (Kromer & Howard, 2013). In the United States, the participation rate of people 65 years and older in the workforce has increased over the past 20 years as well (Kromer & Howard, 2013). Although the participation rate is on the rise, there are unique challenges based on location. For example, the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (2012) reports that Ohio “faces a significant workforce challenge that could last up to 20 years: the loss of workers born during the ‘baby’ boom” (p. 4). Industries that will be particularly affected are educational services with 30% of workers 55 and older, and health care and social assistance, with 20% of workers 55 or older. The opportunity costs of allowing older adults to leave the workforce are meaningful. Despite the fact that older adults are disproportionately affected by chronic illnesses (e.g., arthritis, hypertension, and diabetes), low risk older adults generate significantly lower medical costs than “high risk” adults aged 19-34 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC, 2014). Moreover, older adults are frequently more productive, more cautious, more experienced, more collaborative with coworkers, more likely to follow safety rules and regulations, and possess more institutional knowledge than younger adults (CDC, 2014), all of which positively affects the overall productivity, safety, and health and wellness of the nation’s workforce. However, there is increasing evidence that this age group struggles to adapt to new technologies (Logan, 2000), especially in the workplace. The authors’ pilot data indicates that some older adults are considering leaving the workplace early (e.g., taking early retirement) because of the significant burden, stress, and stigma they feel related to technology adoption (Magsamen-Conrad, Dillon & Billotte-Verhoff, 2014). Stigma affects both employees and employers. A longitudinal study found that stigma consciousness predicted intentions to leave the job, which translated into actual attrition (Pinel & Paulin, 2005).

By utilizing original, ongoing, scholarly research, this chapter applies existent research and provides recommendations to advance workforce diversity learning and support new practices for the future of higher education. The Intergroup Communication Intervention (ICI) posits a program that could positively affect the future of workforce diversity by (a) training and retaining older adults in the workforce, (b) facilitating student learning and programming opportunities, (c) and guiding future partnerships between educators and practitioners as well as local institutions and communities. The ICI seeks to integrate workers’ health and wellness into occupational safety and health programs via theory-based, face-to-face training programs targeting older workers (individuals over the age of 55 years).

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