

# AGE AND RACE DIFFERENCES ON CAREER ADAPTABILITY AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AMONGST EMPLOYEES IN AN INSURANCE COMPANY

*Rebecca Tladinyane\*, Marna Van der Merwe\*\**

## Abstract

The objective of the study was to determine whether age and race groups differ significantly regarding career adaptability (measured by Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS) and employee engagement measured by Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES). A quantitative survey was conducted with a convenience sample (N = 131) of employees in an insurance company within South Africa. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were performed to achieve the objective of the study. The results showed significant differences between age and race groups in relation to the constructs. Organisations need to recognise biographical differences with regards to career adaptability and employee engagement with reference to engagement interventions and the career counselling setting.

**Keywords:** Career Adaptability, Employee Engagement, Insurance Company

*\*Department of Industrial and Organisational Psychology, University of South Africa, PO BOX 128, Damdorn, 0280*

*Tel: +27 12 429 8095*

*Fax: +2712 429 8368*

*\*\*Tel: 0844169232*

## 1 Introduction

Careers and workplaces have become more chaotic and uncertain in the highly competitive and dynamic changing business environment. Consequently, individuals are required to use their positive psychological capital in order to adapt to uncertainty and more frequent career transitions (Avey, Reichard, Luthans and Mhatre, 2011; Savickas and Porfeli, 2012). Exploring age and race group differences on career adaptability and engagement of employees in an insurance company has thus become important in the contemporary world of work. An understanding of this constructs is important not only because of the significant changes that have taken place in industry and the changing nature of careers, but also as a result of limited research-based data on the variable career adaptability in the South African organisational context.

Career adaptability is an adaptive resource enabling individuals to cope with career transitions in a stressful and uncertain times (Ferreira, 2012). Individuals with high levels of career adaptability are generally both cognitive and emotionally more ready to cope with the unpredictable adjustment prompted by changes in work and working roles (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012). Every effort should be made by organisations to improve performance and to remain relevant in this environment (Klehe, Zikic, Van Vianen, and De Pater, 2011). Workers are expected to

take greater control of their career development (Lent, 2013)

Employee engagement is seen as a function of working conditions, specifically the job demands, job resources and the control which the employee has over his work (Bakker, 2011; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). It is also a function of personal resources. Career adaptability, as a personal resource, relates specifically to the agency of the employees to manage their own careers, make career decisions and have the confidence to adapt to changing work environments (Bakker, 2011).

Early-career workers tend to have high levels of career adaptability (Rostami, Abedi, Bagnhan and Savickas, 2012). Career adaptable individuals are also likely to have strong feelings of attachment towards their organisation and are more likely to engage in self-development activities that will enable them to take advantage of opportunities in their job or career (Ferreira, 2012). According to Peeters and Emmerick (2008), adaptation to change in work settings may become more difficult with age.

According to Ferreira (2012), age relates to explaining the sense of control (self-discipline in conscientious and responsible decision making). This association may be because of early career being the period during which the life structure of early-career adults becomes stable as they begin to settle down and become committed to contributing towards an occupation, a company or a person (Coetzee and Schreuder, 2009).

Studies by Rossier Zecca, Stauffer, Maggiori, and Dauwalder (2012) have found that career adaptability seems to be uninfluenced by age in general. This is in contrast with the vocational maturity development models which suggest an increase in maturity with age, confirming the appropriateness of career adaptability as a construct in the changing world of work (Rossier et al., 2012).

There are no conclusive research findings on the relationship between age and employee engagement (Peter, 2008). Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) found that older employees generally reported higher feelings of engagement than their younger counterparts. Similarly, Mostert and Rothmann (2006) found marginal differences in vigor and dedication, based on age. Pitt-Catsouphes and Matz-Costa (2008) proposed that older employees were no longer considered “dead wood” in organisations, as career development theory suggested that employees might make career and occupation changes at any age or life stage. However, some studies suggested that no significant differences existed in relation to age and employee engagement (Bakken and Holzemer, 2000; Salamonson, Andrew and Everett, 2009).

Despite the prominence of racial differences in South Africa, few studies have investigated racial differences in relation to employee engagement. Existing studies found no significant differences in the experience of employee engagement amongst different racial groups (Bakken and Holzemer, 2000; Salamonson et al., 2009).

In practice from South Africa’s unique history and the career guidance context, it can be expected that different groups may differ in relation to career adaptability and employee engagement. Very little career guidance is provided to the majority of South Africans, specifically disadvantaged learners entering tertiary institutions. These learners end up in careers without having adequate knowledge of exactly what it entails (Maree, 2012). It is, therefore, expected that concern for the future may be experienced differently among different race groups, depending on their exposure to career guidance. In terms of age, older employees are expected to be more engaged in their organisations because of the responsibilities that come with their age.

In recent year, employee engagement among the various race groups has become an important challenge within South African organisations, due to the broad economic transformation agenda pursued by the government. The influence that race has on employee engagement is a crucial subject matter to understand. Employees from different backgrounds may need to be treated differently by their employers in order to increase engagement levels and to enhance competitiveness in the market.

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 Career adaptability**

Adaptability refers to the individual’s ability to negotiate new or changing environments (Savickas, 1997; Savickas, 2005), and their capacity, willingness and motivation to change (Hall and Chandler, 2005). Distinctly different to career maturity, which refers to the mastery of complex tasks throughout the stages of career development (Coetzee and Roythorne-Jacobs, 2012), career adaptability can be defined as the individual’s readiness responses and coping resources which are used by individuals to plan for, explore and inform decisions regarding the future possibilities of their careers (Rossier, et al., 2012).

Savickas (1997, 2005) proposed the notion of career adaptability to refer to a set of specific attitudes, beliefs and competencies which shape problem-solving strategies and coping. It is readiness of the individual to cope with predictable tasks, such as planning, preparing and participating in work as well as unpredictable demands of the organisation, such as changes in work and career (Klehe et al., 2011). In achieving this, career behaviours, such as exploration and planning, are seen as complementary (Savickas, 1997, 2005; Super, Savickas and Super, 1996).

The four dimensions of career adaptability resources are concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. Concern (‘Do I have a future?’: showing concern for one’s future, being engaged in planning by being aware, involved and prepared). Career concern involves a future orientation, feeling optimistic about it and demonstrating a planful attitude about the future (Hartung, 2013). Being concerned about one’s future requires one to be aware, involved and preparatory (Savickas, 2005, 2013).

Control (‘Who owns my future?’: degree to which an individual engages and exerts control over their future through decision-making, determination and agency). Control relates to the responsibility of individuals to shape themselves as well as the environment, and to face challenges with effort, persistence and self-discipline (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012).

Curiosity (‘What do I want to do with my future?’: how individuals gather occupational information and self-knowledge as they attempt to fit themselves into the world of work). Curiosity encourages individuals to explore alternatives of themselves and their environment, and to see themselves in different roles (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012). To explore information builds confidence in individuals to actualise their decisions and implement these in their life designs.

Confidence (‘Can I do it?’: the degree to which individuals feel a sense of self-efficacy to overcome obstacles as they work to implement their career goals) (Del Corso, 2013; Savickas, 2005, 2013;

Savickas and Porfeli, 2012). Confidence is reflected in demonstrating an efficacious attitude in solving problems and effectively navigating obstacles to constructing the future (Hartung, 2013).

An adaptable individual in the face of change is therefore, seen as concerned about their future, takes control of preparing for it, explores alternatives through their curiosity and pursues aspirations through established confidence (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012). In reaction to the changing world of work, regulation skills, adaption abilities and therefore, adaptability is regarded as critical for individuals to respond to and face the challenges associated by constantly changing work contexts (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012).

## 2.2 Employee engagement

Employee engagement implies that the individual feels strongly involved and connected to their work, invests more discretionary effort in their work and is focused and concentrated on the work they are involved in (Rossier et al., 2012). It is further viewed as a function of working conditions, as well as the personal control which the individual has over their work (Rossier et al., 2012; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004).

Engaged employees will stay with the company, advocate the products and services of the company and contribute to the bottom line of business success (Vazirani, 2007). According to Saks (2006), employee engagement is a strong interpreter of optimistic organisational performance because it shows the relationship between the employer and the employee. Engaged employees who are emotionally connected to the organisation, are more involved in their work and have a greater eagerness for achievement.

Employee engagement is characterised by three dimensions, namely vigor, dedication and absorption. Vigor refers to the willingness to invest effort, low fatigue, high levels of energy and resilience and persistence in the face of difficulties (Bakker, 2011; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003). Vigor also refers to employee's resilience when working (Bakker, 2011).

Dedication refers to the sense of significance the individual derives from doing their job, a feeling of pride and enthusiasm about work, feeling challenged and inspired at work. Individuals with high dedication strongly identify with their work and experience it as meaningful, challenging and inspiring (Bakker, 2011; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003).

Absorption indicates the feeling of being totally and happily immersed in work, often finding it difficult to detach from work (Bakker, 2011; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003). Employees with high absorption are happily engrossed in their work and fully concentrate on the task at hand (Bakker, 2011).

Based on the literature review, we propose the following hypothesis:

H<sub>1</sub>: There is a significant difference in biographical variables (age and race) of the

participants' career adaptability construct and employee engagement variables.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Participants

The population from which the sample was selected is from a business within a large financial institution based in Gauteng. The business unit consists of 298 employees in total from whom a non-probability or convenience sample was drawn. Electronic questionnaires were sent out to all elements within the population and 153 participants responded to the electronic questionnaire. However, only 131 participants completed both questionnaires, resulting in an overall response rate of 43.96%.

Majority of respondents were between the ages of 31 and 40 years, 45.80% of the total sample. There were no participants younger than 20 years and only a minimal number (6.87%) of respondents were younger than 25 years. Of the participants, 18.32% were between 26 and 30 years old, whilst 13.74% were between the ages of 41 and 45 years. The remaining 15.27% of participants were reported as older than 46 years.

In terms of race more than half of the sample consisted of white respondents (57.25%) with 22.90% African respondents. A minority of 7.63% respondents were Coloured, with 12.21% Indian respondents.

### 3.2 Measuring instruments

A biographical questionnaire was used to obtain data age and race of participants. Employee engagement was measured by using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003). The UWES is a self-rating questionnaire developed by Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) which measures three subscales of engagement, namely vigor, dedication and absorption. It comprises 17 items which include statements such as 'I am bursting with energy every day in my work' (vigor); 'My job inspires me' (dedication); and 'Time flies when I am at work' (absorption). Respondents respond to items on a seven-point rating scale, indicating frequency of feelings and experiences relative to work, varying from never (0) to always (6) (Rossier et al., 2012; Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova, 2006). The UWES is scored by calculating the score obtained per question based on the response (7-point scale) per dimension (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003).

Internal consistencies of the UWES have been established. Studies conducted in South Africa have indicated the following Cronbach's Alpha coefficients: vigor: .78, dedication: .89 and absorption: .78 (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003). Total score reliability typically exceeds .85, indicating good reliability of the UWES (Rossier et al., 2012; Schaufeli et al., 2006). The UWES has been re-

validated and psychometric properties for a South African sample have been established, indicating its suitability for use within the South African population (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003).

The participant's career adaptability was measured using Savickas' Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS) (Maree, 2012). The CAAS (International Form) consists of 24 items which respondents are required to rate on a scale from 1 (not strong) to 5 (strongest). The questionnaire includes items such as "Preparing for the future" and "Considering the consequences of my actions". These items are divided equally to measure the four dimensions of career adaptability, namely concern, control, curiosity and confidence (Maree, 2012).

The total score reliability for the CAAS is indicated as .92 for the international version of the questionnaire, while the reliability scores of the four subscales were reported as .83 for concern, .74 for control, .79 for curiosity and .85 for confidence (Maree, 2012).

The Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS) has demonstrated excellent cross-national measurement equivalence, although validity for use in South Africa needs further investigation (Maree, 2012). Initial construct validity evidence has been reported by Savickas and Porfeli (2012).

### 3.3 Research procedure

Ethical clearance and permission to conduct the research were obtained from both the higher education research institution and the participating organisation. Using a non-probability or convenience sampling method, participants were requested to voluntarily complete an electronic questionnaire of the UWES as well as the CAAS. Questionnaires were sent to participants via an electronic survey tool, accompanied by a covering letter explaining the purpose and voluntary nature of the research as well as confidentiality of information. Informed consent from participants was obtained by explaining the purpose of

the study, confidentiality of data as well as the purposes for which the data will be used in a compulsory section to be completed in the electronic survey. Participants were not able to continue with the questionnaire if they have not given explicit informed consent.

Completed questionnaires were returned to the researcher via the electronic survey tool. The confidentiality of the participants was maintained. Completed questionnaires were kept secure and the raw data was captured and converted to a Statistical Programme for Social Sciences (SPSS, version 19, 2010) dataset.

### 3.4 Statistical analysis

The data analysis procedures chosen for this research were based on the exploratory nature of the research design. Descriptive (means, standard deviations and reliability analyses), and inferential analysis T-test were performed to achieve the objective of the study.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Descriptive statistics

The descriptive statistics and Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for the subscales of the measuring instruments are depicted in Table 1. Internal consistency reliability of the measuring instruments was determined using Cronbach's Alpha coefficients.

Each of the subscales on the CAAS reflected adequately high Cronbach's Alpha values and displayed high internal reliability (.85 - .93). The CAAS had an overall Cronbach Alpha value of .96 which indicates high internal reliability of the instrument. The Cronbach's Alpha values of the UWES were also highly satisfactory with all scores between .80 and .91. The overall internal consistency of the UWES was high, at .94, indicating good reliability of the instrument.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics: means, standard deviations and Cronbach's Alpha coefficients (n=131)

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients ( $\alpha$ )
<b>Career Adaptability</b>	<b>24.75</b>	<b>54.25</b>	<b>41.93</b>	<b>6.10</b>	<b>.96</b>
Concern	19.00	54.00	41.44	6.57	.88
Control	20.00	55.00	39.51	6.64	.85
Curiosity	25.00	55.00	43.51	6.93	.93
Confidence	20.00	60.00	43.24	7.41	.90
<b>Employee Engagement</b>	<b>11.00</b>	<b>34.00</b>	<b>25.97</b>	<b>5.44</b>	<b>.94</b>
Vigor	10.00	36.00	27.10	5.71	.80
Dedication	11.00	36.00	27.81	5.96	.89
Absorption	10.00	36.00	27.10	5.71	.91

**4.1.1 Descriptive statistics: career adaptability**

In terms of means and standard deviations, Table 1 indicates the average mean score of the CAAS as  $M = 41.93$ ;  $SD = 6.10$ . The highest means score obtained was on the curiosity subscale ( $M = 43.51$ ;  $SD = 6.93$ ), whilst control presented the lowest scores ( $M = 39.51$ ;  $SD = 6.64$ ).

**4.1.2 Descriptive statistics: employee engagement**

Table 1 shows that the UWES had an average mean score of  $M = 25.97$  and standard deviation of  $SD = 5.44$ . All subscales obtained similar mean scores, with the highest on the dedication scale ( $M = 27.81$ ;  $SD = 5.96$ ), and the lowest on both vigor and absorption ( $M = 27.10$ ;  $SD = 5.71$ ).

**4.2 Inferential statistics: tests for significant mean differences**

**4.2.1 Age**

The differences in mean scores on the measurement scales between age groups were tested by means of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) (for normally distributed data) and the Kruskal Wallis Test (for data not normally distributed). As indicated in Table 2 the age group 41-45 years scored significantly higher than other age groups on concern. For this age group  $M = 42.72$  versus  $M = 33.44$  for the lowest age group 46-50 years. However, the effect size of the differences between the groups are of a small magnitude ( $\eta^2 = 11.7\%$ ).

Table 3 indicates that the age group 46-50 years scored significantly higher than the other age groups on vigor as a dimension of employee engagement. The effect size of the differences between the groups are of moderate magnitude ( $\eta^2 = 32.2\%$ ).

**Table 2.** Significant differences between age groups (ANOVA)

Variable	Age group	N	Mean	SD	Sig. level (2-tailed)	Partial Eta Squared $\eta^2$
Concern	20 - 25 years	9	39.33	4.50	.016*	.117
	26 - 30 years	24	41.21	7.02		
	31 - 35 years	32	39.91	6.02		
	36 - 40 years	28	38.00	6.52		
	41 - 45 years	18	42.72 <sup>+</sup>	5.53		
	<b>46 - 50 years</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>33.44</b>	<b>8.68</b>		
	> 50 years	11	38.36	6.04		

Note: \*  $p \leq .05$ ; <sup>+</sup> Higher mean

**Table 3.** Significant differences between age groups (Kruskal Wallis)

Variable	Age group	N	Mean rank	Sig. level (2-tailed)	Partial Eta Squared $\eta^2$
Vigor	20 - 25 years	9	32.83	.030*	.322
	26 - 30 years	24	60.90		
	31 - 35 years	32	59.86		
	36 - 40 years	28	69.59		
	41 - 45 years	18	75.08		
	<b>46 - 50 years</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>86.56<sup>+</sup></b>		
	> 50 years	11	81.32		

Note: \*  $p \leq .05$ ; <sup>+</sup> Higher mean

**4.2.2 Race**

The differences in mean scores on the measurement scales between race groups were tested by means of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) (for normally distributed data) and the Kruskal Wallis Test (for data not normally distributed). Results in Table 4 indicate that significant differences were found between race groups on concern as a dimension of career adaptability. The African race group scored significantly higher on this mean score ( $M = 42.13$ )

versus the white race group ( $M = 38.14$ ) who had the lowest mean score.

**5 Discussion**

The objective of the present study was to determine whether age and race groups differ significantly regarding career adaptability and employee engagement. The results of the study add new insights to the career literature by showing that age and race variables are important to consider in enhancing career adaptability and employee engagement.

**Table 4.** Significant differences between race groups (ANOVA)

Variable	Race group	N	Mean	SD	Sig. level (2-tailed)	Partial Eta Squared $\eta^2$
Concern	<b>African</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>42.13<sup>+</sup></b>	5.39	.033*	.066
	Coloured	10	41.10	8.54		
	Indian	15	40.13	5.54		
	White	76	38.14	6.75		

Note: \*  $p \leq .05$ ; <sup>+</sup> Higher mean

### 5.1 Significant differences between biographical variables

The study explored broad trends regarding differences between various age and race groups in terms of their career adaptability and employee engagement. The results indicated the differences to be practically small to moderate.

#### 5.1.1 Age

The majority of respondents were in the age group 31-35, whilst the minority of respondents were in the 41-50 age group. Findings indicated differences between groups, specifically relating to the latter minority age groups. Results from this study showed that respondents between the ages of 41 and 45 years were concerned with the future of their careers, planning and looking ahead to what might come next (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012).

These results are contradictory to previous research, where age has been found to have no significant impact on career adaptability (Rossier et al., 2012). It may be said, however, that these differences are not as a direct result of age only, as the differences are of small magnitude.

As found by Brown, Bimrose, Barnes and Huges (2012), career adaptability is influenced significantly by the employees' exposure to challenging work. By engaging with progressively more challenging work, these older workers can be seen to develop a positive and optimistic attitude to the future of their careers (concern) alongside an evolving sense of career development (Brown et al., 2012).

Older respondents between the ages of 46 and 50 years indicated significantly higher scores on vigor. This means that older workers are likely to invest more effort in their work, have lower fatigue, higher levels of energy as well as resilience and persistence in the face of difficulties (Bakker, 2011). These employees are also likely to display energy, zest and stamina when working (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003).

These findings are consistent with research which has found differences in vigor based on age (Mostert and Rothman, 2006). It shows that younger employees are in general less engaged than their older counterparts (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003). Older employees experience finding new jobs more difficult with age and tend to be more satisfied with their jobs as they get older (Posthuma and Campion, 2009; Spector, 2008).

#### 5.1.2 Race

Results indicate that different race groups differ significantly in terms of their career concern. African

respondents have indicated the highest concern in contrast to white respondents who have obtained the lowest scores on concern. The findings are consistent with research which found that African employees reported higher levels of career adaptability (Stoltz, 2014). Very little research has focused on differences between race groups in relation to career adaptability. Within the South African context, very little focus has also been given to career guidance variables such as career adaptability in general (Maree, 2012).

The only findings derived from literature review refer to the impact of culture and the influence of relationships with other individuals and races. Individuals from deep-rooted cultural backgrounds and strong adherence to tribal tradition might think differently about their problem-solving skills, which could influence their career adaptability (De Guzman and Choi, 2013).

### 6 Conclusion and recommendation

Overall, the results of the study added valuable new insights regarding how age and race influence career adaptability and employee engagement of employees in the insurance company. The conclusions derived from these findings indicate that practitioners can greatly benefit from understanding biographical differences between career adaptability and employee engagement in order to inform engagement strategies as well as in the career counselling and guidance setting in a diverse groups of employees. The multicultural South African context necessitates the consideration of the differences between biographical groups.

This research emphasises the significance of career adaptability in the twenty-first century world of work which enables employees to deal with the changes and environmental pressures they face. In practice, facilitating career adaptability skills through various career interventions can be seen to equip and enable individuals to deal with the changing world of work, whilst simultaneously fostering employee engagement within the organisation.

The sample used in this study was quite homogenous and not representative of the South African population in terms of age and race. The sample was also drawn from a specific industry only. This reduces the power of this study and the potential to generalise the results to the diverse South African population. By expanding the population group from which the sample is drawn to other regions within South Africa and different divisions within the organisation, more generalisable results may have been rendered.

Based on the limited scope of the study, it is strongly recommended that further studies be undertaken in order to address this limitation.

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