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## The Driving Mechanisms of Older Employees Seeking Knowledge from Younger Colleagues In the digital era, older employees face rapid technological changes, particularly the widespread adoption of artificial intelligence and automation technologies. To bridge skill gaps, older employees increasingly...

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### Abstract

Faced with the profound impact of population aging on the workplace, how to fully develop and utilize older workforce resources has become an urgent priority for organizations. Older employees seeking knowledge from younger colleagues (hereinafter referred to as older employee knowledge seeking), as an important approach for older employees to achieve successful aging at work, has gradually attracted attention from both academia and industry. However, systematic investigation into the antecedents and driving mechanisms of older employee knowledge seeking remains lacking. In response, this paper first clarifies the role of older employees as active agents of knowledge seeking. Building upon a review and synthesis of antecedents of older employee knowledge seeking, and integrating the Theory of Planned Behavior, we attempt to construct a theoretical framework for the antecedents and driving mechanisms of older employee knowledge seeking: specifically proposing a driving mechanism centered on seeking attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, along with moderating conditions comprising individual employee factors and organizational contextual factors. Future research should ground itself in the active agent role of older employees, employ advanced research methods to deepen exploration of the driving mechanisms, and thereby expand research perspectives and theoretical contributions on intergenerational knowledge transfer in organizations.

## Full Text

# The Driving Mechanisms of Older Workers' Knowledge Seeking from Younger Coworkers

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## Abstract

Faced with the profound impact of population aging on the workplace, effectively developing and utilizing older workers has become an urgent priority for organizations. Older workers' knowledge seeking from younger colleagues, as a critical pathway for successful aging at work, has increasingly attracted attention from both academia and practice. However, systematic investigation into the antecedents and driving mechanisms of this behavior remains lacking. This paper first clarifies older workers' role as active knowledge seekers and, building upon a review of existing antecedents, integrates the Theory of Planned Behavior to propose a theoretical framework for understanding the drivers and constraints of older workers' knowledge seeking. The framework identifies seeking attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control as core mechanisms, while specifying individual and organizational contextual factors as boundary conditions. Future research should center on older workers' agency, employ advanced methodologies to deepen exploration of these mechanisms, and thereby expand theoretical perspectives and empirical insights on intergenerational knowledge transfer in organizations.

**Keywords:** older workers' knowledge seeking; intergenerational knowledge transfer; workforce aging

## 1 Introduction

China's population aging has become increasingly severe. The "National Medium- and Long-Term Plan for Actively Responding to Population Aging" issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the State Council has elevated active aging to a national strategic priority. As President Xi Jinping emphasized, "Effectively addressing population aging concerns the overall development of the nation," highlighting the need to "integrate the concepts of positive aging and healthy aging into the entire process of economic and social development." Indeed, as China's population aging deepens, workplaces face profound challenges including age discrimination, intergenerational conflict, and barriers to intergenerational knowledge transfer. According to a Zhaopin report on workforce aging trends, 56.2% of Chinese enterprises have experienced employee aging, posing new challenges for human resource management. Deloitte's 2023 Global Human Capital Trends report similarly underscores the substantial value of developing and managing older workers and cultivating a diverse workforce ecosystem. Consequently, effectively developing and utilizing

older workers has become a pressing issue for organizations navigating an aging workforce (Cui et al., 2023).

Older workers often represent a golden period where knowledge reserves and practical experience converge, possessing the potential for continued contribution to society (Irving, 2014). However, realizing this potential depends on continuous learning, particularly seeking and acquiring new knowledge and skills from younger colleagues (Ackerman & Kanfer, 2020; Pfrombeck et al., 2024). This necessity arises for two primary reasons. First, older workers must regularly update their existing knowledge to adapt to evolving work processes and technological changes (Ackerman & Kanfer, 2020). Second, younger employees serve as important sources of effective knowledge for career development, often mastering distinct and potentially unique information and skills (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b). Research demonstrates that older workers' knowledge seeking from younger colleagues constitutes an effective strategy for successful aging at work (Pfrombeck et al., 2024).

This research stream shifts the traditional focus of intergenerational knowledge transfer studies—where older workers are positioned as knowledge transmitters—to examine older workers as knowledge seekers, broadening our understanding of intergenerational knowledge dynamics. This represents a current hotspot and frontier in organizational management research (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b; Li et al., 2025; Pfrombeck et al., 2024). Nevertheless, research on older workers' knowledge seeking remains in its infancy, having examined only a limited set of drivers while lacking systematic investigation of its underlying mechanisms. Addressing this gap, this paper focuses on knowledge seeking behavior within the intergenerational knowledge transfer context. Through a systematic review of domestic and international literature, we clarify the concept of older workers' knowledge seeking, synthesize its antecedents, and integrate the Theory of Planned Behavior to construct a theoretical framework explaining the antecedents and driving mechanisms from three dimensions: seeking attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. This framework not only reveals the psychological processes underlying older workers' knowledge seeking behavior but also provides theoretical guidance for organizational interventions to motivate such behavior.

## 2 Concept and Differentiation of Older Workers' Knowledge Seeking

We searched Web of Science using terms including “older workers' knowledge seeking,” “older employees seek knowledge,” “knowledge exchange between older and younger employees,” “knowledge transfer between younger and older employees,” “intergenerational knowledge transfer,” and “knowledge transfer in age-diverse coworker dyad.” For Chinese literature, we searched CNKI using terms such as “年长/年轻员工知识寻求” (older/younger employees' knowledge seeking), “代际知识转移” (intergenerational knowledge transfer), and “代际知识传承/交流” (intergenerational knowledge inheritance/exchange). After initial screening

of titles and abstracts, we identified 73 English articles, 23 Chinese CSSCI papers, and 4 doctoral dissertations related to the topic. Following a thorough reading, we excluded articles not addressing intergenerational knowledge seeking (e.g., those focusing solely on older workers sharing knowledge with younger colleagues) and supplemented missing references. The final sample comprised 32 articles (27 English, 4 Chinese CSSCI, 1 doctoral dissertation), primarily from leading journals such as *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Human Resource Management Journal*, *Journal of Knowledge Management*, *Work, Aging and Retirement*, and *管理学报* (Journal of Management). These works provide valuable foundations for our investigation.

## 2.1 Concept of Older Workers' Knowledge Seeking

Older workers' knowledge seeking is an emerging research topic originating from extended discussions of intergenerational knowledge transfer (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b; Pfrombeck et al., 2024). Intergenerational knowledge transfer refers to knowledge exchange between employees from different generations (minimum 10-year age difference), encompassing both knowledge seeking and sharing behaviors (Burmeister et al., 2020; Schmidt & Muehlfeld, 2017; Wang et al., 2017). While such transfer can occur both horizontally among peers and vertically between superiors and subordinates (Wang et al., 2020), existing research primarily focuses on peer-level exchanges (Burmeister et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2017). Consistent with prior work, we limit our scope to peer-level intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Intergenerational knowledge transfer does not occur automatically; it depends on knowledge seeking behaviors across generations (Harvey, 2012). As a key component, intergenerational knowledge seeking includes both younger workers seeking knowledge from older colleagues and older workers seeking knowledge from younger colleagues (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b). Although existing research has not explicitly defined older workers' knowledge seeking, related concepts such as intergenerational learning and reverse mentoring similarly emphasize knowledge acquisition from younger colleagues. We compare these concepts across behavioral objectives, direction, and actor relationships (see Table 1).

Synthesizing prior perspectives (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b; Pfrombeck et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2022), we define older workers' knowledge seeking as the intentional and proactive acquisition of younger colleagues' expertise, experience, insights, and opinions through active learning. This definition has three characteristics: (1) **Intergenerational verticality**: The behavior occurs between older workers and younger colleagues with at least a 10-year age gap, exclusively from older to younger workers, excluding same-generation interactions. (2) **Absence of hierarchical difference**: The actors are peers at the same organizational level, excluding superior-subordinate relationships. (3) **Subjective voluntariness**: The behavior is initiated voluntarily by older workers, representing an intentional act that may consume their time and cognitive resources.

## 2.2 Differentiation from Related Concepts

Before differentiation, we must clarify the scope of knowledge. Following prior research (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Polanyi, 2009; Wilkesmann et al., 2009), we define knowledge as relatively systematic, transferable resources—including skills, experiences, and tacit interpersonal knowledge—that enhance job competence and career adaptability. This distinguishes knowledge from more fragmented or short-term resources such as information, feedback, or help. Feedback seeking primarily involves obtaining evaluations of one's behavior or performance (Ashford, 1986), help seeking emphasizes problem-solving requests (Bamberger, 2009), and information seeking concerns queries about situational or data-based explicit knowledge (Morrison, 1993). Table 1 provides a detailed comparison.

**First**, older workers' knowledge seeking versus intergenerational knowledge transfer. Intergenerational knowledge transfer involves bidirectional exchange between generations, with employees both providing and acquiring knowledge from colleagues at least 10 years younger (Burmeister et al., 2020; Schmidt & Muehlfeld, 2017). Its core features are reciprocity and mutuality. In contrast, older workers' knowledge seeking emphasizes unidirectional acquisition, with older workers as actors actively seeking new knowledge to bridge gaps. Thus, it represents a specific manifestation of intergenerational knowledge transfer, but its research value lies in revealing the unique role transition from knowledge transmitter to knowledge seeker.

**Second**, older workers' knowledge seeking versus reverse mentoring. Reverse mentoring involves younger junior employees (as mentors) sharing knowledge with older senior colleagues (as mentees) (Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2012; Marcinkus Murphy, 2012). Both emphasize generational differences and knowledge flow from younger to older workers, but differ significantly. Reverse mentoring typically results from organizational design or formal arrangements, with younger employees as active sharers, emphasizing their leadership development and relationship building across hierarchical levels (Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2012; Marcinkus Murphy, 2012). Conversely, older workers' knowledge seeking is a voluntary behavior initiated by older workers (not organizationally designed), emphasizing learning motivation amid knowledge update pressures, excluding relationship building and hierarchical differences.

**Third**, older workers' knowledge seeking versus intergenerational learning. Intergenerational learning emphasizes mutual learning between older and younger workers, focusing on bidirectional interaction, knowledge co-construction, and value exchange (Gerpott et al., 2017; Rupčić, 2018). This concept encompasses not only knowledge seeking but also emotional and attitudinal dimensions, including critical reflection and recreation after learning (Gerpott et al., 2017; Rupčić, 2018). In contrast, older workers' knowledge seeking focuses narrowly on acquiring new knowledge and skills, excluding values and emotional integration.

**Fourth**, older workers' knowledge seeking versus younger workers' knowledge seeking. At the operational level, these behaviors share similarities—both involve actively observing and seeking knowledge from colleagues in another age group (Burmeister et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023).

### 3 Theoretical Perspectives on Antecedents of Older Workers' Knowledge Seeking

The question “What factors influence knowledge seeking?” has long attracted scholarly attention. Researchers have examined antecedents from multiple levels, including individual traits, interpersonal interactions, and organizational contexts. Our review reveals that investigations of older workers' knowledge seeking primarily adopt four theoretical perspectives: motivation, relationships, cognition and identity, and resources (see Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]).

**First**, motivation-based perspectives have provided initial insights into the drivers of older workers' knowledge seeking (Fasbender et al., 2021; Li et al., 2025). From the cognitive-motivational-relational emotion theory perspective, older workers experiencing technostress may develop different types of envy toward younger colleagues (Li et al., 2025). Benign envy may motivate knowledge seeking to close gaps, whereas malicious envy undermines learning motivation and inhibits seeking behavior (Li et al., 2025). From the lifespan development motivation perspective, generativity striving is a key antecedent of knowledge sharing (Fasbender et al., 2021). Consequently, younger colleagues' generativity efforts promote their knowledge sharing, which in turn triggers older workers' proactive knowledge seeking (Fasbender et al., 2021).

**Second**, interpersonal mechanisms underlying knowledge seeking have attracted considerable attention (Burmeister, Van Der Heijden, et al., 2018; Scheuer et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2025). Positive intergenerational relationships are crucial for knowledge transfer, promoting self-expansion and perspective-taking that facilitate mutual seeking and sharing (Burmeister & Deller, 2016; Rui & Ju, 2022; Wang et al., 2025). From the HR practices relationship perspective, age-inclusive HR practices reduce age discrimination, foster intergenerational friendships, and create an age-diversity climate encouraging mutual learning, thereby promoting older workers' knowledge seeking and sharing (Burmeister, Van Der Heijden, et al., 2018). From social exchange and aging exchange theories, older workers' humility and competence jointly shape intergenerational trust and influence cost-benefit perceptions of knowledge seeking, ultimately determining whether they engage in such behavior (Scheuer et al., 2023). Humility serves as a necessary condition that reduces psychological barriers, while competence, though important, is not essential for building confidence in knowledge seeking.

**Third**, cognition and identity theories offer important lenses for understanding antecedents. Social learning theory suggests that older workers' knowledge

seeking, as a learning-oriented behavior, is driven by late-career development striving (typically post-45 years; Bayl-Smith & Griffin, 2014; Super, 1980) and shaped by social and individual factors (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b). Age-inclusive HR practices, as a key organizational context, can enhance older workers' future time perspective and intergenerational interaction quality, stimulating development striving and knowledge seeking (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b). Categorization-elaboration theory indicates that age differences may trigger social categorization, affecting knowledge transfer (Ellwart et al., 2013). Objective age differences and subjective age diversity perceptions often hinder knowledge seeking, whereas positive age diversity beliefs and team psychological safety promote it (Ellwart et al., 2013). Organizational age effects theory suggests older workers are typically assigned the knowledge transmitter role, as age negatively correlates with knowledge seeking motivation and capability (Burmeister, Fasbender, et al., 2018). This role norm may create pressure, embarrassment, and status threat when seeking knowledge from younger colleagues, inhibiting the behavior (Pfrombeck et al., 2024; Yan et al., 2025). Temporal social comparison theory further shows that when younger employees anticipate future disadvantage (negative temporal comparison), they reduce knowledge sharing, which reciprocally limits older workers' seeking (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022a).

**Fourth**, knowledge seeking is constrained by individual resources and capabilities. The behavior consumes cognitive resources for processing new information and requires time and effort for communication (Burmeister et al., 2020). Conservation of resources theory suggests that intergenerational support climate and top management support provide resources facilitating knowledge seeking (Wang & Zuo, 2020). Similarly, younger workers' learning motivation, absorptive capacity, perceived intergenerational support, and organizational support promote their knowledge seeking (Schmidt & Muehlfeld, 2017; Wang et al., 2017; Lu & Sun, 2021). Thus, the resource perspective is essential for understanding antecedents.

In summary, existing research has examined older workers' knowledge seeking from motivational, relational, cognitive-identity, and resource perspectives. While role norms and age differences constrain the behavior, positive relationships and adequate resources can mitigate these barriers (Burmeister, Fasbender, et al., 2018; Burmeister, Van Der Heijden, et al., 2018; Ellwart et al., 2013; Wang & Zuo, 2020). However, research remains nascent, with limited literature and fragmented theoretical perspectives. Studies have focused on few individual and contextual factors while neglecting knowledge characteristics. Most examine single variables rather than systematic interactions. Moreover, theoretical frameworks inadequately address aging-specific features. Motivation studies overlook cognitive changes and social expectations in aging contexts. Relationship studies emphasize interaction quality but neglect behavioral intention formation. Cognitive-identity studies reveal age norms' importance but rarely explain attitude-behavior conversion. Resource studies cannot account for why resource-sufficient older workers lack seeking intentions. Consequently, we integrate the Theory of Planned Behavior with aging characteristics to con-

struct a systematic model encompassing motivation, relationships, cognition, and resources, revealing how seeking attitudes, subjective norms, and behavioral control drive intention and behavior.

#### 4 Driving Mechanisms of Older Workers' Knowledge Seeking

Knowledge seeking is a proactive, planned behavior. For older workers, it differs from younger employees' immediacy and spontaneity, tending toward deliberate, cautious, goal-oriented decision-making (Pfrombeck et al., 2024). This highly planned and rational characteristic makes the Theory of Planned Behavior particularly applicable. The theory, grounded in expectancy-value theory, explains general decision-making processes from an information-processing perspective (Duan & Jiang, 2008). Compared to other motivation theories, it reveals seeking attitudes under rational choice while incorporating social norm pressures and behavioral control beliefs, aligning well with older workers' knowledge seeking in intergenerational contexts (Ajzen, 1991). Specifically, older workers, typically cast as knowledge transmitters, face stronger social evaluation and normative pressure when seeking knowledge from younger colleagues (Burmeister et al., 2018), aligning with the subjective norms dimension. Additionally, knowledge seeking is constrained by cognitive resources, technological updates, and relationship quality, with implementation depending on perceived controllability and feasibility—matching the behavioral control dimension. Thus, the Theory of Planned Behavior offers a clear “attitude-norm-control” driving chain with enhanced explanatory power in aging and intergenerational contexts.

Table 2 presents specific driving elements and categories. **Seeking attitudes** reflect older workers' positive or negative evaluations of knowledge seeking from younger colleagues, comprising behavioral beliefs including intrinsic and extrinsic attitudes. Intrinsic attitudes reflect positive tendencies stemming from internal characteristics (e.g., aging non-essentialist beliefs, future time perspective), while extrinsic attitudes reflect positive tendencies from external factors (e.g., expected benefits, perceived usefulness). **Subjective norms** reflect perceived organizational and social pressures when deciding whether to seek knowledge, comprising normative beliefs including injunctive and descriptive norms. Injunctive norms reflect institutional expectations (e.g., age-inclusive HRM, older-worker-specific HRM), while descriptive norms reflect referent others' 示范作用 (e.g., age-inclusive leadership, age-diversity climate). **Behavioral control** reflects perceived difficulty of knowledge seeking, comprising control beliefs including capability and interpersonal control. Capability control reflects feasibility judgments based on cognitive resources (e.g., late-career management self-efficacy, late-career development striving), while interpersonal control reflects difficulty judgments based on relationship quality (e.g., intergenerational trust, interaction quality).

Based on this framework, we categorize drivers into seeking attitudes, subjective norms, and behavioral control, constructing a theoretical model shown in Figure

2 [Figure 2: see original paper].

#### 4.1 The Driving Process of Seeking Attitudes

**First**, aging non-essentialist beliefs, as stable cognitive characteristics, significantly influence older workers' attitudes and states (Weiss et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2023). These beliefs represent positive perceptions of aging as malleable rather than fixed (Weiss et al., 2022). Older workers holding such beliefs feel younger than their chronological age, believe aging does not entail lost opportunities or capabilities, and exhibit stronger development motivation (Weiss et al., 2022). They also tend to view age as not necessarily indicative of knowledge or ability, recognizing that younger colleagues may possess richer, more advanced knowledge in certain domains (Weiss et al., 2022). Consequently, aging non-essentialist beliefs promote positive views of intergenerational learning and increase willingness to seek knowledge from younger colleagues.

**Second**, future time perspective is a key driver (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b). Associated with personal planning and future-oriented cognition, older workers with this perspective perceive ample remaining time and opportunities in their careers (Zacher & Frese, 2009), enhancing work and learning motivation (Kochoian et al., 2017). When convinced of sufficient time and developmental opportunities, they form more positive attitudes, perceive new goals and possibilities (Zacher & Frese, 2009), and exhibit higher learning and knowledge seeking intentions (Oliveira, 2021). Moreover, they prioritize instrumental and knowledge-related goals, believing they can leverage newly acquired knowledge to maximize future benefits (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b; Rudolph et al., 2018). Thus, future time perspective increases knowledge seeking willingness.

**Third**, expected benefits directly enhance knowledge seeking intentions (Scheuer et al., 2023). As a proactive behavior, knowledge seeking requires substantial time and effort investment (Chia-An Tsai & Kang, 2019) while carrying potential risks such as status loss or face threat (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022a). These costs constitute behavioral barriers. However, knowledge seeking also yields multiple benefits (Scheuer et al., 2023), including knowledge expansion and performance improvement for older workers (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022a) and enhanced intellectual and social capital for organizations (Li et al., 2021). When perceived benefits outweigh costs, older workers' seeking intentions strengthen significantly.

**Fourth**, perceived usefulness is a prerequisite (Lai et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2018). Perceived usefulness reflects the degree to which older workers believe seeking knowledge from younger colleagues will improve job performance. When they consider the knowledge useful, they are more willing to engage in seeking behavior (Veeravalli et al., 2019). Prior knowledge management research demonstrates significant positive relationships between perceived usefulness and knowledge seeking intentions (Lai et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2018).

In summary, based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), aging non-

essentialist beliefs, future time perspective, expected benefits, and perceived usefulness as attitudinal elements drive knowledge seeking intentions. We propose:

**Proposition 1:** Older workers' seeking attitudes positively influence their behavioral intentions to seek knowledge from younger colleagues, with intentions strengthening as aging non-essentialist beliefs, future time perspective, expected benefits, and perceived usefulness increase.

#### 4.2 The Driving Process of Subjective Norms

According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), age-inclusive HRM and older-worker-specific HRM as “hard” approaches institutionalize knowledge seeking through policies, conveying injunctive norms. Age-inclusive leadership and age-diversity climate as “soft” approaches convey descriptive norms through interpersonal interactions (Leroy et al., 2018). These factors constitute subjective norms influencing seeking intentions.

**First**, age-inclusive HRM comprises practices emphasizing age inclusivity and equality, providing equal opportunities for all age groups (Boehm et al., 2014). It enhances seeking intentions through dual pathways: (1) providing equal training, development, and promotion opportunities that stimulate learning motivation (Boehm et al., 2014; Cui et al., 2025; Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b); and (2) emphasizing contributions from all age groups, fostering an age-friendly culture and high-quality intergenerational interactions that make older workers more willing to seek knowledge from trusted younger colleagues (Boehm et al., 2014; Fan et al., 2023; Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b).

**Second**, older-worker-specific HRM comprises supportive practices tailored to older workers' unique needs, including job redesign, reverse mentoring programs, appropriate training, and encouragement of mentoring (Kulik et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2025). By providing specific training and career development opportunities, these practices signal organizational value for older workers' contributions, enhancing work and development motivation (Kulik et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2025). Job redesign helps older workers adapt to age-related physical and cognitive changes, strengthening perceived organizational support (Zhang et al., 2025). Consequently, older-worker-specific HRM creates supportive developmental environments that increase confidence in future goal achievement and knowledge seeking intentions (Kulik et al., 2016; Zhou et al., 2024).

**Third**, age-inclusive leadership—focused on age differences—embraces age diversity, ensuring all employees feel included and valued for their unique contributions (De Boom & De Meulenaere, 2025). By providing age-inclusive environments, addressing older workers' needs, and encouraging their contributions, such leaders foster trust and support that enhance work and learning motivation, ultimately increasing knowledge seeking intentions (De Boom & De Meulenaere, 2025; Zeng et al., 2020). Additionally, age-inclusive leadership supports older workers' learning and development, providing assistance that makes seeking

knowledge feel safe and legitimate, thereby increasing intentions (Carmeli et al., 2010; Randel et al., 2018).

**Fourth**, age-diversity climate represents shared perceptions that employees of all ages receive fair, non-discriminatory treatment in organizational practices, policies, and rewards (Boehm et al., 2014). This climate expresses organizational inclusivity and reflects a shared belief that “age does not constitute a developmental barrier” (Boehm et al., 2014). Such supportive climates enhance perceived organizational justice and investment in continuous development, motivating knowledge seeking (Burmeister, Van Der Heijden, et al., 2018). Furthermore, age-diversity climate improves subjective age perceptions and strengthens learning motivation (Singh & Chitre, 2025), while providing opportunities to learn through knowledge seeking (Burmeister, Van Der Heijden, et al., 2018), reinforcing behavioral intentions.

In summary, based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), age-inclusive HRM, older-worker-specific HRM, age-inclusive leadership, and age-diversity climate as normative elements enhance knowledge seeking intentions. We propose:

**Proposition 2:** Older workers’ perceived subjective norms positively influence their behavioral intentions to seek knowledge from younger colleagues, with intentions strengthening as age-inclusive HRM, older-worker-specific HRM, age-inclusive leadership, and age-diversity climate increase.

#### 4.3 The Driving Process of Behavioral Control

**First**, late-career management self-efficacy, derived from self-efficacy theory, reflects older workers’ beliefs in their ability to successfully conduct career activities and achieve career-related goals (Vuori et al., 2019). Older workers with high self-efficacy possess confidence in their seniority and value, view aging positively, and experience less psychological pressure or concern about face/status loss when seeking knowledge (Vuori et al., 2019). Importantly, they maintain strong motivation to preserve and enhance work capabilities, believing they can effectively manage changing work demands (Vuori et al., 2019). Thus, late-career management self-efficacy significantly promotes knowledge seeking intentions and behavior.

**Second**, late-career development striving reflects older workers’ motivational tendency to continuously invest effort in maintaining work capabilities and acquiring new knowledge/skills during late career stages (Fasbender et al., 2021; Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b). Research identifies this as an important antecedent (Fasbender et al., 2021; Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b). Older workers with high development striving view knowledge seeking as self-improvement opportunities rather than threats to competence or status, reducing psychological barriers (Fasbender et al., 2021; Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b). Moreover, it not only enhances seeking intentions but also motivates greater time and effort investment in the process (Fasbender et al., 2021; Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b).

**Third**, intergenerational trust affects knowledge exchange effectiveness (Scheuer et al., 2023). Trust reflects positive beliefs about younger colleagues' benevolent intentions, making older workers willing to risk vulnerability (Lai et al., 2014; Scheuer et al., 2023). In high-trust contexts, older workers believe younger colleagues will provide helpful responses to seeking requests (Lai et al., 2014). Prior research demonstrates that trust promotes intergenerational cooperation and mutual knowledge seeking/sharing (Kuo, 2013; Scheuer et al., 2023).

**Fourth**, high-quality intergenerational interaction reduces cognitive gaps and age stereotypes, enabling older workers to view younger colleagues' knowledge with greater openness, thereby increasing seeking tendencies (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b; Wang et al., 2025). Positive interactions also generate work enjoyment, triggering approach motivation that encourages exploration of new opportunities and learning motivation that promotes seeking from well-connected younger colleagues (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b).

In summary, based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), late-career management self-efficacy, late-career development striving, intergenerational trust, and interaction quality as behavioral control elements enhance knowledge seeking intentions. We propose:

**Proposition 3:** Older workers' behavioral control positively influences both their behavioral intentions and actual knowledge seeking behavior, with stronger intentions and more frequent behavior associated with higher late-career management self-efficacy, development striving, intergenerational trust, and interaction quality.

#### 4.4 From Behavioral Intention to Actual Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior posits that behavioral intention is the strongest predictor of actual behavior, directly influencing knowledge seeking actions (Ajzen, 1991; Lai et al., 2014). Knowledge seeking intention positively correlates with implementation frequency—stronger intentions increase action likelihood (Lai et al., 2014; Veeravalli et al., 2019). High intentions help overcome psychological barriers like status threat and face loss, while triggering goal commitment mechanisms that drive action and increase resource investment (e.g., longer discussions, more frequent requests) (Veeravalli et al., 2019; Wu & Li, 2025).

However, intentions do not always translate into behavior, as expressing hypothetical intentions is costless while actual behavior involves costs, risks, and obstacles (Allen et al., 2005). This translation may be constrained by individual factors (e.g., self-monitoring) and contextual factors (e.g., learning climate). **First**, self-monitoring significantly affects intention-behavior consistency (Snyder, 1974). High self-monitors exhibit behavioral variability guided by external cues, making their intentions weaker predictors (Ajzen et al., 1982; Allen et al., 2005). Conversely, low self-monitors show stronger stability across attitudes, intentions, and behavior, guided by internal states and less influenced by situa-

tions, making them more likely to act on intentions (Ajzen et al., 1982). Thus, low self-monitoring older workers are more likely to engage in knowledge seeking.

**Second**, learning climate is an important constraint. When strong learning climates exist, older workers perceive organizational support for learning behaviors that aligns with their intentions, motivating action (Banerjee et al., 2017). Conversely, weak learning climates signal that knowledge seeking is discouraged, creating confusion and reducing behavior likelihood. We propose:

**Proposition 4:** Older workers' knowledge seeking intentions positively influence actual behavior, with this relationship moderated by self-monitoring and organizational learning climate. Specifically, self-monitoring weakens the intention-behavior link, while learning climate strengthens it.

## 5 Conclusions and Future Research Directions

### 5.1 Research Conclusions

This review yields three main conclusions. **First**, in intergenerational knowledge transfer, older workers are not only knowledge transmitters but also knowledge seekers. This phenomenon is widespread, and older workers' role as active seeking agents cannot be ignored. Given technological advancement and organizational change, older workers must regularly update knowledge (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b), while younger employees possess unique information, making them important knowledge sources. Qualitative studies show younger workers can demonstrate new technologies to older colleagues (Gerpott et al., 2017; Harvey, 2012). Fasbender and Gerpott (2022b) emphasize that older workers' knowledge seeking is increasingly important for adapting to organizational change.

**Second**, existing research follows an intergenerational knowledge transfer antecedent framework, examining drivers from four perspectives: motivation, relationships, cognition and identity, and resources. Drawing on organizational age effects theory (Burmeister, Fasbender, et al., 2018), social learning theory (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b), social exchange and aging exchange theories (Scheuer et al., 2023), and conservation of resources theory (Wang & Zuo, 2020), studies identify individual antecedents (traits, cognition, motivation), interpersonal antecedents (trust, interaction quality), and organizational antecedents (HR practices, top management support, climate).

**Third**, integrating the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), we developed a systematic framework. Aging non-essentialist beliefs, future time perspective, expected benefits, and perceived usefulness constitute seeking attitudes. Age-inclusive HRM, older-worker-specific HRM, age-inclusive leadership, and age-diversity climate constitute subjective norms. Late-career management self-efficacy, development striving, intergenerational trust, and interaction quality constitute behavioral control. These enhance seeking intentions and behavior, while self-monitoring and learning climate moderate the intention-behavior link.

This framework unpacks the “black box” of knowledge seeking formation, expands intergenerational knowledge transfer research, and provides new theoretical insights for motivating older workers’ knowledge seeking.

## 5.2 Future Research Opportunities

Although older workers’ knowledge seeking from younger colleagues is common in practice, theoretical research lags behind. The topic remains in its early stages (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b; Pfrombeck et al., 2024), with particularly limited domestic research. This presents several opportunities for future investigation.

**5.2.1 Focus on Older Workers’ Agency in Intergenerational Knowledge Seeking** Existing research primarily examines younger workers as actors, neglecting older workers’ agency within the same ecosystem. However, as technology advances and working lives extend, older workers’ continuous learning becomes increasingly important (Ackerman & Kanfer, 2020), and younger colleagues represent vital knowledge sources (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b). To adapt to career demands, older workers have both motivation and necessity to seek knowledge (Pfrombeck et al., 2024). Research shows this behavior promotes successful aging (Pfrombeck et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2023) and enhances organizational efficiency and innovation (Gadomska-Lila, 2020; Singh et al., 2021). Therefore, examining older workers as knowledge seekers is essential for understanding intergenerational knowledge transfer—a perspective previously neglected even in Western research. Exploring “how to motivate older workers to seek knowledge from younger colleagues” represents an important and intriguing future direction.

**5.2.2 Enriching Drivers and Mechanisms of Older Workers’ Knowledge Seeking** Current research focuses on drivers of younger workers’ knowledge seeking, with limited investigation of older workers’ antecedents. Existing studies examine only a few factors such as age-inclusive HR practices, interaction quality, and future time perspective (Burmeister, Van Der Heijden, et al., 2018; Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b). Moreover, research is fragmented, lacking comprehensive analysis of driving processes, which hinders both theoretical understanding and practical guidance. Future research should systematically identify drivers and processes using grounded theory, text mining, and other methods to reveal mechanisms of intergenerational knowledge exchange.

One promising direction examines STAARA technologies’ (smart technology, AI, automation, robotics, algorithms; Pak et al., 2023) impact. STAARA applications restructure older workers’ job content and boundaries, imposing additional demands (Liang et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2025). Older workers must master technical skills and handle more challenging cognitive tasks (Pak et al., 2023; Parker & Grote, 2022). Drawing on cognitive appraisal theory, some older workers may positively appraise such stress, believing they can cope through knowledge seeking from younger colleagues who typically possess more technological

knowledge (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b). Others may negatively appraise the situation, feeling overwhelmed and avoiding action. Future research could explore STAARA' s mechanisms and boundary conditions, providing theoretical support for helping older workers navigate technological change.

Knowledge characteristics also warrant investigation. A common distinction is explicit versus tacit knowledge (Burmeister & Deller, 2016). Explicit knowledge is formalized, codified information (e.g., manuals), while tacit knowledge is cognitive, experience-based, and embedded in individuals (Burmeister & Deller, 2016; Smith, 2001). Unlike explicit knowledge accessible through documentation, tacit knowledge requires interaction and seeking (Duan et al., 2022; Smith, 2001), making it a stronger driver. Knowledge also varies in complexity, difficulty, and importance (Kang et al., 2010; McEvily & Chakravarthy, 2002). Highly complex/difficult knowledge increases psychological costs, potentially hindering seeking. Highly important knowledge, perceived as critical for task performance or career development, strengthens seeking intentions. Future research should examine how knowledge characteristics shape seeking mechanisms.

**5.2.3 Developing Governance Systems for Older Workers' Knowledge Seeking** While the importance of older workers' knowledge seeking is clear, effective guidance requires robust governance systems—a topic receiving insufficient attention. Current research examines few drivers and lacks systematic investigation of driving mechanisms. Moreover, it overlooks the dual and complex nature of consequences (Pfrombeck et al., 2024). Whether older workers benefit from seeking depends on effective guidance of post-seeking outcomes. Future research should examine both driving mechanisms and consequence mechanisms to build comprehensive governance frameworks addressing pre-behavior “driving governance” and post-behavior “consequence governance” to effectively guide intergenerational knowledge exchange and achieve organizational goals.

For **driving governance**, research could examine how HR practices or leadership motivate seeking. Developmental HR practices, which emphasize employee interests and growth, may be effective (Kuvaas, 2008; Tang et al., 2021). These integrated practices—including diverse training, development assessment, job design, and communication feedback—signal organizational value and support, enhancing intrinsic motivation and work engagement that awaken development motivation and increase knowledge seeking (Kuvaas, 2008; Tang et al., 2021). Future research could apply signaling theory to examine how developmental HR practices promote seeking through individual cognition (e.g., perceived meaning, thriving).

For **consequence governance**, research should examine diverse outcomes of knowledge seeking. Pfrombeck et al. (2024) identified dual effects based on lifespan development self-regulation theory: while seeking enables continuous learning and successful aging perceptions, violating age norms creates psychological costs, with embarrassment ultimately reducing continued work intentions. Thus, examining different consequences and interventions is crucial. For instance, con-

servation of resources theory could explore dual effects and boundary conditions: seeking may help older workers gain knowledge resources, promoting thriving and performance, but may also consume cognitive and interpersonal resources (processing information and communicating; Burmeister et al., 2022), inhibiting thriving and harming performance. Organizations and leaders could provide instrumental and emotional support as interventions.

**5.2.4 Improving Research Methodologies** Existing research primarily uses qualitative interviews and surveys, occasionally multi-timepoint or experimental designs, but predominantly relies on cross-sectional, single-source data. Future studies should adopt more dynamic and diverse methods. **Experience Sampling Method (ESM)**, also known as diary method, is promising. ESM captures individuals' momentary assessments multiple times within short periods to record daily experiences (Zhang et al., 2017). Its core logic is that events, perceptions, states, and behaviors fluctuate within short timeframes (e.g., a workday) and mutually influence each other. Such within-person analysis effectively examines the dynamic process of knowledge seeking, which occurs daily based on situational opportunities or constraints (Burmeister et al., 2022). Between-person designs may mask short-term cognitive effects only detectable when examining daily fluctuations (Burmeister et al., 2022). Future research should employ ESM to investigate within-person dynamics.

**Longitudinal designs** are also valuable. The Theory of Planned Behavior emphasizes that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control jointly influence intentions and behavior (Ajzen, 1991). This motivation→intention→behavior process requires time to evolve rather than occurring instantaneously. Given potential identity threats and status loss risks, older workers often require thorough preparation and planning before acting (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022b; Li et al., 2025; Pfrombeck et al., 2024). Longitudinal designs thus provide stronger explanatory power for long-term driving mechanisms.

Finally, **common method bias** requires attention. Self-report surveys inevitably introduce such bias (Podsakoff et al., 2024). Although statistical remedies exist (e.g., Harman's single-factor test, unmeasured latent method factor, marker variable technique), they cannot fundamentally solve the problem (Podsakoff et al., 2024). Future research should control method variance at the design stage through multi-source data (self, peer, supervisor ratings) to reduce common method bias and enhance validity.

**5.2.5 Emphasizing Indigenous Research** Most existing measurement scales and findings derive from Western contexts. Given substantial cultural and social differences between East and West, their applicability to Chinese organizations requires examination. Future research should investigate formation and effect mechanisms in Chinese contexts to reflect local realities and provide targeted management recommendations.

**First**, *face* concerns are paramount in Chinese culture, representing important

social interaction goals (Zhang et al., 2011). Older workers, with strong self-esteem and image maintenance needs, are particularly sensitive to face threats (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022a). Face includes gaining face and protecting face. When oriented toward gaining face, older workers may seek knowledge to enhance performance and demonstrate competence. When oriented toward protecting face, they may perceive seeking from junior colleagues as revealing inadequacy, creating face threats that inhibit seeking.

**Second**, *traditionality* is an important cultural factor. Chinese culture emphasizes hierarchical age relationships, with older workers viewed as experienced and authoritative (Li et al., 2012). Highly traditional older workers adhere to this role positioning, emphasizing age-based hierarchy. In this context, seeking knowledge from younger colleagues may be interpreted as role inversion, conflicting with internalized social expectations. Additionally, highly traditional older workers tend to rely on existing knowledge, rarely acknowledging deficits, which inhibits seeking behavior.

**Third**, *collectivism* profoundly influences knowledge seeking. China is a highly collectivist culture where employees prioritize collective interests, even when conflicting with personal interests (Chen et al., 2013). This may motivate older workers to enhance capabilities through seeking to better serve team or organizational goals. Moreover, collectivism emphasizes humility and mutual assistance, making older workers more willing to learn from capable younger colleagues, viewing seeking as legitimate teamwork rather than personal inadequacy (Chen et al., 2013).

**5.2.6 Expanding Theoretical Perspectives** Existing research relies on limited theories (e.g., social exchange, social learning, conservation of resources). Future studies could adopt aging-relevant perspectives such as **Selective Optimization with Compensation Theory** (Baltes & Baltes, 1990) and **Socioemotional Selectivity Theory** (Carstensen et al., 1999).

Selective Optimization with Compensation theory posits that individuals consciously select, optimize, and compensate to maintain or enhance quality of life and work performance amid age-related declines (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). Research suggests knowledge seeking may be an important strategy for maintaining work ability and achieving successful aging (Pfrombeck et al., 2024). Future research could examine when older workers adopt knowledge seeking to cope with age-related resource loss.

Socioemotional Selectivity Theory, highly relevant to both aging and knowledge seeking, proposes that as perceived future time diminishes with age, core motivations shift from knowledge seeking to emotional regulation (Carstensen et al., 1999). A baseline prediction is that age hinders knowledge seeking by reducing motivation. However, the theory also acknowledges malleability in time perception. Future research could examine how organizational practices shape older workers' time perception to influence knowledge seeking motivation and

behavior.

*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

*Source: ChinaXiv – Machine translation. Verify with original.*