

# Locus of Control at Work: Does Age Matter?

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DOI: 10.29322/IJSRP.9.11.2019.p9561

<http://dx.doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.9.11.2019.p9561>

**Abstract-** Locus of control is one of the most relevant and important concepts that affects outcomes in modern organizations. It is psychologically connected to how we cope with stress and our overall well-being. Research has shown that as a construct locus of control, specifically whether a person displays an internal or external orientation, plays a substantial role in a person's attitudes and beliefs in the workplace (Spector, 1988). A person's age is also interrelated to how they perceive life events. A study was done with a total of 871 participants who were recruited through the use of convenience sampling in order to examine whether there was a significant difference in work locus of control between age groups. Participants completed a survey answering a series of demographic questions as well as several Likert scale type questions measuring a group of nine constructs. The main instrument used for this study was the 8-item abbreviated version of Spector's Work Locus of Control Scale (WLCS) (1988). Results indicated no significant difference in work locus of control among the four different age groups. The findings of this study have implications for employee performance and HR practices.

**Index Terms-** age, locus of control, perceived control, work locus of control.

## I. INTRODUCTION

An extensive body of research is devoted to control beliefs and their importance. Adler (1930) observed that having control over one's external environment is an intrinsic human need. Psychologists today continue to examine perceived control in a variety of ways and control beliefs are correlated with an assortment of affective, behavioral, cognitive, and biological outcomes (Ng, Sorensen, & Eby, 2006). Work locus of control focuses exclusively on control beliefs and expectancies concerning the workplace and has proven to be significant for outcomes at both individual and organizational levels (Spector, 1988). Research supports the idea that in the domain of work, control beliefs tend to increase with age. Therefore, the intention of this paper is to observe whether differences in work locus of control can be attributed to a person's age.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1 Locus of Control

Locus of control as a concept was first introduced by Phares (1957) and further expanded by Rotter (1966) as the framework of his social-learning theory of personality (Akkaya & Akyol, 2016). It is the extent to which people believe outcomes are determined by their own behavior versus the extent to which they perceive that outcomes are uncontrollable, due to chance,

luck, fate, or influenced by more powerful others (Rotter, 1966). As a psychological construct, locus of control indicates how much control an individual perceives they have over their general life outcomes. Rotter (1966) further established the Internal-External Locus of Control Scale (I-E Scale), which has endured as the most repeatedly used scale for assessing locus of control (Twenge, Zhang, & Im, 2004).

Those who display an internal locus of control (internals) identify outcomes as a direct consequence of their behavior, while those who display an external locus of control (externals) attribute outcomes to factors that are outside of themselves (Rotter, 1966). Research indicates that locus of control is interrelated to several variables of motivation, personality, behavior, and attitudes (Twenge et al., 2004) as well as being linked to psychological and physical well-being throughout life (Dijkstra, Beersma, & Evers, 2001). Personal belief of control over one's exterior environment symbolizes a constructive and essential assessment of self-worth, while the absence of control denotes a negative estimation of self-worth (Ng et al., 2006). Perception of control is by itself psychologically beneficial, even when control does not exist (Miller, 1980). This is why internal locus of control is often associated with better overall welfare.

Lynch, Hurford, and Cole (2002) suggest that internal and external locus of control orientations are shaped throughout a person's childhood, molded by learning experience and parental behavior. Parents foster internal locus of control when they encourage a child's independence, whereas overprotection can lead to forming an external locus of control orientation (Lynch et al. 2002). Rotter (1966) explained that locus of control stems from an individual's universal belief regarding their environment. Those who have their endeavors steadily rewarded develop an internal locus of control, whereas those who have difficulty succeeding notwithstanding their best efforts tend to develop an external locus of control (Rotter, 1966). Thus, people who develop a high internal locus of control learn to notice an association between behavior and rewards (Rotter, 1966).

A common assumption by most psychology and sociology literature is that locus of control is stable across time (Phares, 1957). Nevertheless, while general locus of control is a fixed characteristic, control orientations can habitually shift depending on the present situation (Wilski, Chmielewski, & Tomczak, 2015). This is because whether someone is internal or external is determined by environmental factors. Under this assumption, locus of control has been identified as a multidimensional construct, assuming that people have the ability to change their control orientations throughout different stages of their lives (Wilski et al., 2015). This signifies that people have

the ability to be both internal and external or to change their orientation depending on the environment.

### 1.2 Work Locus of Control

Spector (1988) established work locus of control as the prospect that outcomes, returns, and reinforcements (e.g. promotions or salary increases) in the work place are decided by either one's own behaviors or external forces. This expectancy impacts the occurrence of frustration and the reactions to experienced frustration in the workplace (Fox & Spector, 1999). In order to focus on specific attitudes and beliefs in the work field, Spector (1988) created the Work Locus of Control Scale (WLCS). Items for this scale were produced through theoretical examination of the locus of control construct and how it is interconnected to behavior in the domain of work (Spector, 1988). The Work Locus of Control Scale was found to have noticeable associations to job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and role stress (Spector, 1988).

Spector (1988) observed that within a work setting, locus of control is associated with overall effort, motivation, perceptions, overall job performance, and compliance with authority. Those who display an internal work locus of control orientation display additional hours worked, intrapreneurship skills, self-efficacy, psychological capital, better attendance, and positive relationships with their supervisors (Karabay, Akyüz, & Elçi, 2016). Moreover, people with an internal orientation are also perceived as more sociable, success-oriented, competent, and independent than those with external orientation, who often engage in inflexible, suspicious and insecure-avoidant behaviors (Basım, Çetin, & Meydan, 2009).

Individuals who hold higher positions in their organizations usually display an internal locus of control (Angelova, 2016). Yukl and Latham (1978) observed that those who exhibit an internal locus of control often set more challenging goals and their need to achieve these goals is stronger. This is reflective of greater intrinsic motivation (Yukl & Latham, 1978). Conversely, people with an external locus of control often display inferior job performance when compared to internals because they are unable to anticipate rewards for their efforts (Tong & Wang, 2006).

Locus of control also has the ability to influence coping styles in the workplace. Perceiving control over one's external environment is a strong sign of effective personal coping resources (Thoits, 1995). Gray-Stanley et al. (2010) detected that internals are more inclined to actively cope with negative circumstances as opposed to externals, who believe they are at the mercy of luck, chance, or fate. Internals often display the ability to overcome adverse task experiences and job attitudes, including job stress, burnout, anxiety, turnover, absenteeism, role overload, role conflict, and role ambiguity (Karabay et al. 2016).

Since externals perceive that outside forces have direct control over their experiences, it is possible they will identify more stressors (Muhonen & Torkelson, 2004) and report lower job satisfaction. Wilski et al. (2015) advised that work locus of control fundamentally depends on degree of autonomy a person experiences in the workplace. Hard-workers who usually exhibit an internal orientation may develop external perceptions if they come up against many difficulties, such as a rigid work system, an authoritarian leader, or high levels of stress (Wilski et al.

2015). Similarly, externals may change their perceptions if working conditions encourage autonomy (Wilski et al. 2015).

### 1.3 Age as an Indicator of Locus of Control Orientation

Twenge et al., (2004) discuss two models which offer opposing views regarding changes over time in locus of control. The independence model highlights a substantial increase in individualism to suggest that locus of control has become more internal (Helson, Jones, & Kwan, 2002; Twenge & Campbell, 2001). This model reinforces that people are more internal today because they have a higher degree of control over their environments. As individualism rises, the independence model expects internality to rise as well (Twenge et al., 2004). Remarkably, increased individualism can also cause greater externality. This is due to the fact that individualism encourages self-serving bias, which arises when people accredit positive events to themselves and assign negative events to forces outside themselves (Twenge et al., 2004). According to prior research, the presence of self-serving bias is noticeably higher people who report an external locus of control (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999).

The opposing alienation model anticipates that locus of control will become more external over time. This model suggests that more recent generations experience greater cynicism, distrust, and alienation (Twenge et al., 2004). Research has noted that over time, college students are progressively exhibiting a more external locus of control. Eighty percent of students attending universities in the early 1960s reported considerably less external control beliefs than a typical millennial college student in the 2000s (Twenge & Campbell, 2008). Millennials account for over half of the workforce in the United States today (Pew Research Center, 2018) and a sharp rise of external locus of control in young adults has its own implications for behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs in the workplace (Twenge & Campbell, 2008).

In the workplace, externals are more prone to blame others when something goes wrong and seek to avoid being held accountable for failures as opposed to internals (Twenge & Campbell, 2008). Blau (1987) found that in a workplace setting, internals seek to control their immediate environments, whereas externals tend to fall back, displaying a need to be pushed before attempting to do certain things themselves. In young adults, this may be due to inexperience and the desire to want to present themselves as knowledgeable in front of their more seasoned coworkers. Twenge and Campell (2008) suggest that externals in the workplace are more likely to view themselves as helpless and this leads them to see outcomes as a consequence of external variables such as company policies and procedures. Externals also tend to show a preference for team work due to the fact that team work establishes collective accountability, where employees share responsibilities, but also take part in subsequent rewards and losses (Twenge & Campbell, 2008).

According to Siu, Spector, Cooper and Donald (2001), research supports the idea that in the domain of work, a person's control beliefs increase as they age. Perceptions of control over work have proven to be greater in middle age than in young adulthood (Lachman & James, 1997). Those in middle age have a higher chance of holding more powerful positions with more

responsibilities on the job and in their families, compared to when they are younger or older (Lachman & James, 1997). Older employees also tend to exhibit less stress against problems at work than younger employees (Lachman & James, 1997). Siu et al., (2001) observed that older individuals usually develop additional coping resources over time, consequently seeing their problems as less taxing. This may be why older people usually report fewer aggravations than their younger counterparts, due to their greater range of experience (Siu et al., 2001).

Locus of control can determine an employee's motivation, performance, coping mechanisms, and overall organizational behavior. Prior studies on locus of control have shown that general control beliefs increase with age. It has also been suggested that people have the ability to differ in their control orientations during different stages of their lives and that older people sense a higher level of control over their work domains. However, few studies have exclusively concentrated on how work locus of control changes as people age. Therefore, after reviewing the literature it is hypothesized that there is a significant difference in work locus of control between age groups.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. Participants

A sample of 871 participants was drawn using convenience and snowball sampling methods. Most of the sample resided in the United States, Brazil, the United Kingdom and Curacao. The population on interest was adults 18 years of age or older at the time of the study who are currently employed or have held a full time or part time job at some point prior to the study.

#### B. Procedure

An internet-based survey was created through Google Forms in order to collect data anonymously. Participants were recruited through e-mail, text messaging, and social media (e.g. LinkedIn, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram) and provided a link with a standardized recruitment message and the designed survey. They were asked to forward the survey to any other contacts who were in the population of interest. Preceding the survey, participants were presented with an informed consent form describing the study and giving them the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Moreover, participants were requested to disclose demographic information including gender, age, level of education, ethnic identity, sexual orientation, number of children, job tenure, marital status, and household annual income. After demographic information was collected, participants were presented with a series of Likert scale type questions measuring the following group of constructs: competence (perceived personal), independence (perceived personal), leadership (perceived personal), self-determination (perceived personal), Desire for Status, Gender Equality, Work Related Locus of Control, Interpersonal Conflict at Work (perceived personal), and the Big Five Personality Traits (openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion-introversion, agreeableness and neuroticism). Survey responses were then exported to SPSS and analyzed statistically.

#### C. Instrumentation

The construct work locus of control was measured using the 8-item abbreviated version of the Work Locus of Control Scale (WLCS) (Spector, 1988). The Work Locus of Control Scale is a 16-item instrument intended to evaluate control beliefs in the domain of work. Responses are rated on a six-point scale with anchors 6 = *disagree very much*, 5 = *disagree moderately*, 4 = *disagree slightly*, 3 = *agree slightly*, 2 = *agree moderately*, and 1 = *agree very much*. Half of the items on the WLCS are written in each direction, representing externality and internality. High scores represent externality, therefore internally worded items must be reversed scored before calculating a total score. Total score, which is the sum of all items, is used to interpret results and ranges from 16 to 96. The 8-item abbreviated version consists of items 2, 3, 5, 9, 11, 13, 14, 16 and scores range from 8 to 48. For the purpose of this study, a score of 8-24 was interpreted as an internal orientation, a score of 25-31 was interpreted as both an internal and external orientation, and a score of 32 or higher was interpreted as an external orientation.

### IV. RESULTS

A total of 872 responses were acquired, yet, 1 response was omitted because it did not meet inclusion criteria. Descriptive statistics presented a sample of 871 participants between the ages of 18 and 84, with an average age of 37 years old (See Figure 1). 551 (63%) were female and 316 (36%) were male. The average female in this sample was 38 years old while the average male was 36 years old. 285 (32.7%) of the sample was 18-28 years old, 253 (29%) of the sample was 29-39 years old, 222 (25.5%) of the sample was 40-55 years old, and 111 (12.7%) of the sample was 55 and older.

The majority of the respondents were White/Non-Hispanic (47.3%), followed by 37 % Hispanic/Latinos, and 6.9% Black/African-American. 344 (39.5%) of the respondents held a Bachelor's degree at the time of the study, followed by 179 (20.6%) with a Master's degree, 156 (17.9%) with a high school diploma or GED, 119 (13.7%) with an Associate's degree, and 64 (7.3%) with a Doctorates degree. Most of the sample reported their current job as Professional (45.4%), followed by Management (15%), and Service/Sales (14.7%). Therefore, people who took part in the study were primarily professional, college educated, White/Non-Hispanic millennials.

In order to verify if there was a significant difference in work locus of control between age groups, an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was chosen as the main source of hypothesis testing. A Pearson correlation test was also performed to establish if there was a linear relationship among perceived work locus of control and age. There was no statistically significant difference between groups as determined by a one-way ANOVA ( $F(3,867) = 1.646, p = .177$ ) (Table 1). The result of the correlation denoted a moderately weak ( $r = .012$ ) correlation that was not statically significant ( $p = .726$ ) between variables (Table 2).

V. FINDINGS AND LIMITATIONS

Results of this study failed to support the initial hypothesis, which proposed that there would be a significant difference in work locus of control between age groups. Existing literature may lead one to conclude that younger participants would be more likely to exhibit an external locus of control, while older participants might display a more internal orientation. However, the results indicated that no significant differences existed within the given sample.

These findings directly contradict results of the previous cross temporal meta-analysis conducted by Twenge et al. (2004) which supports the alienation model and determined that college students were becoming increasingly more external over time. The results of that study suggested that as individualism increased, locus of control became more external, specifically in younger people. The findings of the present study however support the independence model, which proposes that locus of control has become more internal. Most responses (84%) were from participants living in the United States, a greatly individualistic country. This coincides with research findings that denote a higher frequency of internal scores in nations that are considered more individualistic (Hsieh, Shybut, & Lotsof, 1969; Hung, 1977; McGinnies, Nordholm, Ward, & Bhanthumnavin, 1974).

While research done by Lachman & James (1997) suggest that perceptions of control over work have proven to be greater in middle age compared with young adulthood, the findings of the present study directly contradict this notion. Work locus of control scores were extremely similar across four different age groups, implying that perception of control is present in young adulthood and in older adulthood as well. Similarly, several other cross-sectional studies have not been able to detect any considerable differences in locus of control scores between young adults and other age groups (Grob, 2000; Mirkowsky, 1995). In some cases, results have even demonstrated a higher degree of externality in older adults (Mirkowsky, 1995; Shaw & Krause, 2001).

Although the initial hypothesis was not supported, results do indicate positive implications for the workforce. Most of the literature strongly sided with the belief that an internal orientation of work locus of control is more advantageous. Internals are found to experience more success at work, while success at work also leads to a higher internal locus of control (Dijkstra et al., 2001). In contrast, negative connotations are often linked to an external work locus of control and work-related well-being.

What the results of this study represent is that each age group perceived more internal attitudes and beliefs about work locus of control. All of the mean scores fell into the internal range. Therefore, it can be determined that age and number of life experiences do not have a bearing on whether someone has an internal or external work locus of control, at least within the given sample. These findings represent an optimistic view of locus of control in the domain of work.

From a HR perspective, the findings demonstrate favorable attitudes and beliefs in the workplace, at least where work locus of control is concerned. The workforce represented by the analyzed sample attributes events in the workplace to their

own actions instead external factors, such as management or the organization. This is important and beneficial to employers because it represents increased levels of personal responsibility and accountability in the workforce.

A substantial limitation of this study is presented in the sampling method used to collect data. Convenience and snowball sampling methods are considered non-probability sampling and do not have external validity. Thus, results from this study cannot be generalized to the general populace. In the future, a stratified sampling technique would be most advantageous to this kind of study.

Another limitation stems from the lack of diversity in age. The oldest group (56 and older) only comprised 12% of our sample, while 61% was between the ages of 18 and 39; as such, this sample is not indicative of the typical distribution of age in our society. This could account for the abundant similarity in scores. Perhaps a more diversified sample would have produced a different result. Nevertheless, the results of this study contain valuable information for organizations.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

Tables

Table 1: ANOVA test results of work locus of control (WLOC) between age groups

ANOVA WLOC		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups		180.110	3	60.037	1.646	.177
Within Groups		31626.591	867	36.478		
Total		31806.700	870			

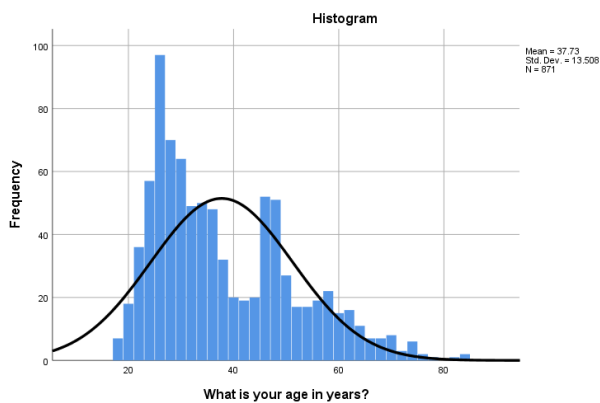
Table 2: Correlation test results between employees' age and work locus of control (WLOC).

		What is your age in years?	WLOC
What is your age in years?	Pearson Correlation	1	.012
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.726
	N	871	871
WLOC	Pearson Correlation	.012	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.726	
	N	871	871



## APPENDIX B

Figure 1: Distribution of Ages



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