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Envelhecimento da força de trabalho – desafio ou vantagem?

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*Ageing Workforce – Challenge or Opportunity?
(Snapshots on ageing workforce research in organisations)*

THRIVING AT 55+

(Thriving in the workplace - supporting people at the age of 55 years and over in satisfying and productive work)

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"Addressing an ageing workforce is an ongoing task... I urge everyone to make every effort to stamp out ageist mindsets and treasure the cumulative knowledge and experience of our seniors."

(Amy Khor, 2014)

Abstract

In the last 25 years statistics have been consistently alarming about the rates and potential consequences of population ageing. The ageing workforce has become of considerable importance for many employers. Yet, workers aged 55 years and over are not always utilised or valued as much as they could be in the workplace. Many of them need to work for longer than they expect, due to pension fund shortfalls and changes in official retirement ages. For some, this will require a change in perspective and new strategies for managing self and career.

Population and workforce ageing

Population ageing means that the median age of the people in a country or region rises. Population ageing is taking place in almost all areas of the world with Japan, Germany and Italy being the most ageing countries. It is also expected that demographic ageing will become entrenched in many countries during the next half of the century with the number of people aged 60 years or over increasing more than twice and exceeding the number of children by 2050. Thus, the ageing population becomes a key challenge for society and an important social and economic responsibility. Furthermore, the ageing of the population has led and will lead to significant changes in the workforce, particularly demonstrated by the rise of employment rates amongst older workers (usually workers aged 55 years and over).

As the need to keep older workers in the workforce has been referred to as an “emergency”, various prevention measures ranging from changes in the legislation and social security systems to

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the introduction of tailored life-long learning programmes and flexible work models have been undertaken recently. As result, across Europe there has been a considerable increase of the employment rates of older workers (aged 55-64) over the last ten years from 38% to 47%. There is a wealth of examples about how employers can benefit from hiring and retaining older employees at work. Reforms in the pension and legislation systems have been made, and actions in terms of the development of age neutral recruitment and retention measures have been undertaken. Most arguments are around potential financial and social benefits as results of utilising older workers' experience and transferring their skills to younger employees within organisations.

Research on the ageing workforce is highly multidisciplinary incorporating economical, sociological, psychological, vocational, biological and even political aspects. Traditionally, among the most discussed issues are age-related changes and their associations with particular work outcomes, age stereotypes and discrimination against older workers, the impact of job-related and organisational characteristics on older workers. Recently, more attention has been paid to cross-cultural research and topics such as successful ageing at work and how best organisations can support and retain older workers. However, there are still some research gaps, particularly with regard to older workers' personal approaches towards enhancing their own well-being and job performance.

Stereotypes and discrimination against older workers

The term “ageism” reflects the process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people based on their age. Age discrimination was found to be the most widely experienced form of discrimination across Europe. Stereotyping can have both positive and negative consequences. Examples of positive stereotypes of older workers are “increased levels of loyalty”, “reliability” and “job commitment”. Sometimes, as a result of some positive images about older workers, older workers can be favoured in their access to certain types of work. However, it appears that older workers are most often negatively stereotyped. Recent research indicates that the six of the most common and damaging stereotypes about older workers are that older employees are “less motivated”, “less willing to engage in training and career development programs”, “more resistant to change”, “not as trusting”, “more likely to experience health problems that affect their work”, and “more vulnerable to work–family conflicts”.

Negative age stereotypes may have negative effects on older workers' self-esteem, job performance and well-being. It was consistently found that negative stereotypes significantly affected employers'

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attitudes towards training, promotion and retention of older workers and their willingness to work with older workers. This, in turn, may lead to older workers' withdrawal from the labour market. Many times the effects of age discrimination are hidden and masked by situations such as forced retirement or redundancy. There is good evidence that nearly all negative stereotypes about older workers are unjustified. For instance, it has been revealed that older workers provide longer and more reliable service to their employers, are not less adaptable, have fewer accidents compared to younger workers, often possess complex intellectual capacity, have good customer and interpersonal skills, have good learning capacity and motivation to learn.

The type and prevalence of age discrimination can vary across types of employers, industries, jobs and be expressed through certain Human Resource Management strategies and practices only (e.g. reduced recruitment and/or reduced training and learning opportunities for older workers). For instance, it is highly likely for older workers with specialist skills in skill shortage areas to be more valued by employers while this tendency does not apply to sectors with lower skills base and no shortage of applicants. Age stereotypes about older workers seem to be particularly strong in certain industries, such as finance, retail, insurance, technology, information services. A specific example is the ICT sector, where discrimination against older workers is particularly rampant even in a context of high skills gaps and shortages.

There is growing international awareness of the value of older workers. Age-stereotypes and age-discrimination have been addressed through many academic, professional and political events in the Western world. This has contributed to positive changes in employers' attitudes towards older workers. However, there is still a lot to be done even in the most developed countries. A survey amongst employment organisations and older employees in the UK (CIPD&CMI, 2010) has found that only 14% of managers consider their organisation well prepared to cope with the issues caused by the ageing workforce. Although in the last seven years there has been a modest decline in older workers' perception of being discriminated against, 40% of them still think they have experienced discrimination because of their age. In addition, it seems that in some countries older workers have been even more affected by negative stereotypes during the current economic recession.

Age-related Changes, Work-related Behaviours and Outcomes

It has been well documented that people change physically and psychologically with age. Some of these changes are demonstrated through people's behaviours at work. Most importantly, we have to acknowledge that there are big individual differences and, for example, some of these age-related changes may be more obvious for some individuals and negligible for others.

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Older workers are likely to be less fit than younger workers and, therefore, they may experience more difficulties than their younger colleagues when performing physically demanding jobs. However, research has demonstrated that the degree of physical change is not just related to age, but is highly dependent on many other factors such as individual's heredity, life styles, physical activity, and the environment. Thus, not everybody is likely to experience age-related disadvantages in their work.

There could be also declines in some cognitive functions, mostly associated with fluid intelligence (e.g. working memory and information processing) at later age. However, such age effects were found not to be great on average and can be further reduced within a supportive environment (i.e. when adjusting time, using new enabling technologies, etc.). Furthermore, the levels of cognitive decline among older individuals may vary significantly. For instance, some older individuals show very little change in competence or performance until very old age. In addition, declining fluid intelligence abilities are usually compensated by increased crystallized intelligence (e.g. knowledge and experience). Thus, using their accumulated knowledge and experience, older workers may perform better than younger workers in their jobs.

Similarly to physical and cognitive (fluid intelligence) changes, people may experience some personality changes when they grow older. For instance, studies demonstrate that older workers are less extraverted and open to change than younger workers, but at the same time - more self-controlled, tolerant, modest and conscientious. Yet again, these changes are very individual and do not apply to everyone.

Of particular research interest are the age-related changes in workers' motivation. It has been consistently reported that, despite what some people believe, work motivation does not decline at later age. However, workers' priorities tend to change over time and with age. For instance, older workers (compared to younger workers) may tend to attribute more importance to some social aspects of work (such as supporting younger workers and transferring their experience) as well as to feeling valued and involved than to career development options and striving for achievement.

Some individual outcomes such as work performance and occupational well-being have also been discussed with regard to later age. Well-being can be interpreted in terms of various concepts including workers' mental and physical health and work satisfaction. Older age is usually associated with higher (physical) health risks and some jobs and workplaces are more hazardous than others for workers' health. However, individuals' health depends on many other factors, such as for

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example individuals' biology and life styles. Regarding work satisfaction, it has been reported that older workers attribute significant importance to their job content and relations with colleagues.

Overall, researchers suggest that there is no age-related decline in job performance, apart from when the work demands high levels of physical stamina and effort. The declines of performance are more likely due to skills obsolescence or exhaustion than to age. In addition, it is well documented that workers' well-being and performance are related. Therefore, keeping older workers healthier and happier at work can enhance their performance.

Supporting Older Workers in Organisations

At job level, various characteristics are expected to have effects on individuals' work behaviour. Therefore, it is important to identify those jobs in which older age is either a benefit or a limitation and to employ practices to support older workers' adaptability. For instance, some job characteristics, such as higher autonomy, higher task significance, higher skill variety and specialization, greater opportunities for providing social support to colleagues, are hypothetically associated with higher job satisfaction and performance for older workers. Other job characteristics (e.g. higher task variety, job complexity and information processing) may have rather negative than positive effect on older workers' job satisfaction and performance. In addition, the relationship between age and job characteristics may be influenced by a variety of factors, such as individual differences and contextual (e.g. organisational) factors. Therefore, the positive effects of the appropriate job design can be facilitated at both individual and organisational levels.

Older workers in organisations can support themselves through some *personal (individual) strategies*. Contemporary theory is likely to view ageing as a process of growth as well as decline. This view is reflected in the concept of "successful ageing", which suggests that individuals can experience good health and vitality over the life-span, but not only at young age. There are *personal approaches* to successful ageing. One particular path is minimising the impact of the negative age-related changes (e.g. decline in some fluid intelligence aspects) and maximising the effects of the positive ones (e.g. crystallised intelligence). This is best demonstrated through the theory of Selection, Optimization and Compensation (SOC). SOC assumes that individuals can successfully adapt to age-related changes and changes in the workplace through using three types of personal strategies: selection (e.g. reducing one's range of activities selecting the most important tasks), optimisation (e.g. improving one's skills through training and development) and compensation (e.g. demonstrating one's strengths in front of others). There is good evidence that the use of SOC

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strategies can enhance workers' performance and well-being and becomes particularly important with age.

Older workers can also be supported by their employers (*organisations*). As organisations play a significant role in shaping one's skills, knowledge, motivation, and social relationships, they are an important social context for individuals. Thus, the quality of the employee-organisation relationship (EOR) and Human Resource Management (HRM) may have critical impact on older workers' well-being and performance. In simple words, EOR theory presumes that employees are likely to reciprocate their input in the organisation based on their perception of the extent to which their organisation values them. If employees are satisfied with what the organisation provides, they will be more willing to reciprocate with their contributions to the organisation. Therefore, it can be expected that older workers who feel more valued and supported by their organisations, will be more dedicated to their organisations.

Strategic Human Resource Management (HMR) is an important tool for organisations to provide support to their workers. In particular, older workers are likely to prefer organisations which demonstrate their consideration of older workers through their HRM practices. Fighting negative stereotypes and discrimination against older workers has become increasingly important for many organisations and is well reflected in their HRM strategies. In the last few decades there has been a significant shift in the employers' attitudes and strategies towards older workers from targeting them when labour reductions were required towards supporting the idea of positive ageing and more particularly, the utilization and retention of older workers. A practical indicator of employers' interest and attempts to introduce specific age-management practices is the occurrence of terms, such as "pro-age management", "age-sensitive management", "age-positive management", "age conscious HR policy", etc. The employment of "age-friendly" HRM strategies most of the times is encouraged by changes in the national policies and legislations.

The extent of implementation and the forms of "age-friendly" HRM strategies vary significantly across countries, industrial sectors and organisations. Most examples of successful age-management are derived from the Western countries. Some HRM practices associated with older workers may include reduced working hours, flexible working options, adjusting job roles, refresher training, and extra annual leave and may aim to help older workers maintain their job performance at an acceptable level. Other HRM practices, encouraging older workers to undertake new projects, tasks, and job roles, learn new skills, and mentor/coach others on the job, may have rather a developmental than maintenance effect on older workers and, thus increase their work

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performance and satisfaction. Furthermore, successful HRM practices may encourage some older workers to remain in the workforce longer and even return to work past retirement.

Thriving in Late Career

Individuals who are thriving feel both vitality and learning, which in turn allow them to develop themselves. Thriving workers are not just surviving, but feeling enthusiastic, acquiring new knowledge and skills and experiencing growth. It was found that thriving workers, compared to non-thriving ones, overall perform better, are more creative, have better relationships with their co-workers, feel more satisfied with their job and committed to their organisation, and are healthier.

From a career development perspective workers aged 55 years and older are often considered as late career workers. Classical theory and practice view late career as a “closure” of one’s working life, rather than strive for development. Nowadays this view is about to change. Many older workers still seek continuing personal growth and development. However, this might be different kind of growth, compared to younger workers. Unlikely many younger workers who may prefer promotion, older workers may rather strive for refining their skills, developing relationships, exercising autonomy and control, contributing to the collective good by (for example) transferring their experience to their younger colleagues. This suggests that older workers can also experience thriving, though may be in a slightly different way than younger workers.

It is clear that thriving workers will not only feel better themselves, but will be a valuable asset for their employers. Therefore, it is important to identify what will allow older workers to feel thriving in the workplace.

Our research programme (“THRIVING IN THE WORKPLACE - SUPPORTING PEOPLE AT THE AGE OF 55 YEARS AND OVER IN SATISFYING AND PRODUCTIVE WORK”) is accentuating the opportunities of a successfully managed ageing workforce. Through empirical research in two EU countries (United Kingdom and Bulgaria) and two sectors (health and IT), we are investigating what organisational and personal strategies can help employees aged 55 years and over to continue to thrive and make a good contribution in late career. The programme is funded by the European Commission under its Marie Curie (IEF) scheme.

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