



An introduction to the work and well-being of older workers

From managing threats to creating opportunities

The work and well-being of older workers

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Abstract

Purpose – The article's aim is to introduce the papers contained in this special issue of the *Journal of Managerial Psychology*.

Design/methodology/approach – Specifically the present article starts by discussing the meaning of the factor age and by considering who is actually termed an older worker. Next, the consequences of cognitive, physical and mental changes during the aging process for work and organizations are being discussed. Before presenting a general introduction to the research contributions that are included in this special issue, a plea is made for a more positive approach to older employees. The article presents a literature review, a discussion of the main topics and suggestions for future pathways for research and HRM.

Findings – It is indisputable that some cognitive, physical and mental changes take place while people grow older. However, what is less certain is how these changes impede on employees' well-being. Recently, scholars seem to agree that the picture is not as negative as one used to think.

Research limitations/implications – The implications are: use different conceptualizations of age; focus on the process of aging instead of on age as a factor; shift the focus from managing threats to creating opportunities.

Practical implications – It is in both employers' and employees' interest to make the best use of employees of all ages and to manage employees in accordance with individual attributes and capacities rather than by making assumptions based on age.

Originality/value – The article frames the issues and sets the stage for a more positive approach towards older workers.

Keywords Work identity, Older workers, Ageing (biology), Equal opportunities

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

The population of a growing number of countries is ageing rapidly and it is estimated that between 2005 and 2050, half of the increase in the world population will be accounted for by a rise in the population aged 60 years or over (United Nations, 2007). This is more and more acknowledged in the literature. For instance, Van der Heijden *et al.* (2008) emphasize that in the EU, the number of people aged 55 and over is expected to grow by more than 15 percent between 2010 and 2030. Alley and Crimmins (2007) recognize the same trend for the US, where the number of workers over 55 is projected to grow at nearly four times the rate of the overall labour force. So, as it is expected that the number of older employees will vastly increase in the near future, it is not surprising that more and more attention is devoted to the current situation of older workers in organizations.



This article focuses specifically on the well-being of older workers. Older employees are often considered to be dispensable, a greater expense and of less value than younger employees. Age stereotyping is not seldom at the cause of such perceptions. Because of the vast amount of literature that pertains to issues of age, work and well-being, many limitations were put on the scope of this brief overview. For example, while issues of career development, learning motives and early retirement are clearly significant to the topic, this article will not address these issues directly (for an overview of these issues see for example Van der Heijden *et al.* (2008)). The general purpose of the present article is fourfold: First, we start with discussing briefly different conceptualizations of the factor age and with considering who is actually termed older workers. Second, we focus on the process of aging and discuss the consequences of cognitive, physical and mental changes during the aging process for work and organizations. Next, we will plead for a more positive approach to older employees. In this respect we will argue that it is timely to shift our focus from threats to opportunities. Finally, we will present a general introduction to the research contributions that follow.

Conceptualizations of age

When is an employee considered as an “older worker”? This is a very subjective and difficult to answer question. The vagueness in defining who is termed an older worker is reflected in the literature, probably because aging is a multidimensional process that is difficult to capture in a single definition or measure (Cleveland and Lim, 2007). Very often empirical studies distinguish between age-categories, but the differences between studies with regard to the categories they use is huge and the scientific underpinning for the chosen cut-off points is often lacking. A related problem with distinguishing between age-categories is that there exist large individual differences. This appears to be especially true for older workers. The term “differential aging” refers to individual differences increasing with age. Differences within age groups can become bigger than differences between age groups (Boerlijst *et al.*, 1998). The older, the more unique employees become and as such older employees form a very heterogeneous sub-group in which the variability in health and well-being is very large.

Cleveland and Lim (2007) list a number of approaches to define an older worker’s age and categorize them into two general groups:

- (1) person-based age measures; and
- (2) context-based age measures.

Person-based measures of age

The chronological or calendar age is the most widespread used person-based measure in research on older workers. Although legally and scientifically convenient, this type of age may provide a too narrow view of the role of aging at work. It can serve as a proxy measure for many age-related processes that may influence work outcomes directly or indirectly (De Lange *et al.*, 2006). Subjective or perceived age refers to how old or young individuals perceive themselves to be. An individual’s interpretation of his or her age may reflect perceptions of health, appearance and/or energy. A third largely person-based age measure is functional or biological age. As chronological age increases individuals change both biologically and psychologically, reflecting declines in some attributes such as eyesight, reaction time and hearing, as well as increases in

other areas including experience and judgment. As such, functional age refers to the age of individuals considering their physical, social and psychological status. Although intuitively appealing, this type of age is problematic because theoretically, the number of functional ages can equal the number of different functions.

Context-based measures of age

An example of the context-based measure of age is the social or interpersonal age. It refers to the age status or perceived age of an individual as evaluated by others. Again another conception is called the perceived relative age. It refers to the perceived age of an individual in comparison with some normative group, for example employees own perception of age compared to work group members.

Inspired by the work of Sterns and Doverspike (1989), Kooij *et al.* (this issue) also discuss different conceptualizations of age. In addition to the above mentioned categorization of Cleveland and Lim (2007) they introduce organizational age (referring to the years of service, career stage, skill obsolescence and age norms within a company) and life span age (referring to the intra-individual changes as individuals move through adulthood and older adulthood). Earlier De Lange *et al.* (2006) presented some possible manners of how the different age conceptualizations can be operationalized.

Most of the research presented in the reminder of this article considers the calendar age of workers. One of the accompanying problems with this can be demonstrated by a study of Barnes-Farrell and Piotrowski (1991). They found that the discrepancy between perceived, subjective age and calendar age was systematically related to the presence of workplace stressors and reports of workplace strains. To the extent that workers reported high levels of workplace stressors they were more likely to report a personal age in excess of their calendar age (feeling older). Conversely, to the extent that workers felt younger than their calendar age, they reported less workplace strain. This example clearly shows that how we measure age may well have implications for the results obtained in empirical investigations as well as for the theories we develop. In fact, all the aforementioned conceptualizations address a specific factor or part of the ageing process and as such each age concept has its own limitations and can – per definition – not capture the entire age process. Therefore, in line with Schultz and Adams (2007) we would like to motivate future researchers in this area to include a variety of conceptualizations of age in order to determine their differential impact on an assortment of outcomes.

The process of aging

Distinguishing between different conceptualizations of the factor age, does still not help us to answer the question who exactly is an older worker? Schultz and Adams (2007) suggest that “one avenue for dealing with the dilemma of where to set the cut off is not to set any cut off (p. 310)”. They explain this by arguing that age should be better included in research as a continuous factor because this might help us to shift the focus from age differences to a focus on aging as a process. Age represents a fixed point in time, whereas aging represents a process that occurs over time. As a consequence, we will obtain a much better picture of what happens when workers grow older and thus provide a much stronger foundation for theorizing about aging and work. However, examining the aging process instead of focussing on age differences will require more sophisticated approaches to data analysis, such as time series analyses or growth curve modelling.

Changes in cognitive, physical and mental abilities and the consequences for work

In order to consider the impact of aging on well-being it is important to discuss some of the major changes that occur as one grows older. Jex *et al.* (2007) distinguish in this respect between cognitive ability changes, physical and functional changes and mental health changes.

Cognitive ability changes

Due to continuous change in the brains when people grow older they tend to experience a reduction in cognitive resources (for an overview see Raz, 2000). This can happen even though the general knowledge remains stable or even increases. More specifically, older adults experience declines in processing speed (speed by which mental operations can be processed), working memory (the amount of on-line cognitive resources which provides simultaneous storage and processing of information), inhibition function (inhibiting attention to irrelevant information and concentrating on relevant information) and sensations (a decline in visual and auditory acuity) (Jex *et al.*, 2007). However, not all the cognitive abilities appear to deteriorate over the years. Intelligence remains stable until – on the average – the age of 80. In this respect, Horn (1982) distinguishes between crystallized and fluid abilities. Crystallized abilities are mainly automatic, knowledge-based and procedural of nature whereas fluid abilities are characterized by more conscious information processing and rely upon processing speed, spatial functions and connecting pieces of new information. The former demand little effort and tend to increase throughout one's working life. The latter, the fluid abilities, tend to deteriorate with ageing.

Consequences for work. Given these age-related cognitive changes, one might expect that older workers would have greater difficulty performing tasks that require retention of large amounts of information or that require rapid cognitive processing. Empirical results on this issue are contradictory and not always straightforward. Sturman (2003) conducted a meta-analysis to study the overall relationship between temporal variables (i.e. age, job experience and organizational tenure) and concluded that for all three variables there was an inverted U-shaped relationship with performance, but only in low complexity jobs. When jobs are of high complexity, the relationship is non-linear but not an inverted U-shape. The results showed that, over time, experience becomes more predictive of job performance in high complexity jobs. This implies that older employees may be able to compensate to some degree for cognitive changes in a manner that does not automatically result in bad performance.

Physical and functional changes

There exist ample evidence that the physical and functional condition changes as one grows older. Environmental exposures, genetic factors, various health behaviors and medical conditions lay at the course of these changes. Jex *et al.* (2007) list some important changes: With aging there is a gradual loss of muscle mass and muscle strength. Furthermore, normal aging is accompanied by the loss of bone tissue throughout the body. The rib cage and the air passageways become stiffer, making it harder to breath. Metabolism generally drops as people grow older and older adults' immune system takes longer to build up defences against specific diseases. These

changes lead us to the conclusion that the physical condition deteriorates as we become older.

Consequences for work

Does the deterioration of physical abilities imply that we have to advise managers not to hire older employees? Nauta *et al.* (2004) sum five reasons why this question should be answered by a straight “no”. First, people tend to be able to compensate for physical losses. These compensation mechanisms can vary from simple reading glasses to the coping strategies mentioned in the selection-optimization model of Baltes and Baltes (1990). Second, as implied by the concept of differential aging, the aging process is a very individual process. Some people of the age of 45 are already “old” whereas others of 45 function still as youngsters. Third, age is by far not the only factor that impedes on physical health. Lifestyle seems to explain also a large part. People who smoke, drink, have less exercise and eat unhealthy, face a greater risk on chronic complaints and serious diseases. Fourth, for many occupations, a deterioration of the physical condition is not significantly related to performance. Many jobs predominantly call for cognitive and social-emotional competencies and less for physical power and speed. Nevertheless, there are still various functions that are characterized by high physical demands and they need our special attention. Particularly jobs that require employees to perform physically demanding activities for long periods at a time will cause physical health problems for older employees. Moreover, it has been shown that older employees have more difficulty adjusting to nonstandard work shifts than younger employees (Kawada, 2002). Finally, many jobs can be accommodated relatively easy to the decreasing physical conditions of older workers. One could think about ergonomic adaptations as well as about changes in work schedules and in the number of hours work per week.

Mental (or psychological) health change

Psychological well-being is considered to be an important aspect of successful aging. With regard to the affective dimension, a broad distinction can be made between positive affect (feelings of joy, interest, enthusiasm and alertness) and negative affect (feelings of anxiety, depression, worry or other distressing psychological symptoms). Positive and negative affect, emerge as two relatively independent dimensions of affect when measured over a longer time period (Watson and Tellegen, 1985). There exist contradictory opinions as well as empirical results on age differences in positive and negative affect. A meta-analysis of Pinqart (2001) on this issue showed a small age-associated increase of negative affect and a small age-related decline of positive affect. Furthermore, there appeared to be an age-associated decline of those positive and negative feelings that are associated with high arousal (feeling excited or upset) and an age-associated increase of positive and negative low arousal emotions (feeling relaxed or depressed). The latter is partly in line with results on the relationship between age and depression: contrary to popular belief, there is U-shaped relation between age and depression: the highest rates occur in young adults and people over age 75. Middle-aged adults have a lower rate. In line with Mroczek and Kolarz (1998) we conclude that the relationship between age and affect is so complicated that personality, contextual and socio-demographic variables, as well as their interactions, are all needed to fully understand the age-affect relationship.

Consequences for work

What can be said about the general affective state of older employees in the work domain? According to Clark *et al.* (1996) older employees are likely to be more satisfied with their jobs than younger employees. Warr (1997) also reported U-shaped curvilinear relationships between age and occupational well-being. Relationships between age and burnout are also not likely to be linear. Although cultural differences exist, in the USA burnout seems to occur most frequently among employees under the age of 30, whereas in European countries, burnout seems to be more prevalent among older age groups (Schaufeli and Buunk, 2003). However, a recent longitudinal study of De Lange *et al.* (2006) among nearly 700 Dutch employees revealed that older workers (> 50) did not differ from younger workers (< 35) nor from middle aged workers (35-50) with regard to job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion (the core burnout dimension). On the other hand, their results showed that the antecedents of feelings of emotional exhaustion did differ for the age groups. For older employees a lack of social support from colleagues and supervisors appeared to be related to exhaustion, whereas for the middle-aged workers particularly a change in job demands appeared to be positively related to exhaustion. This is broadly in line with recent results of a study of Avery *et al.* (2007) who concluded that to help facilitate engagement among older workers one has to surround them by other satisfying older co-workers.

In conclusion, it is indisputable that some cognitive, physical and mental changes take place while we grow older. However, we are less certain about how these changes impede on employees' well-being. Although widespread age-stereotypes of employers towards older workers seem very persistent (Brooke and Taylor, 2005), recently scholars seem to agree that the picture is not as negative as one used to think in early research on this topic. This warrants the conclusion that it may be time to shift our focus from threats to opportunities.

Towards a more positive approach: from threats to opportunities

In general, most past research on older workers has taken a negative psychology approach focusing on what is wrong with older workers or on the threats that older workers might face and the problems and threats associated with having to manage the careers of older workers. In line with Peterson and Spiker (2005) we believe that a new, positive way of looking at older workers, more in terms of opportunities, is desirable. Ever since Martin Seligman introduced in 1998 the positive psychology movement, positive psychology has emerged and gained popularity as an approach that redirects focus from what is wrong with people or organizations towards an approach that emphasizes human strengths that allow individuals, groups and organizations to thrive and prosper. In this respect, Peterson and Spiker (2005) introduce their so-called PIES model (Psychological, Intellectual, Emotional and Social capital) and apply it to older workers. They argue that human capital could continue to increase with experience and time and those workers with greater human capital will bring more positive contributory value to organizations. While PIES relates to workers of any age, they argue that older workers are at minimum more underutilized than younger workers. Very recently, Bakker and Schaufeli (2008) in their editorial for a special issue on Positive Organizational Behaviour (POB) have argued that nowadays the focus in modern organizations is on the management of human capital:

Currently, organizations expect their employees to be proactive and to show initiative, collaborate smoothly with others, take responsibility for their own professional development and to be committed to high quality performance standards (p. 147).

By fully utilizing older workers' human capital to create value, organizations will encounter numerous positive organizational outcomes, such as increased employee loyalty, decreased employee turnover, retention of institutional knowledge and memory and increased employee productivity.

According to Peterson and Spiker (2005), it is imperative that organizations offer various incentives to attract and retain older workers, such as:

- *Flexibility in HR policies*: policies, procedures and systems should be created which – also- fulfil the unique needs of older workers, such as training opportunities, mentoring, phased retirement, flexible scheduling etc.
- *Attitude change*: as more organizations challenge the negative stereotypes surrounding older workers and create new positive images, older workers will begin to flourish and thrive.
- *Knowledge transfer programs*: these refer to programs that help define, capture, manage, disseminate and measure valuable organizational knowledge information in order to prevent that this knowledge will disappear when older workers leave an organization.

Another positive approach to older workers is offered by the literature on successful aging. Robson *et al.* (2006) argue that in the past, successful aging has frequently been conceptualized as the absence of disease or illness. More recent research has employed a broader multidisciplinary approach. Although no single model by itself offers a comprehensive and unified theory of successful aging, there is now a broad consensus that it must be regarded as a multidimensional construct involving socio-cultural, psychological, physical and environmental factors. Furthermore, it has been argued that it should be defined in terms of adjustment and performance in specific domains, such as the work domain, rather than evaluating successful aging from a general perspective. In this respect Robson *et al.* (2006) developed and tested five criteria that employees themselves use to determine how successful they age in the workplace:

- (1) adaptability and health: this reflects the importance of the ability to adapt to changes and retain physical, psychological and cognitive health;
- (2) positive relationships: this factor indicates the importance of positive workplace relationships to successful aging;
- (3) occupational growth: represents the importance of being able to grow and to remain competitive on the job;
- (4) personal security: involves perception of safety and workload demands;
- (5) continued focus and achievement of personal goals; focuses on the importance of continuing to set and achieve goals.

Important in this respect is that these five criteria reflect continuity rather than change. Specifically, the findings indicate that the importance of the five domains was related similarly across the age groups. That is, older workers continue to place considerable value on their adaptability, health, personal security, achievement of goals and

occupational growth and as such they do not differ from workers in other stages of their careers.

To conclude, this brief overview shows that it is indeed in both employers' and employees' interest to make the best use of employees of all ages and to manage employees in accordance with individual attributes and capacities rather than by making assumptions based on age.

Overview of articles in this special issue

This special issue encompasses a selected number of studies that each focus on topics that enlarge our understanding of the work and well-being of older workers, and especially of the potential opportunities for both employers and employees when older workers continue to work. To gain more insight in the conceptualization of age and motivation of older workers, this special issue starts with a paper by Kooij, De Lange, Jansen, and Dijkers "Older workers' motivation to continue to work: five meanings of age: a conceptual review". This study addresses different conceptualizations of age in order to distinguish specific age-related factors that influence older workers' motivation. In this conceptual approach, the authors identify age-related factors that influence the motivation of older workers to continue to work that can be addressed by the use of HRM policies, e.g. policies aimed at ergonomic adjustments, job redesign, and continuing career development.

The second paper focuses on stereotypical beliefs about older workers. "New measures of stereotypical beliefs about older workers' ability and desire for development: exploration among employees age 40 and over" by Maurer, Barbeite, Weiss, and Lippstreu, examines stereotypical beliefs about older workers' ability and desire to learn and develop in a group of senior workers from across the US work force. Stereotype measures appear to be associated with important outcome constructs relevant to retirement, interest in development, and self-efficacy/concept for learning and development. The authors suggest that their scales might be used as a kind of diagnostic tool to get a "read" on employee thinking about older worker ability and motivation for development.

Since much of the research that has been conducted has focused on negative age stereotyping and its implications for older workers' access to development opportunities, Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser in "Benefits of a supportive development climate for older workers" emphasize the learning and development component. These authors examine how older workers' propensity to engage in development activities and their perceptions of their organization's support of the development of older employees contribute to older workers' commitment to their organization and their intention to remain with their organization. This study found that older workers who had a propensity to engage in development activities and who perceived their organization and their job provided them with development opportunities were significantly more likely to be committed to their organization and to intend to remain with their organization than older workers who were not inclined to pursue development activities and whose organization and job did not provide them with opportunities for development.

In "Age and creativity at work: the interplay between job resources, age and idea creativity" by Binnewies, Ohly, and Niessen, older employees' creativity at work is studied. They examine the interplay between age and job resources (i.e. job control and

support for creativity, and idea creativity) in a sample of younger and older nurses. Findings show that job control and support for creativity as well as age are unrelated to idea creativity. Job control and support for creativity moderate the relationship between age and idea creativity. Implications of these findings for managers are to train managers to provide supportive, non-controlling feedback and to create a climate of psychological safety at work and by acting as a role model, managers may increase co-worker support for creativity.

The final paper concentrates on the retirement process. Taylor, Goldberg, and Shore in “The effects of retirement expectations and social support on post-retirement adjustment: a longitudinal analysis” examine the shifting effects of retirement expectations and social support on adjustment and it appears that retirement expectations play a central role in predicting retirement satisfaction and life satisfaction. Expectations thereby appear to be a central determinant of adjustment early and later in retirement. The results regarding expectations, and this ends the special issue, suggest that giving workers realistic information about retirement and allowing them to plan for retirement will have a beneficial impact on work and well-being of older workers.

We hope that – with this special issue – we will inspire and motivate researchers to further investigate the work and well-being of older workers from a more positive perspective that focuses on individuals’ capabilities and opportunities instead of stereotyping them by age.

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