

Paper 4

What's a Leader to Do? Developing Tools and Resources for Managing an Aging Workforce

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Background: Population aging is a global trend with far reaching societal implications, including maintaining sufficient numbers of qualified workers (Czaja, 2020). One response to the aging phenomenon is developing strategies to encourage and support extending workers' labor force participation. At the national level, countries have raised the qualifying age for receiving government-sponsored retirement-related benefits (e.g., U.S. Social Security) or offered incentives to companies who hire and retain older workers. Yet, employers have been slow to implement organizational policies and practices to support an older workforce (Perron, 2020).

Recognizing the critical need to protect older workers' safety and health in the workforce, in 2015 the U.S. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health established the National Center for Productive Aging and Work (NCPAW). NCPAW researchers strive to understand physical and psychosocial aspects of work that contribute to a productive aging workforce and thus are mutually beneficial to workers and employers alike. The theoretical approach of productive aging focuses on the positive aspects of aging and emphasizes the important contributions older individuals can continue to make in their workplaces (Grosch et al., 2019). Productive aging at work is characterized by a work environment that is safe and healthy and gives workers of all ages the power to be successful and thrive in their jobs (Grosch, 2020). To facilitate its work in support of productive workforce aging, NCPAW regularly collaborates with the academic community to conduct original research, and to translate and disseminate research to the public, including employers and health and safety professionals.

New contributions: Whilst researchers have recently begun to develop and test various strategic frameworks related to productive workforce aging, such as the 3i model (e.g., Parker & Andrei, 2020) and the Later Life Workforce Index (Wilckens et al., 2021), scientific-based guidance developed for use by organizational leaders is lacking. To address the research-to-practice gap, the NCPAW research team is working on several projects aimed at educating employers and business leaders on ways to create an age friendly workplace and support productive aging. Many of NCPAW's practice-focused projects involve partnering with academic-based researchers to produce scientifically rigorous, empirically supported resources for public dissemination. These partnerships hold promise for meeting the needs of the employers, employees, and the broader scientific community. This presentation will provide an overview of four current NCPAW projects in diverse industry sectors that involve developing and disseminating promising strategies that employers can use to address the health and safety needs of their older workers.

NCPAW is creating an online tool that managers and safety and health professionals within manufacturing companies can use to assess the age friendliness of their workplace. Using the work ability framework (Gould et al., 2008), the tool will assess four areas: the physical work environment, organization and leadership policies and practices, professional development, and individual health resources. A similar project is developing an ageing workforce module for the Small Business Safety and Handbook jointly published by the U. S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and NIOSH (2021). In a third project NCPAW is developing a training intervention for hotel managers and supervisors that provides guidance and practical strategies for designing an age-inclusive

workplace to support hotel housekeeping employees, a working population that tends to be older than the national average. Lastly, NCPAW is developing general educational and guidance materials for employers and business leaders on psychosocial factors in the workplace that are associated with productive aging at work.

Conclusions – research and/or practical implications: Providing employers with theoretically sound and empirically supported organizational policies and practices is critical for confronting the challenges that come with an aging workforce. Research collaborations to assess the aging workforce is necessary to mitigate a labor shortage and ensure the health and safety of this group. Broad dissemination of theoretically grounded and empirically supported findings to employers is equally as important to ensure best practices are implemented in the workplace. NCPAW leverages collaborations with the academic community to move the field of workforce aging forward and bridge the research to practice gap.

Relevance to the Congress theme “The future is now : the changing world of work”. Workforce aging is no longer something that will happen in the future – it is happening now. Creating resources designed for and freely available to employers is important toward communicating much needed guidance on effective strategies and important considerations for managing an aging workforce.

Relevant United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: Decent work and economic growth.

Keywords: Organizational guidance, Dissemination; Worker well-being



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