SAGE Reference

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 2nd edition

Older Worker Issues

Contributors: **Author:**Janet L. Barnes-Farrell & Gretchen A. Petery
Edited by: Steven G. Rogelberg
Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 2nd edition
Chapter Title: "Older Worker Issues"
Pub. Date: 2017
Access Date: November 16, 2021
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc
City: Thousand Oaks
Print ISBN: 9781483386898
Online ISBN: 9781483386874
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483386874.n361
Print pages: 1041-1044

Older workers constitute a growing segment of the workforce and must contend with a variety of distinctive concerns as they navigate their careers. These include physical, cognitive, and emotional changes that accompany the aging process; unique sources of work stress; age discrimination in employment opportunities; late-career and skill maintenance concerns; and decisions about when and how to retire from active employment. Psychologists can use information about challenges that confront older workers to develop recruitment and retention strategies and work designs that allow older workers to maintain their performance effectiveness and to see work as a satisfying and rewarding experience.

Age and Workforce Demographics

The point at which the term older worker is applied in studies of workforce demographics may be as early as 40 years of age or as late as 65 years of age. Nonetheless, studies of workforce demographics all come to similar conclusions: The proportion of older adults who continue to engage in paid employment well into their 60s and 70s is growing, and the proportion of our workforce that can be classified as “older” will continue to expand throughout the next decade.

Labor force participation rates generally tend to drop off beginning at about age 55, primarily because of early and “normal” retirements. However, labor force participation rates among those who are 55 and older are on the rise, with a projected labor force participation rate of 43% among those 55 and older by 2020. Among those aged 55 to 64, participation rates are expected to exceed 68%, and participation rates among those aged 65 and older are expected to exceed 22%. In fact, it is projected that “over 55” workers will constitute approximately 25% of the total civilian labor force in the United States by 2020. This trend of increases in labor force participation for the 55 and older age group is expected to continue through 2050. The growth of this segment of the workforce represents the convergence of several forces, including improved health and longer life span, economic policies that encourage prolonged working (e.g., increases in the “standard” retirement age that qualifies an individual for full Social Security benefits), national and global economic uncertainty, and elimination of mandatory retirement policies from most civilian occupations in the United States.

Changes That Accompany Aging

Several aspects of physical work capacity, such as aerobic capacity, strength and endurance, tolerance for heat and cold, and ability to adapt to shifts in waking and sleeping cycles, systematically decline with age. Sensory skills such as visual acuity and auditory sensitivity, and some psychomotor abilities, including manual dexterity and finger dexterity, begin to decline once workers move into their 40s and beyond. Of course, the extent to which such decrements are likely to be associated with performance problems depends substantially on the nature of physical job requirements.

The most consistent finding in studies of cognitive abilities across the life span is a general slowing of response to information-processing demands as adults age, particularly as they move into their 60s and beyond. In addition, recall and working memory both decline with age. However, there are multiple types of cognitive abilities, and decline is not universal or uniform. In fact, cognitive functioning can remain stable or even improve across time for many older adults. For example, those aspects of cognitive functioning that rely on expert knowledge (or wisdom) continue to increase or remain stable well into the 70s. The rate of decline is slowed when cognitive skills, such as inductive reasoning and number abilities, are used regularly—“use it or lose it” seems to be an apt phrase in this case. In this regard, intellectually demanding jobs may protect against cognitive declines. Also, the manner in which learners prefer to acquire new skills differs between younger and older learners, with older learners preferring more active, experiential learning approaches and preferring to learn at a somewhat slower pace.

Although most personality traits are believed to be quite stable throughout the life course, characteristics that are helpful in the work context, such as conscientiousness, can be learned and emerge over time. Furthermore, job characteristics that are aligned with existing personality traits will foster continued development of those traits. Even so, a general dampening of emotional responsiveness accompanies the aging process. There are also age-related shifts in the kinds of coping strategies adults use to manage

stressful experiences and increased skill in using such strategies.

Normal aging is accompanied by increased frequency and severity of health concerns. Clinically assessed indicators of physical health (e.g., blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and body mass index) may indicate a decline in health with age; however, self-reports of physical health may not. This indicates that even though health may have declined, the decline may be so gradual as to not be noticeable, or adjustments have been made to behaviors so that the decline does not prevent functioning. Many older workers function with a variety of chronic health conditions, such as arthritis and chronic back pain, which also prompt them to carry out work duties while coping with some degree of pain or mobility impairment. These have implications for physical stamina and the ability to sustain physically and mentally demanding work.

With all of these changes in mind, it is important to point out two other sets of findings regarding age-related changes and characteristics. First, from life span studies, we know that the rate and extent of age-related change differ considerably among adults. This is a recurring theme of findings regarding cognitive and physical abilities, health status, and most other characteristics relevant to work functioning. Thus, generalities regarding characteristics of older workers will frequently be incorrect for a particular individual worker.

Second, it is a common misconception that the changes accompanying aging will inevitably be associated with systematic declines in motivation, work attitudes, and job performance. Although it is certainly true that changes in physical and cognitive functioning that accompany the aging process provide the potential for reduced performance in some kinds of jobs, evidence of performance declines with aging tends to be the exception rather than the rule. In fact, there are many work-related outcomes from older workers that are beneficial to employers. There is little evidence that levels of motivation differ as a function of worker age, and studies of the relationship between age and work performance have shown no systematic relationship between the two. Absenteeism rates are generally low among older workers, and the frequency of accidents is actually lower among older workers than it is among younger workers. Attitudes such as job satisfaction are somewhat more positive among older workers than they are among younger workers. Furthermore, older workers can contribute to the work group as a whole by sharing expertise and fostering a supportive and less stressful work climate.

Sources of Work Stress

Workers experience occupational stress when there is a mismatch between the demands of the job and workers' capabilities and resources. The changes that accompany aging provide some guidance regarding the conditions under which older workers are most likely to experience stress and the strains that accompany prolonged stress, such as performance decrements, injuries, negative work attitudes, and mental and physical health symptoms.

For example, jobs that require heavy lifting and tasks that involve external pacing and substantial time pressure produce chronic demands that may be of particular significance to older workers. Likewise, hot and cold work environments may be physically more taxing to older workers than they are to younger workers, and work schedules that require night work will be more demanding for older workers than they will be for younger workers.

Other features of job design, such as the widespread incorporation of technology in the workplace, may produce both threats and opportunities for older workers. On one hand, technological innovations (e.g., adjustable illumination and font sizes on computer displays and ergonomically designed chairs and workstations) can be used as a way of redesigning work to accommodate needs of older workers, thus reducing some sources of work-related stress. On the other hand, new technologies often require skill sets that many older workers have not developed. The threat of obsolescence that this raises can serve as a stressor that is particularly salient to older workers.

Older workers are also at risk from organizational sources of stress associated with their work roles. For example, time pressures and work "overload" have become a way of life on many jobs. The long-term nature of their exposure to the constant pressure of too much to do and insufficient time to accomplish it increases the likelihood that older workers will experience negative consequences, including "burnout" and reduced

health and well-being.

Distinct from work design, the social environment in which work takes place exerts a variety of pressures on older workers that may be experienced as stressful or that may reduce their ability to cope effectively with work demands. These include subtle or overt forms of age discrimination, hints about what older workers "can" and "should" do, and organizational cultures that devalue experience and "wisdom."

Age Discrimination

Although evidence regarding the relationship between worker age and work performance suggests that worker age is a singularly poor predictor of work performance, older workers encounter a variety of barriers to employment opportunities that reflect discrimination on the basis of age. Studies have documented age discrimination in many occupations with respect to hiring, promotions, salaries, and access to development opportunities. Sometimes the discrimination is fairly blatant, other times it represents more subtle (and often unintentional) differences in the way older workers and younger workers are treated at work.

One of the most common explanations for age discrimination is that managers and other decision makers are influenced by stereotypes that depict older workers as less capable, less energetic, less creative, more rigid, and less willing to learn than younger workers. This has the potential to put older job candidates at an unfair disadvantage when competing against younger applicants for jobs, promotions, and development opportunities. An additional unfortunate consequence of age discrimination is that it creates an environment in which older workers sometimes feel threats to their job security and, quite reasonably, experience anxiety about becoming reemployed should they lose their jobs.

To combat age discrimination in the United States, legal protections are afforded to older workers by the Age Discrimination in Employment Act. This legislation protects employees 40 years of age and older from discrimination on the basis of age in hiring, promotion, discharge, wages, and conditions of employment. Legal protections from age discrimination exist in many other English-speaking countries as well, often in the form of protections for younger workers as well as older workers.

Career and Work–Life Issues

Workplace norms and expectations about appropriate career trajectories (e.g., the sense that an individual is "stalled" with respect to career advancement) cause considerable distress and distraction for many older workers. As organizational structures continue to "flatten," the problem of career plateaus has become more widespread because there are fewer opportunities to continue upward movement.

Training and retraining are an important means of ensuring that older workers can continue to perform their jobs effectively and that they can move into new jobs and career paths later in their careers. However, fewer older workers participate in trainings compared with younger workers. Unrestricted opportunities for new skill development, support for participation in training, and training program design that incorporates the learning styles and preferences of older workers are all important to ensuring that late career workers can continue to be effective in their work. Training on technology use should incorporate confidence building into skill development.

Among their work–life concerns, many older workers are likely to have significant responsibilities for the care of elderly adults, financial responsibility for college students, and concerns about coordinating their own plans for retirement or continued work with those of spouses or partners. To be responsive to the work–life needs of older workers, employers need to take these kinds of concerns into account when they develop programs aimed at providing workers with options for balancing their work and personal lives.

Retirement Decisions

As they move into their 50s and 60s, most workers devote considerable time and energy to wrestling

with decisions about if and when to retire. Retirement decision making is a complex process that includes consideration of the timing of retirement (Retire at age 55? Sixty-five? Seventy-five? Never?), the completeness of retirement (e.g., complete, permanent withdrawal from the paid workforce vs. alternative work arrangements such as part-time work or so-called bridge employment), and the voluntariness of retirement (e.g., feeling "pushed" out of one's job or retiring for health reasons vs. retiring to spend more time with one's family and other personal pursuits).

Personal preferences, health, and economic and social pressures to continue working or discontinue working as one nears "normal" retirement age all play important roles in this process. At the macro level, for example, changes in stock markets may result in losses to retirement savings. At the meso level, early retirement packages offered by many organizations as a way of reducing their workforces provide opportunities for some workers to leave the workforce early or to shift to new careers. At the micro level, chronic health problems may speed retirement or may lead to the decision to delay retirement in order to maintain access to health care benefits. In addition, personal preferences for continued work and the financial pressures of elder care and family education lead many older workers to continue some form of paid employment well past the age of 65, although it may not be in the form of traditional full-time employment. For some, retirement may mean a transition to pursue new career interests that provide continued growth and development. As a result, the reality of retirement is that many workers will move into and out of the workforce several times during their later years, and organizations can make best use of the talents of these workers if they design flexible work arrangements that can accommodate this kind of movement.

Janet L. Barnes-Farrell and Gretchen A. Petery

See alsoCareers; Retirement; Stereotyping

Further Readings

Adams, G. A., & Beehr, T. A. (Eds.). (2003). Retirement: Reasons, processes and results. New York: Springer.

Barnes-Farrell, J. L. (2004). Older workers. In J. Barling, K. Kelloway, & M. Frone (Eds.), Handbook of work stress (pp. 431–454). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Bowen, C. E., Noack, M. G., & Staudinger, U. M. (2011). Aging in the work context. In K. W. Schaie & S. L. Willis (Eds.), Handbook of the psychology of aging (7th ed. pp. 263–277). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Farr, J., & Ringseis, E. (2002). The older worker in organizational context: Beyond the individual. In C. Cooper & I. Robertson (Eds.), International review of industrial and organizational psychology (Vol. 17, pp. 31–75). New York: John Wiley.

Finkelstein, L., Truxillo, D., Fraccaroli, F., & Kanfer, R. (Eds.). (2015). Facing the challenges of a multi-age workforce. New York: Routledge.

Hansson, R., DeKoekkoek, P. D., Neece, W. M., & Patterson, D. (1997). Successful aging at work: Annual review, 1992–1996: The older worker and transitions to retirement. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 51, 202–233.

McEvoy, G., & Cascio, W. (1989). Cumulative evidence of the relationship between employee age and job performance. Journal of Applied Psychology, 74, 11–17.

Ng, T. W. H., & Feldman, D. C. (2013). Employee age and health. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 83, 336–345. doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2013.06.004

Posthuma, R. A., & Campion, M. A. (2009). Age stereotypes in the workplace: Common stereotypes, moderators, and future research directions. Journal of Management, 35, 158–188. doi:10.1177/0149206308318617

Schaie, K. W. (1990). The optimization of cognitive functioning in old age: Predictions based on cohort-sequential and longitudinal data. In P. B. Baltes & M. M. Baltes (Eds.), Successful aging: Perspectives from the behavioral sciences (pp. 94–117). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Sterns, H., & Huyck, M. H. (2001). The role of work in midlife. In M. Lachman (Ed.), Handbook of midlife development (pp. 447–486). New York: John Wiley.

Szinovacz, M. E., Davey, A., & Martin, L. (2014). Did the great recession influence retirement plans? Research on Aging, 37, 275–305. doi:10.1177/0164027514530171

Toossi, M. (2012, January). Employment outlook: 2010–2020. Labor force projections to 2020: A more slowly growing workforce. Monthly Labor Review, 135, 43–64.

Wang, M., & Shi, J. (2014). Psychological research on retirement. Annual Review of Psychology, 65, 209–233. doi:10.1146/annurv-psych-010213-115131

- workers
- older worker issues
- age discrimination
- retirement
- journal of vocational behavior
- labor force participation
- labor force participation rates

Janet L. Barnes-Farrell & Gretchen A. Petery
http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483386874.n361
10.4135/9781483386874.n361