

Employability among older construction workers in the United States

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Introduction

The U.S. construction workforce is aging. Between 1985 and 2015, the average age of workers employed in the construction industry jumped 6.5 years, and the number of construction workers aged 55 years or older doubled. With the trend of an aging workforce, how to sustain employability of older workers is critical. The purpose of this study is to define employability among older construction workers in relation to job demands in this industry.

Methods

Three large data sources were analyzed, including O*NET, a primary source of occupational information in the U.S.; Occupational Requirements Survey (ORS), a new survey conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS); and the Health and Retirement Study (HRS), a longitudinal household survey of U.S. residents age 50+. Occupational requirements were quantified by O*NET and ORS, and data from HRS (including doctor-diagnosed health conditions) were used to evaluate workers' self-rated workability. Employability among older construction workers was measured by major construction trade.

Results

The initial findings show remarkable gaps between workability among older workers and occupational requirements in construction. For example, many construction occupations require lifting/carrying > 50 lbs and ≤ 100 lbs, but some older construction workers are unable to carry 10 lbs or stretch their arms up. Moreover, workability decreases rapidly with age. The prevalence of older workers with work limitations more than doubled from 14% in the baseline to 33% in a ten-year follow-up. Detailed analyses will be performed after the 2018 ORS data are released.

Conclusions/implications

This study suggests that differentials between workability of older construction workers and their job requirements should be taken into account in defining employability. Job redesign and retraining should be available for older workers to sustain their employability. Moreover, promoting healthy aging for workers is essential in the construction industry and beyond.

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