

HOW TO KEEP OLDER ADULTS TO CONTINUE MANAGING THEIR OCCUPATION

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Abstract:

We live in the time when informations and technologies changes very fast. How can older adults manage all the changes? How can they keep a workplace and be efficient until they retire? What can we, as an university do for those people? This paper will analyse the method to aid those people and in the same time the enterprises that have such employees.

Key words: *older adults, information, keep workplace, educate*

Advances in public health and medicine and improvements in technology have allowed people to increase not only their health, but life expectancy as well, from age 70 to 78 over the past 50 years. This improvement in life expectancy and health brings with it the willingness, and sometimes the financial need, for older adults to work beyond the traditional retirement age of 65 years. Researchers have found that as Baby Boomers people born from 1946 to 1964, age, they are prolonging their employment and careers, resulting in an increase in the number of older workers in the workplace.

How can we define older employees? The question is not easy to define and there is no consensus defining who is an older worker.

Different agencies and organizations use a broad spectrum of ages, ranging from 40-65 years of age, to determine when they consider an employee an "older worker." For example, The U.S. Department of Labor considers an older worker to be someone aged 55 years or older, whereas the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 provides protection for anyone in the workplace older than 40 years.

Older workers are found in every type of industry, including blue-collar, white-collar, and service industries, with slightly more in white collar industries. Within these industries, older workers are represented in every job category and occupation.

By 2030, the number of people aged 65 years or older in the United States is projected to double to 72 million adults representing 20% of the total U.S. population. The qualifying age to receive full Social Security retirement benefits has been increasing incrementally since 1998 and will reach 67 years by 2020.⁷ As a result, the average age of the workforce has slowly risen and is projected to continue rising. This increase in workers' age has been attributed to overall health of the older population, the change in eligibility for Social Security retirement benefits, the general economic climate, the need for health insurance, and the availability and design of employer-sponsored benefits, typically transferring greater responsibility to the retiree (e.g., from defined benefits plans and pensions to defined contribution plans and 401Ks).

Overall, employers have positive views of older workers. Prior studies revealed that employers report that older workers have greater knowledge of the job tasks they perform than their younger colleagues, willingly learn new tasks quickly, bring wisdom and resilience to work, and are able to keep up with the physical demands their jobs require. All of these elements are widely believed to positively affect productivity.

The overall health of the older population has improved over time because of increased awareness of the basic mechanisms of human health and disease and better self-management. Despite these improvements, a direct relationship still exists between increasing age, increasing health risks, and the associated medical costs. For this reason, employers should not only provide opportunities in areas such as scheduling and training, but they also should consider programs in the worksite for older workers to engage in healthy lifestyle activities. These programs are crucial to the health, longevity, engagement and productivity of older workers and helps employers by decreasing costs, increasing their return on investment, decreasing the companies' benefit expenses, and improving the image of the company in the community.

Although employers have an overall positive view of older workers and are willing to employ them, these workers still face barriers that hinder their employment prospects, including:

- Reduced employment opportunities. Those who are returning to the workforce or making a career change later in life find it harder to maintain salary and benefit levels comparable to their previous employment, because fewer options are available.
- Decreased training participation. When compared to younger workers, older workers are less likely to participate in workplace training activities (35 hours per year for younger workers versus 9 hours per year for older workers).
- Increased discrimination. Employer anxiety around salary and benefit costs have driven some to avoid interviewing and hiring older workers, even though evidence suggests it would not cut workplace productivity or earnings to employ them.
- Increased disparities in health. A decline in overall health, such as developing cardiovascular disease, has been shown to be associated with increasing age. This could result in workplace limitations that intimidate and discourage both the employer and the older employee.
- More challenging workplace conditions. When the need arises for older workers to care for aging family members or slowly transition out of the workplace, they may be confronted with inflexible work hours. Flexible work conditions, such as unconventional work schedules or the ability to telecommute, are important for employers to consider when employing older workers.

Employers pay a large share of costs associated with health risks and chronic disease. The risk and numbers of chronic conditions a person lives with increases as we age. Age itself is a health risk factor, but one that you cannot modify.

Beyond direct medical costs, which most employers focus on, indirect productivity-related costs of poor health, such as worker's compensation and short-term disability, can be 2 to 3 times higher than direct medical costs. Because of this, the workplace is an excellent place to make an impact and reduce employees' risks.

Worksite health programs can make a difference in employees' health and quality of life. Some of the benefits associated with worksite health programs are:

- Improved employee health and well-being.
- Lower employee health risks and improved health status can lower health care costs.
- Ability to affect workers' compensation-related expenses through integrating safety and health promotion.
- Reduction in absenteeism and presence (the measurable extent to which health symptoms, conditions, and diseases adversely affect the work productivity of individuals who choose to remain at work) and increased productivity.

The increase in seniors is not just limited to the United States; there is also an aging population explosion in many other countries

In 2000, approximately 605 million people were 60 years or older. By 2050, that number is expected to be close to 2 billion. At that time, seniors will outnumber children 14 and under for the first time in history.

Aging population offers economic and political clout to seniors. There is power in numbers. As a group, seniors have tremendous economic and political clout.

According to "Selling to Seniors," a monthly marketing report, people 50 and over control 77 percent of all financial assets in the United States, own almost 50 percent of all credit cards, and account for more than 50 percent of discretionary spending power – 2.5 times the average per capita.

The aging population can work in the favor of enterprises. They can help give seniors even more clout by joining senior-advocacy groups like AARP, supporting businesses with employment and customer service policies that benefit seniors, and participating in the political process at the local, state and national levels.

Adults 50 - plus represent one of the fastest growing labor groups in the United States, in part because many of today's older workers are delaying retirement. People seek senior jobs to supplement inadequate retirement income, while others continue to work for personal satisfaction. Often, seniors retire from one occupation only to begin another.

Whatever their individual plans and motivations may be, it's clear that the number of senior workers - and the need for senior jobs - is growing rapidly.

Some figures about senior adults: the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports:

- Only 13 percent of American workers were 55 and older in 2000.
- By 2006, that figure will increase to 15 percent, and by 2015 one in five (20 percent) of all U.S. workers will be 55 or older.

According to a 2002 AARP survey of employed workers aged 45 to 74:

- The majority (69 percent) of those interviewed plan to continue working beyond traditional retirement age.
- More than a third (34 percent) of the total sample said they would work part-time for interest or enjoyment.
- 19 percent said they would work at part-time jobs for necessary income.
- 10 percent plan to start their own businesses.
- 6 percent would change careers and work "full-time doing something else."
- Less than a third (28 percent) of older workers said they would not work at all after they reach retirement age

While more 50-plus workers want to work and are looking for jobs, senior job opportunities are not keeping pace. That's where organizations like Workforce50/Senior Job Bank are stepping up to help.

By hiring senior workers, government and private employers benefit by gaining employees who are trained, experienced, and dedicated. Senior workers also fill the void created by a shrinking workforce in the post-baby boom generation.

Providing senior jobs for a growing number of 50-plus adults in the workforce not only provides businesses and other organizations with experienced employees and offers senior workers income and personal satisfaction, it also strengthens the economy in other ways. "Employing older workers can unlock the purchasing and creative power of millions of trainable employees and eager consumers," according to AARP Board Chairman Charles Leven.

We can speak about good experiences about hiring senior adults. Dr. Susan Hughes and her team conducted a comparative study of two workplace interventions

and a control group, targeted at workers aged 40 years and older, to assess health behaviors and outcomes related to diet, physical activity, stress, smoking, and body mass index, over a 12-month period. The first was the COACH Intervention that used a combination of Web-based assessments and individual assistance from a coach with a Master of Public Health education.

The second was the RealAge Intervention that used a Web-based assessment to determine a person's health risk behaviors and generate a healthy lifestyle plan to follow. The control group was offered health education, where participants were given personally handed printed health-promotion materials. These materials included a listing of health-promotion programs and services offered by the university and other community-based organizations.

The team found that when compared to the health education control, COACH participants showed an increase in fruit and vegetable consumption and participation in physical activity, and a lower percentage of energy from fat, and RealAge participants showed a reduction in waist circumference. While both interventions provided some benefit to the participants, Dr. Hughes' team found that COACH participants were twice as likely to use the COACH intervention as RealAge participants were to use the RealAge intervention. The difference in the uptake of the intervention may have been because of the relatively modest personal coaching of the COACH intervention that encouraged participants to continue using the plan.¹⁴ Employers may want to consider using a personal coaching intervention as part of a worksite health program to improve the participation and health outcomes among older workers. BMW

In 2007, BMW implemented a pilot project to improve work conditions for older workers on an assembly line that included a worksite health initiative and changes to the work environment. The project team, which consisted of management staff, assessed the employees during kickoff workshops. Using the feedback from employees, the company implemented 70 changes investing approximately \$50,600 to do so. Among changes were:

- Replacing cement floors with wooden platforms to reduce the impact on knees.
- Barbershop chairs were installed to allow workers to sit at workstations.
- Orthopedic footwear to reduce the strain on feet.
- Adjustable worktables to reduce physical strain and facilitate personnel rotation during shifts.

In the first year they experienced a 7% increase in productivity that rivaled that of lines staffed by younger workers, they have since reported zero defects and a reduction in absenteeism from 7% to 2%. BMW has continued making similar adjustments in other plants with input from line workers at the worksites. This example demonstrates that a modest financial investment to changes in the work environment can have a positive impact on increasing productivity and reducing absenteeism which employers may consider as part of their overall worksite health program.

The increase in seniors is not just limited to the United States; there is also an aging population explosion in many other countries. According to the AoA, this increase can be attributed to "advances in science, technology and medicine leading to reductions in infant and maternal mortality, infectious and parasitic diseases, occupational safety measures, and improvements in nutrition and education."

Also European countries are affected by senior adults employees. Professor Juhani Ilmarinen, Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, Department of Physiology, Laajaniityntie 1, FIN-01620 Vantaa, Finland.

Chronological aging starts at birth and ends at death. Therefore, anyone in the work force (15–64 years of age) can be considered an aging worker. However, the definition of an aging worker is generally based on the period when major changes

occur in relevant work related functions during the course of work life. Functional capacities, mainly physical, show a declining trend after the age of 30 years, and the trend can become critical after the next 15–20 years if the physical demands of work do not decline. On the other hand, workers' perceptions of their ability to work indicate that some of them reach their peak before the age of 50 years, and five years later about 15–25% report that they have a poor ability to work, mainly those workers in physically demanding jobs but also those in some mentally demanding positions. Therefore, the ages of 45 or 50 years have often been used as the base criterion for the term “aging worker”. The main reason for the “early” definition of aging among workers from the occupational health point of view is that it gives better possibilities for preventive measures. The need for early action has been emphasized by the low participation rates of workers who are aged 55 years or older and by the early exit of this age group from work life all over the world.

There are several reasons for the aging of the work force, the main two being the baby boom after the Second World War, and the low birth rates which began in the 1980s. In the European Union (EU), the age groups of 50–64 years and 15–24 years both comprised about 25% of the work force in 1985. By 2005, the “oldest” group will account for 27% of the work force, while the “youngest” group will account for only 18%. It has been predicted that in 2025 there will be twice as many workers aged 50 years or older as those aged 25 years or younger (fig 1) in the present 15 member states. The work force of the entire EU will attain its oldest age during the next 25 years. The predictions have been based on current mortality and birth rate tables and emigration rates. Although the major increase in the emigration rates of younger generations into the EU may decrease the difference between the “oldest” and “youngest” cohorts, it will not solve the problems of older workers. On the other hand, as the EU is extended, the proportion of older workers will probably increase greatly.

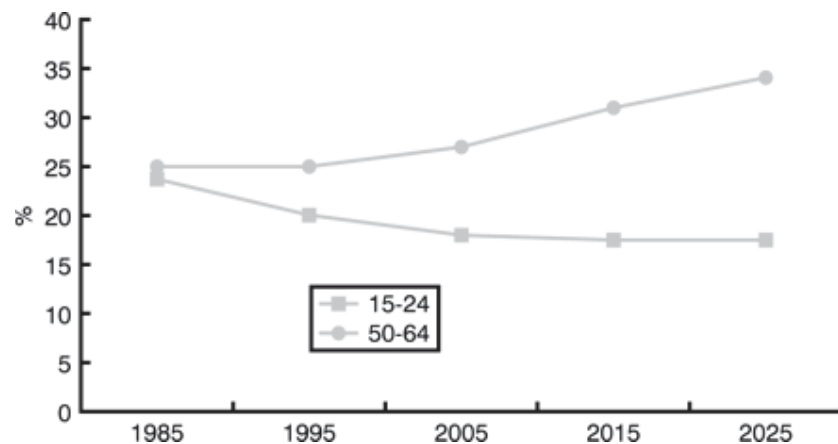


Figure 1 Development of work force, by they age
 Source: <http://oem.bmj.com/content/58/8/546.full>

Expected proportion of two different age groups of workers (15–24 years, and 50–64 years) from the entire workforce (15–66 years) in the EU over the next 12 years.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) has estimated that by the year 2025, the proportion of individuals over the age of 55 years will be 32% in Europe, 30% in North America, 21% in Asia, and 17% in Latin America. The changing demography is a great global challenge, and it will hit the developed countries first. Although the relatively low participation rates of 50–64 year olds in the EU labor force somewhat

balances the differences between the younger and older generations in work life, the alarming decline of 50–54 year olds in the EU labor force indicates that the fit between aging and work is already critical and appropriate concepts and practices are needed for solutions. The participation rates of age groups 55–59 years and 60–64 years of 60% and 20%, respectively, show that the majority of the work force leaves work life before a normal retirement age; therefore, it can be concluded that the mandatory retirement age of 65 years is no longer of any importance.

The demographic change, together with low participation rates, is creating a serious problem, which can be described by the age dependency ratio. The number of dependents (those aged 0–14 years, and 65 years and over) of the working age population (15–64 years) shows that there are currently about 50 dependents for each 100 persons employed. In 2025 the ratio is expected to be 58/100 in the EU. In some countries, such as Finland, the ratio will increase to up to 66/100 during the next 25 years. Sweden will have a heavy age dependency ratio (> 55/100) by 2005-15, and Ireland and Austria will have the lowest ratios (< 50/100).

However, the criterion of 0–14 years and 65 years and over for dependents is not the most relevant for the current situation because most adolescents 15 years and older are still in school or in some form of educational process, and most people 60 years and older are already out of work life. When using 0–19 years and 60 years and older as the criterion for dependents, a completely different level of age dependency ratio can be calculated. For example, in the EU there will be more than 80 dependents for each 100 employed persons in 2005-15. Several countries, such Finland, Sweden, France, Greece, Denmark, and Belgium, will even exceed the ratio of 90/100 by the year 2015.

The main conclusions that can be drawn from these EU statistics are summarized as follows:

- ▶ There will be more potential aging (50 years and over) workers in the work force than ever before
- ▶ Workers aged 50 years and older will comprise the largest proportion (> 30%) of the work force during the next 25 years
- ▶ There will be fewer younger workers (25 years and younger) in the work force than ever before
- ▶ The work force participation rates of workers 55 years of age and over is declining greatly
- ▶ The age dependency ratios will increase greatly during the next 15–25 years

A general conclusion is that the employment rate of aging workers (55 years and older) must be increased greatly. The key question is how? Before possible concepts and actions for solutions are introduced, some essential changes in human resources during aging should be briefly illustrated.

Since yet we spoke only about the advantages of hiring senior adults. But we have to expect also about disadvantages. Much scientific data and excellent textbooks describe the physical, mental, and social aging processes. The major evidence on the effect of the aging processes has been generated, however, by gerontological research, which has often focused on the later decades of life. In the field of occupational health there has been a growing interest since the 1980s in research on the changes in human resources in relation to work demands and aging. An increasing amount of data show that the effects of aging on work life should be taken into consideration more often and efforts should be made to increase the employment rate of aging workers.

Somme of the disadvantages of hiring senior adults can be resumed as:

- Changes in physical work capacity have often concentrated on the cardiovascular and musculoskeletal systems, body structure, and some important sensory systems.

- for the worker to maintain a normal age related average fitness level;
- and for the physical load of work to decrease according to the normal age decline in physical capacity (20–25%) during the ages of 45–65 years.

- Mental functional capacity is often defined as the ability to perform different tasks that require intellectual and other kinds of mental effort. Cognitive functions, such as perception, memory, learning, thinking, and the use of language have been the primary targets of research. Another central area of mental capacity is the relation between the individual and the outside world—for example, self concept, self value, perceived competency, and control of life. The newest component is that of metacognition, which involves the evaluation of a person's own cognitive functioning. Mental health, physical well being and, for example, attitudes towards one's own aging are closely related to mental capacity.

- The capacity to adapt to the new technologies and logistics could be another disadvantage. We say that it could be, because scientifically it was proved that experience, work performance, and aging together form interesting interactions. The positive effects of job experience can be directed towards basic cognitive processes or job performance. If job experience primarily improves or maintains cognitive skills, the positive connection between job experience and performance remains weaker. If, instead, job experience directly improves or maintains job performance, the link between job experience and cognitive skills remains undeveloped. Both of these mechanisms of job experience are possible and can explain why job performance does not weaken with age. A more creative use of job experience can significantly improve the coping of aging workers in work life. The job performance of older workers has been shown to be at least as productive as that of younger workers. The results between age groups have been found to be the same in skill demanding and speed demanding jobs.

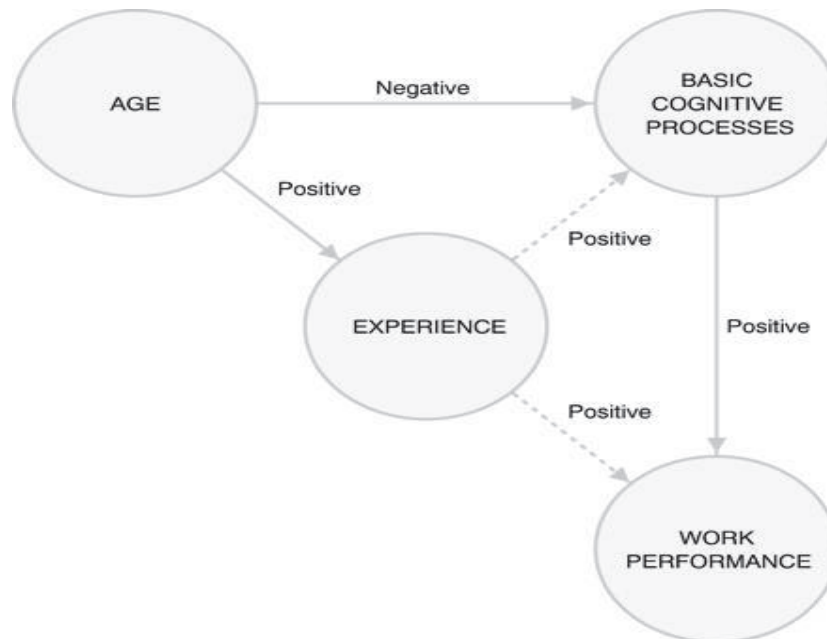


Figure 2. Relation between Age – Experience- Work Performance

Source: <http://oem.bmj.com/content/58/8/546.full>

How can we turn to advantage the so called disadvantages? The promotion of work ability is a basic process that is needed before the features of employability can be fully used. The content of work ability emphasizes that action is needed at both the worksite and the individual level. The most effective combination is the integration of the adjustments needed in the work community and work environment, as in aspects of individual health and functional capacities and professional competence. The results of follow up studies and experiences in the 1990s show, for example, that the following single actions can improve work ability during aging:

- ▶ training of supervisors for age management;
- ▶ implementation of age ergonomics;
- ▶ worksite exercise programs;
- ▶ tailored training in new technology.

The results are better if several actions are integrated. The consequences of improved work ability can be measured as better work productivity and quality of work and the better well being and life quality of aging workers. The long term effects of actions have been measured as a better third age quality. The basic concept for the promotion of work ability is the same for all age groups. However, the adjustments needed and single actions to be carried out are age dependent. Therefore tailoring is needed that is based on the effects of aging on work ability. Examples in private, municipal, and governmental sectors are available, for example, in the report of the FinnAge Action Programme. The promotion of work ability creates the base for the processes of employability. Together they can be powerful tools for improving employment at all ages, especially for aging workers.

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