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Original research article

The Work Ability Index for persons aged 50+ as an instrument for implementing the concept of Age Management



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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the issues of Age Management and the application of the Work Ability Index (WAI) for employees aged 50+. The objective of the study was to verify the potential of the application of an international European questionnaire method for the WAI identification in the Czech environment with the emphasis on the healthcare sector. The practical survey was filled in by a group of nurses and midwives of the Municipal Hospital in Ostrava and the employees of the company Vítkovice Reality Developments s.r.o. The results of the survey imply that healthcare workers scored poorer results in the Work Ability Index than non-healthcare workers. The authors concluded by stressing the need to implement the concept of Age Management as an instrument for staff management and for the maintenance and exploitation of the work ability of older staff members.

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Introduction

Age Management represents the management of the age structure of employees at the level of the entire society, companies and individuals. Discussions in the field of Age Management encompass a series of topics related, in particular, to the demographic development: population ageing, policies in old age pensions and retirement, social responsibility of companies, age discrimination, employment of the

older generation, mainly for the “50+” group. Age Management incorporates the corporate strategy in the area of employment with respect to the age, abilities and the potential of employees, their age diversity, harmonisation of personal and professional life (work-life balance), alternative workloads, the health and the life style of employees and, in keeping with the strategy of intergenerational knowledge transfer, also talent management and succession planning in companies. An integral part of Age Management is support for young families, the harmonisation of work with family life and

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child care through a suitable modification of working hours, very often involving the cooperation with older co-workers. Age Management represents the development and management of programmes, strategies and procedures addressing the demographic changes in the workforce aimed at promoting the age diversity at workplaces, hiring and employing both older and younger employees, knowledge transfer, support for health and a good atmosphere. The Age Management practice is characterised as a system of measures combating age barriers and/or promoting age diversity and activities ensuring that each employee gets a chance to fulfil their potential and is not being discriminated against because of their age. The concept of Age Management is based on the practical application of the findings of longitudinal research conducted by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (FIOH). Its objective was to conduct research into the health, functional capacity, work ability, working environment and stress of employees over the age of 45. To measure work ability, a novel method was devised, a questionnaire leading to the identification of the Work Ability Index (WAI) [1] (this questionnaire was translated into the Czech language by Lucie Štorová within the project “Strategy of Age Management in the Czech Republic” [2]). It includes seven (7) dimensions each of which is evaluated using one or more questions. The total WAI value is calculated as the sum of points reached for individual dimensions [2–7].

This work was done as a master thesis in the field of Systematic integration of processes in health care. Its main objective was to prove the applicability of the wide-spread international questionnaire [1] to measure the WAI in the Czech environment, including the reaction of human resources managers (previous research involved only job seekers registered with the Employment Office [2,7]). Due to the field of study, one company was chosen in the health care field, while the other was outside this sector to allow for comparisons.

Potential at work and work ability of 50+ employees

Although Age Management may be studied as a more general (holistic) management concept, it goes without saying that it primarily focuses on the work abilities of employees in terms of their age. Work ability is generally considered to be the key feature for both employees and their employers. According to the Finnish researchers Ilmarinen and Tuomi [1,8], work ability may be understood as “the employee's quality at present, in the near future and to what extent they are or will be able to perform their work with respect to the demands set on them (in terms of their physical and mental health)”. Work ability is closely related to the employee's potential at work, since work ability may be expressed as the ratio of two variables: the potential at work and the requirements for work. The potential for work may be understood as a set of individual's significant abilities for work, while the potential is not related to any specific work. In simplified terms, we may say that the potential for work is what an individual can do and what abilities they have available. Considering the range of the potential at work, there is no such work or occupation whose

performance requires the entire individual's potential for work, but always only a part of some ability and quality is involved [9,10]. Working conditions may set different demands on a person that may be both adequate and inadequate in relationship to the human potential at work. If the demands set by work are inadequate to the individual's potential at work, this may result in damage to the individual's health, an illness or a loss of the ability to work.

The potential at work has two other components, the physical potential and the qualification potential. The term physical potential is understood as a set of intellectual, physical and sensual abilities that are important for work and give us an idea of the performance of an individual organism. The qualification potential includes the education completed by an individual, their knowledge and experience, but also the requalification ability, skills, motivation, the level of education and ability to learn new things. The potential at work of 50+ persons should be supported by employers by offering them additional qualification growth and requalification, by modifying their working hours and shortening their workload. Work ability is the basis for the quality of work. The aspects affecting the staying of older employees in employment contracts involve health, professional abilities, motivation, the content of work and working conditions. It is essential for organisations to mediate the effective transfer of experience and skills from the older generation to the younger one [11,12].

Material and methods

The Work Ability Index was originally devised for use in corporate preventive care for monitoring at both the individual and the group level. Thus far, work abilities have been primarily studied in older employees (50+), but recent research studies have pointed out the growing difficulty in mastering the demands for work, even among younger employees. Therefore, the focus on their work abilities has also been gaining ground [13,14]. The Work Ability Index primarily serves as a support for employees. The index may be applied in an early phase to assist in identifying the hazards behind a drop in productivity, or to the contrary, as a checking tool for the verification whether correct measures have been taken for the work ability maintenance. The advantage of the index is its easy and fast flexibility and applicability for both monitoring at an individual and a group level. The data are confidential and, at an individual level, they are only used for the purpose of occupational healthcare services. The WAI questionnaire is available in two versions. In the complex version, filled in by an occupational healthcare service doctor and individual diseases are listed within basic groups. For the purposes of this study, a shortened version has been used that may also be filled in by a non-doctor specialist. It only contains the basic groups of the International Classification of Diseases stating further the total number of diseases. The WAI evaluation ranges between 7 and 49 points. The work ability is considered as low in the range of 7–27, average in the range of 28–36, good in the range of 37–43 and excellent in the range of 44–49 points. Employees scoring 37 points and more are classified as individuals with satisfactory work ability.

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