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Active aging at work: Contributing factors and implications for organizations☆

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Contents

INTRODUCTION

Continuously low or shrinking birth rates, the aging of the baby boomer generation, and rising life expectancies and retirement ages are causing unprecedented population and workforce aging around the globe. These developments have spurred an increased interest in the topic of *active aging*. The World Health Organization defines active aging as "the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation, and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age." As a policy framework, active aging is now endorsed widely by organizations such as the United Nations, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the European Commission.

In the work context, active aging means that as workers age, they maintain or improve (1) their physical, mental, and social well-being; (2) continue to show high levels of work engagement and performance; and (3) experience fair treatment and employment security. As a consequence, older workers are not only able and motivated to work past

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traditional retirement ages, they also continue to be happy and productive members of the workforce.

Based on research evidence accumulated over decades, we outline individual, job, team, organizational, non-work, and societal factors that contribute to active aging at work. That is, we take the view that aging workers can actively influence their development and environment, and that aging workers are themselves influenced by their environment. We conclude by outlining implications for organizations that want to implement age-inclusive human resource (HR) management practices, including recruitment and retention activities, career management, training and development, work design and health and performance management, managing the transition to retirement and bridge employment, and combating negative age stereotypes.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO ACTIVE AGING AT WORK

Aging is a continuous process that lasts from conception until death. Because there is immense variability in how people age, most researchers do not specify a cut-off age to define when someone is "old" or an "older worker." Instead, the terms "younger" and "older" worker are used here — and more generally in organizational science — for descriptive purposes only. For practical reasons, organizations and governments often define "older workers" as those individuals aged 40, 45, or 50 years and older. Most studies in the field of work and aging include workers between career entry (typically sometime between 15—25 years) and retirement entry (typically sometime between 60—70 years), so findings can be generalized to the "working age" population. In this section, we primarily describe evidence on *average age-related differences and changes* in various individual and contextual characteristics, as well as important work experiences and behaviors. It is important to note, however, that age is generally a rather weak predictor of work outcomes and, therefore, it is important to consider more proximal *age-related mechanisms* (e.g., work experience) that influence these outcomes. Moreover, there can be substantial *variability within age groups*, and this variability tends to become greater with increasing age. Thus, when average age-related trends are discussed, it is important to keep in mind that there are also differences between workers of similar ages.

Individual Factors

Workers' physical and cognitive abilities, personality characteristics, beliefs, and goals change with age in ways that can affect their motivation for, and performance at work. Contrary to popular beliefs about the detrimental effects of age, however, these changes can be characterized as encompassing both losses and gains. On average, physical strength, cognitive speed, reasoning abilities, and memory decline with age and thus represent age-related *losses*. However, knowledge accumulated through work and life experiences, as well as emotion regulation competencies tend to improve with age. Older workers focus on positive emotions and events, and report higher levels of job satisfaction, interpersonal trust, loyalty, and affective commitment than younger workers. Thus, these characteristics represent age-related *gains*.

Age-related gains can compensate for potentially detrimental effects of age-related losses. For instance, in most jobs, older workers compensate for declines in cognitive speed, reasoning, and memory by relying on their knowledge gained from years of prior work experience. Older workers also have increased opportunities for environmental support, such as support from colleagues or using tools. Indeed, age has been shown to be generally unrelated to task, creative, and training performance, whereas organizational citizenship behavior and safety performance tend to improve with age and counterproductive behaviors decrease with age.

As workers age, they may also perceive changes in their abilities, which may affect their self-efficacy and perceptions of their future work-related opportunities. For example, older office workers might realize that a software upgrade is more disruptive now than when they were younger because they have trouble remembering the tools shown in training. Workers further experience age-related reorganization of personality traits. Older workers, on average, tend to be more conscientious, emotionally stable, and agreeable than younger workers. Moreover, they tend to be somewhat less extraverted and less open to experience. These shifts in personality suggest stable, reliable, and cooperative workers.

In addition to changes in abilities, personality characteristics, and beliefs, goals may also change as people age. On average, with increasing age, people focus less on growth and development goals, and more on maintenance goals, prevention of losses, and emotional meaningfulness. This suggests that the perceived importance or preference for job characteristics and work outcomes also changes with an individual's age. Motives shift from a focus on achievement and career advancement at younger ages to motives at higher ages pertaining to accomplishing worthwhile tasks or interesting work, helping other people or contributing to society, autonomy and flexibility in how the work gets done, use of already learned skills, and job security. Hence, work motivation does not generally increase or decrease with age, but its content and focus changes.

Finally, workers' use of action regulation strategies positively influences their active aging process. To make optimal use of their personal resources, and to manage the demands of their job, older workers typically select fewer work goals, optimize the effort needed to attain these goals, and compensate for age-related losses by using alternative means. For example, seasoned project managers who enjoy managing teams might choose developmental goals related to managing people. They are likely to delegate the responsibility of learning new project management software to subordinates to free up time to manage more direct reports.

It is important to note that the trends discussed above represent average age-related changes that have been documented through research and that there is immense variability in age-related changes in abilities, personality, motivation, and performance. Moreover, differences between individuals increase with age. Some 65-year-olds may have the memory ability of an average 40-year-old and remain open, extraverted, and achievement oriented

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