

Accommodating older people at work

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H. Bouma. Accommodating older people at work. Gerontechnology 2013;11(4):489-492; doi:10.4017/gt.2013.11.4.001.00 In industrial countries, numbers are growing of workers above age 60. Political pressure for later pension schemes is mainly based on financial motives. However, there are better reasons for a longer working life. Here it is argued that a majority of people can keep on working quite well up to about 75 yrs, provided certain working conditions are met and both preventive and ergonomic measures are put in place. Main issues are: fostering motivation, providing focused, situated training and creating suitable work environments. This is summarized in ten recommendations, separate for employers and for older people themselves.

Keywords: older people, work, motivation, prevention, ergonomics

Rising life expectancy has created the possibility for many in the industrialized world to extend their working lives into their 70s. This raises the issue of how these final one or two decades of people's working lives should be structured. The financial implications are currently often decisive. The parameters will differ between countries depending on the pension provisions and wage structure. Whilst this reality cannot be ignored, there is another debate to be had concerning the value of continued employment beyond age 60, to the employer, the older employee, and society at large. It is important to identify the key components that make employment into older age a valuable experience for all parties involved: the balance between loyalty and retaining expertise and experience on the one hand, and accommodating reduced stamina and working hours on the other. More thought is to be given and research to be done as to what makes work a valuable experience, the daily routine it provides, the social framework, the recognition, the shaping of identity. These aspects can to a greater or lesser extent be evaluated independently of the financial incentives that exist. Moreover it is important to remember that money is a means, and not an end. When financial considerations are the only ones that are considered as valid, other valuable realities are crushed in the process and we are all the poorer for it.

A general notion is that after the age of 60 yrs or so human faculties are declining. This would lend some credence to efforts for leaving the employment market. We will argue that such a view is mistaken. Certain declines start much earlier in life while other faculties are not at all declining at old age. This leads to a nuanced view on capacities and faculties of older workers. We will restrict this paper to workers 60-75 yrs of age, because

many of them are healthy, perhaps with one or two chronic diseases that do not much hamper them in their daily life and work^{1,2}; examples are diseases under full control of medicines, and increased glare sensitivity at night. In general, older people are a neglected resource, having skills, experience and wisdom that can make valuable contributions to society³. Earlier findings in occupational gerontology are that the influence of age on work ability is rather limited⁴. The purpose here is to formulate general rules for accommodating older people at work. What can we learn from gerontology and gerontechnology for optimizing working conditions for older people? The general proposal here is to foster motivation, utilize existing experience and skills, provide focused, situated training, and compensate for any declining faculties by proper ergonomics and work organization^{5,6}. Ilmarinen⁷ provided a broad overview of the area including the political scene.

DEVELOPMENTS WITH ADVANCING AGE

Individuals

Older people are very different among themselves as compared to people of younger age groups⁸⁻¹⁰. This is because their lives and environments have been so diverse⁶. This radiates into a great many physical, mental, social and financial aspects. It follows that statistical data, and in particular central values such as averages or medians cannot be utilized for individual purposes¹¹.

Prevention

The most general condition for a long healthy life and consequently for the option of a long working life is prevention. Prevention: physically by moderate exercise, varied healthy nutrition and non-smoking, mentally by continuous training and keeping up with developments in one's profession, and socially by fostering one's profession-

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H.M. Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands who will resign on April 30, 2013, is exemplary in that she has continued full-time working until 75 years

al network. This is not just a recipe at older age, but rather a life span perspective that radiates positively and equally on short and longer term.

Physiology

A most general effect of aging is a gradual decrease of speed, starting already around age 30 as is generally known from the field of sports. The decrease is quite moderate and does not stand in the way of most task fulfilments. The same is true of some general decrease of force and endurance, which, however, can be effectively counteracted by training¹². Obesity and smoking are risk factors. Specific chronic restrictions may be compensated by proper work environments. Examples are an increased sensitivity for auditory noise and the need for postural adjustments. Ilmarinen¹³ developed the self-rated Work Ability Index as a tool to assess efficacy at work, which can also be applied to older workers.

Psychology

Motivation

Voluntary work is exemplary for a high motivation of older workers who receive little if any financial reward. Many examples testify to this: organizing or driving local buses, training youngsters in sports, helping older people use their computer, functioning in boards of foundations and societies, doing many types of advi-

sory work, carrying forth hobbies. This shows that older people are quite motivated and capable of contributing to society apart from financial rewards. Such positive motivation may be mirrored in paid work if similar conditions are fulfilled. For relatively poor people, financial rewards are likely more motivating as such.

Memory

A general phenomenon is some slowing of mental processes with advancing age. However, a distinction should be made between 'fluid memory' functions and 'crystallized memory' functions^{6,14}. Short-term memory, working memory and prospective memory are of the fluid type, which show a gradual decline with advancing age. Also name finding may become somewhat more difficult. However, long term memory, language competence, and complex professional skills are of the crystallized type; these remain quite steady and are a proper basis for a prolonged working life.

Learning

With advancing age, learning becomes more difficult, but remains fully possible. However, different settings produce different results. For optimal professional results, situated learning ranks among the best methods, i.e. learning in the situation in which one has to function¹⁵. Negative learning (learning what *not* to do) should be kept to a minimum¹⁶. Classes are not particular useful, because what is learned may not easily generalize to real work situations¹⁷. Older people are very heterogeneous and teaching them should be geared to their individual situations.

Social gain

Meeting colleagues on a daily basis and keeping involved in a work context provides a wider horizon¹⁸.

Sociology

Cohort and generation

Cohort effects are probably as prominent as age effects, although more difficult to make explicit^{8,19}. One of these is the influence of innovative technologies, which distinguishes successive generations⁹⁻²¹ among which the distinction between Computer generation (born between 1965 and 1980) and Internet generation (born after 1980)²².

Lifelong learning

'Lifelong learning' is a valid concept²³, but its nicely sounding generality may prevent attention to the specifics of application to older workers.

Politics²⁴ and media

Intuitively, a general positive mood about continued working after pension age may raise the

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spirits of contributing to society. Stressing financial arguments may do the opposite. Research in this field will be welcome.

TWO VIEWS OF 10 COMMANDMENTS

From an employer's perspective

(i) *Individuals*. Basis is the person herself or himself, in particular as to work experience and skills. A specific person is more informative than statistical data of groups to which she/he belongs.

(ii) *Statistics*. Older people are far more diverse than younger people. Avoid working with central statistical values such as means or medians. If available, use actual values of the group at hand; otherwise take measures for spread. Realize that few people are average in several respects.

(iii) *Health*. Although epidemiological data may suggest quite a few chronic diseases at old age, many of these do not stand in the way of proper task fulfilment. If, nevertheless, they threaten to do so, suitable ergonomics may compensate for trailing functions. Absenteeism for reasons of disease needs not to be increased.

(iv) *Motivation*. Keep motivation up by valuing work and putting it into the wider perspective of the company and society. Make older workers feel proud about their contributions.

(v) *Utilize professional experience*. Skills and experience belong to the 'crystallized memory' type, and do not generally decline with rising age. Examples of old people still active in their occupation can be found easily: music conductors, politicians, artists, trainers in sports, skilled handymen, drivers, carers, and housewives or housemen.

(vi) *Situated training*. Offer proper and regular training in concrete task requirements. Courses are less useful because contents are easily forgotten and often do not generalize to the real-world tasks. Situated, in-service training endures better. Take into account that unlearning is not a human faculty, so concentrate on training what to do and avoid teaching what not to do.

(vii) *Avoid time stress*. Time stress may induce errors at any age, but more so in complex tasks at advancing age. This is because 'fluid memory' functions among which working memory are declining with advancing age.

(viii) *One task at a time*. Avoid unconnected simultaneous tasks, because these burden working memory and prospective memory, both of the 'fluid' type.

(ix) *Proper ergonomics/human factors*. These may require some extra general or individual

attention because of narrower boundaries of perceptual and motor faculties. Increased light on task, proper glasses, and varied working postures are examples.

(x) *Less than full-time*. Having a day off per week or working a few hours less per day make it easier to keep up.

From a worker's perspective

(i) *Individual*. Maintain self-respect and value your individual qualities and professional experience.

(ii) *Statistics*. Do not believe that average values for health or otherwise have bearing on your own present or future situation.

(iii) *Health*. Consider your own options to work as to fitness, endurance and stress. If you so wish, you may compare yourself to your colleagues in the same type of work.

(iv) *Motivation*. See your contribution in the wider context of the needs of society both locally and more widely, which may lead you to be more satisfied in your work.

(v) *Utilize professional experience*. Utilize your own professional skills and work experience as much as possible.

(vi) *Situated training*. Be willing to take part in training-on-the-spot, i.e. in the actual situation where you will work. Concentrate on what you will have to do or how you can best behave and avoid paying attention to how not to behave.

(vii) *Avoid time stress*. Take your time for the task at hand and avoid overload of work.

(viii) *One task at a time*. Carry out your tasks one by one, and use a written list of consecutive tasks if needed.

(ix) *Proper ergonomics/human factors*. Adapt your working situation to your specific strengths and weaknesses in working posture, in vision and hearing, and in motor skills, asking advice from professional ergonomists when needed.

(x) *Less than full-time*. Consider working part-time either by less working hours per day or less working days per week.

CONCLUSION

Gerontology and gerontechnology offer a variety of insights for enabling older people to continue working into their seventies. It would be preferable if these ideas were preventively incorporated at an early stage. If this is done, this will contribute significantly to realizing the stated general political goal of a higher pension age.

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