

Acknowledgements

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Productive aging

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J. Moraal, Productive aging, Gerontechnology, 2001; 1(1): 62 - 64. In our societies the growth in the number of older people is considerable. Consequently, the costs for old age insurance are rising accordingly. However, many healthy and motivated older people are willing and able to participate in the workforce. A concerted effort by government institutions, labour unions, employers, research institutions, and, not to forget, the elderly themselves, should offer all possible means to employ or re-employ older workers. The article discusses some relevant issues in this field.

Key words: aging, demographics, older workers, work, workforce

Current demographic trends show an increase in world population and an even more pronounced increase in people 65 and over. According to U.N. sources, in the more

developed countries the percentage of people 65 and over will rise from 11.5 % in 1985 to 18.9 % in 2025; for the less developed countries these percentages respectively are

4.2 % to 8.0 % ! Because of the rapid growth in the number of older people, for a substantial part due to the improvement of life circumstances and the "baby boom" following World War II, a growth in the number of older workers is to be noticed and is still expected to continue. At the same time a decreased availability is to be seen in the number of younger workers, which makes it absolutely necessary to avoid spilling older peoples' talents and experiences by putting them aside too early.

In the more developed countries people 55 and over are characterised by an active and mobile way of life, by being more healthy, better educated and longer independent: the "third phase" of life. Considering the tremendous increase in societal costs for old age insurances, together with the wish of many older people to stay in or return to employment, be it full or part time, why not strive for productive aging?

OLDER EMPLOYEES

In many organisations however, management is not much interested in keeping older employees. They prefer a continuous influx of younger workers on contract basis, because the latter have a fresh education with an easy access to the latest developments in knowledge and technologies. Older employees, on the contrary, are easily judged as inflexible, having outdated knowledge, and therefore are difficult to move to other functions because they do not seem to fit in ongoing training programs. In summary, the older people having supposedly lost so much of their functional abilities, management is not interested in employing them.

It is very well known that human capabilities decline during the aging process, but also that the speed of decline largely differs between individuals and between functions and capabilities within individuals. Life history and career developments are among the most determining here. A striking example is from a large company in the Netherlands

some years ago, when many 60+ managers had to leave the company. Most of them fulfilled jobs already within a couple of months as general consultants or advisors in other companies. They had got used to so many reorganisations and changes in their responsibilities during their career in the former company that setting up their own business was just peanuts!

We all know that aging generally leads to losses, for example, in vision: our visual acuity becomes less, our dark adaptation takes longer, etc. Our ears lose some of their hearing sensitivity, especially for high frequency sounds. Our body size decreases, and there is a general loss of strength. We become insecure because of a lack of flexibility in our movements. In cognition it gradually takes more time to process all incoming information and to do two things at a time. We notice difficulties in remembering. But what has all this to do with the relation between aging and work?

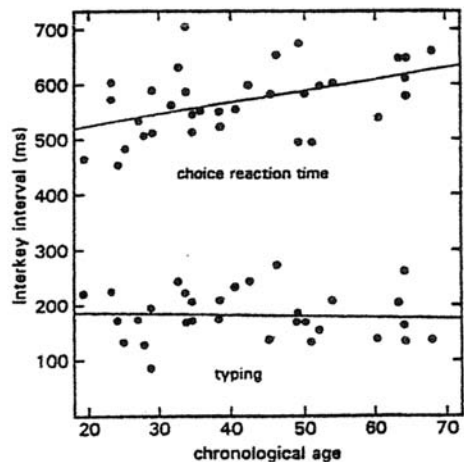


Figure 1. Median interkey interval in ms for normal typing and choice-reaction time tasks as a function of typist age. Each point represents a single typist and the solid line illustrates the regression equation relating interkey interval to age².

Reviews of tens of studies, including meta-analyses resulted in equal evidence that job performance either increases with age, decreases with age, or is not related to age. The results of the studies varied according to type of performance measure and job type. In the meta-analysis of 65 studies by McEvoy and Cascio¹, age and job performance were unrelated. Based on the fact that with aging a general slowing of behaviour takes place, one might expect that the rate of typing of a professional typist should also slow down with age. However, Salthouse² found a strikingly different result (Figure 1).

Compared with the performance on a laboratory choice –reaction time task, which showed the expected drop in performance with age, there was no drop in performance in the typing task. The explanation is that the over-experienced typists did not type single letters, analogous to the laboratory task where they had to react to single lights, but typed parts of and even complete sentences, due to their long experience in working with visual windows that gradually encompassed larger and larger parts of the raw material.

A main critical issue now is the following: what are the employment opportunities for older people when they have to face the increased use of advanced technologies in the workplace? According to Czaja³, it is unlikely that older people have had exposure to computers, implying that they are required to learn a new set of skills. Besides, system designers are mostly not used to consider older people as active users of technology. As pointed out earlier, chronological age is not a valid predictor of work performance. The relationship between job performance and age is mediated by factors as built up

knowledge, overlearned skills, the development of special abilities and the like, all during career development. Although learning new skills asks more from people when they become older, the move should come from the other side, i.e. training programs should be adapted to the older trainees. Based on practical studies many training recommendations now can be given. To name a few, use self-paced learning schedules, create a supportive learning environment with easy-access help, provide sufficient practice, address any concerns the learner has about the equipment, and minimise demands on memory.

CONCLUSION

Older workers are mostly highly motivated, have organisational commitment, positive work-standards, and are less competitive. They have lower accident rates than younger workers for most occupations, although the impact is often more severe and needs longer recovery time. Job turnover and absenteeism decline with age. As older people are able and willing to participate in the workforce in a highly motivated manner, society should investigate the possibilities for advanced and well adapted training opportunities where and when necessary.

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