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## What's Age Got to Do With It? A Primer and Review of the Workplace Aging Literature

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### Author Note

This paper was part of the special issue of *Personnel Psychology*, *What's Age Got to Do with It? Age and Age-Related Differences in the Workplace*, which was edited by Margaret Beier, Ruth Kanfer, Dorien Kooij, and Donald Truxillo, who was editor-in-chief for the special issue.

### Synopsis

As populations around the world continue to age, HR practitioners and scholars have focused on how to support workers across the lifespan. There has been significant progress on how work and non-work factors affect the performance, well-being, and workforce participation of older workers. Our review highlights this research.

### The Lifespan Development Approach and Work

Lifespan development approaches frame aging as a continuous process of growth and decline (Baltes et al., 1980). There is also variability in aging: One person at age 50 might resemble another person aged 35 in terms of ability and motivation (Hertzog et al., 2008). Thus, there is no specific age at which a person becomes an "older worker." Instead, this varies as a function of the individual's development, the requirements of the job, and the norms of the society, organization, and industry. In addition to life events and physical changes, aging is also a result of a person's cognitive and motivational changes.

### Cognitive abilities

There are two broad cognitive abilities relevant to aging and workplace performance. First, fluid abilities (e.g., processing speed) decline slowly over the lifespan, starting in early adulthood (Salthouse, 2010). Second, however, crystallized abilities (e.g., acquired through education and experience) offset

some of these age-related losses: Crystallized abilities tend to remain stable and or even increase throughout the working years (Ackerman, 2000).

### Motivation over the work lifespan

Across the lifespan there are changes in dispositions/personality traits (Roberts et al., 2006), goals, and motives (Ebner et al., 2006). These may contribute to changes to what motivates a person at work (Kanfer et al., 2013). For example, midlife workers may desire jobs that allow them to teach others (generativity motives). In later adulthood, intrinsically satisfying work and using skills to one's full potential may be most motivating (e.g., Kooij et al., 2009) and even cause workers to delay retirement.

### How People (and Workers) Adapt to Aging: Theories of Lifespan Development

Two theories of lifespan developmental explain how a person successfully adapts to age-related changes, including at work. Selection, Optimization, and Compensation (SOC) Theory proposes that workers choose different activities across the lifespan (including at work) to compensate for age-related changes. (e.g., Rauvola & Rudolph, 2022). Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST) argues that motives and goals shift over the lifespan – and at work – as a function of perceptions of time left in life (future time perspective); thus as people age, they may shift away from longer-term goals related to achievement and skill acquisition and toward shorter-term, social and emotional goals such as relationships (Carstensen et al., 1999).

### How Age Relates to Key Work Outcomes Job performance

Results over many studies show no relationship between age and core job performance (e.g., Ng & Feldman, 2008). This may be because for

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most jobs, age-related declines in fluid abilities are offset by stability/gains in crystallized abilities (Beier et al., 2020) and motivation. In addition, increased age is associated with increased organizational citizenship behaviors (e.g., helping others) and safety behavior and lower counterproductive work behavior.

### Work ability

Work ability, a person's ability or perceived ability to meet their job requirements, is considered a predictor of disability and retirement. A recent meta-analysis (Brady et al., 2020) found that age had a negative but small relationship with work ability: that is, work ability declines with age, but only slightly.

### Worker well-being (e.g., job satisfaction, health)

A meta-analysis (Ng & Feldman, 2010) found small to moderate differences between older and younger workers on most job attitudes such as job satisfaction, role conflict, role ambiguity, and commitment, with older workers having more positive attitudes/well-being outcomes than their younger counterparts. Another study (Ng & Feldman, 2013) found that although clinical measures of physical health (e.g., blood pressure) worsen with age, self-reported physical and mental health among older workers generally do not.

### Successful aging at work

An important factor for mature workers is the concept of successful aging at work, such as maintaining their competency and maintaining health, motivation, and work ability. Successful aging implies successful adaptation to the aging process, through processes such as the SOC processes described above or by job crafting (described below).

### Late career transitions and retirement

Career and retirement decisions often involve a weighing of individual and environmental factors such as motivation, financial considerations, social connections at work, country and industry norms, health, and family situation. Based on these factors, workers may decide to retire, seek "bridge employment" to transition to retirement, volunteer, and/or return to work after retirement.

### Additional Research Streams on the Age-Diverse Workforce

#### Age stereotypes and age discrimination

Although most older-worker stereotypes (e.g., lower performance and ability to learn; resistant to change; more costly) are negative, all are not (e.g., more dependable than; Posthuma & Campion, 2009). In any case, a large meta-analysis showed that most of these common older-worker stereotypes are not true (Ng & Feldman, 2012). People may hold conscious age stereotypes, although stereotypes also operate at the unconscious level. Research continues on when age stereotypes lead to actual discriminatory workplace decisions. Some authors (e.g., Rudolph et al., 2021) have argued that the discussion of generations in the popular press has actually exacerbated age stereotyping and discrimination.

#### Teams, groups, and age diversity

Work teams are, and will continue to be, age-diverse. Research has shown that age diversity in teams can lead to either worse (Joshi & Roh, 2009) or improved (Cox & Blake, 1991) team performance depending on

the circumstances. Age-diverse teams may perform better on complex versus simple tasks (Wegge et al., 2012). In addition, employers can encourage successful age-diverse teams by promoting a positive age-diversity climate.

### Age, job crafting, and job design

Employees themselves can act proactively to adapt their work to fit their needs through job crafting behavior. Job crafting refers to changes that a person makes to their job so it better fits them. Organizations can offer training to help workers craft their jobs successfully. In addition, employers can redesign work (e.g., reduce physical demands) to support older workers. Such redesigns can benefit younger workers as well.

### Training and development

Despite age-related stereotypes about older workers' inability to learn (Posthuma & Campion, 2009), people can and do learn throughout the lifespan (Carter & Beier, 2010), although learning may be more effortful as people age (Torres & Beier, 2018). One solution is to design training for the needs of older trainees. Many training practices that support older workers (e.g., self-paced learning) will also benefit younger workers (Davenport et al., 2022).

### HR practices to support an aging workforce

Research has examined HR strategies for mature workers. For example, Boehm et al. (2014) found that inclusive HR practices – where the HR practices support workers of all ages – lead to a positive age-diversity climate in the company, which in turn leads to increased performance and reduced turnover for workers of all ages. Also, as workers' needs change with age, they may need different types of HR practices. For example, practices that help workers maintain and apply their current skills and expertise may become more important than HR practices such as new training.

### Future Research

Our review uncovered the extensive literature on how to manage an age-diverse workforce, but research questions remain. Specifically, we need additional research on:

- How age relates to different types of job performance.
- Ways organizations support work ability and workforce participation across the lifespan.
- Ways to best support wellbeing across the lifespan.
- Individual and organizational factors that lead to successful aging at work.
- Effects of technology, remote work, job characteristics, and social environment on retirement decisions.
- How older workers craft their jobs to restore their fit with their jobs as they age.
- Interventions to improve performance of age-diverse teams and how age diversity affects teams over time.
- The roles of conscious (explicit) and unconscious (implicit) stereotypes in discrimination against workers in different age groups.
- Age differences in reactions to different training methods and how to design training for the unique needs of older trainees.
- Examine which HR practices and interventions are effective for workers of different ages.

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