



Desafios e oportunidades para organizações no que diz respeito ao aprendizado e treinamento de trabalhadores idosos

Challenges and Opportunities for Organisations of Longer Working Lives With Respect to Work-Related Learning and Development

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Abstract: With the decline of births and with an increasing number of people reaching the retirement period, governments worldwide are extending the age that people could finally retire; due to this, more workers over their 60s see themselves forced to work longer, and organisations are being pushed to adapt their environment and Human Resources practices to hire, retain, and retrain older employees. This article explores this new reality of working longer and what are the opportunities and challenges for organisations brought by it. Academic studies were reviewed to highlight if organisations are assessing their employees' needs and developing and training their older employees. This process is not easy, considering the stereotypes and prejudices faced by mature employees in the labour market.

Keywords: Longer working lives; learning; development; opportunities; challenges.

Resumo: Com o declínio dos nascimentos e com um número crescente de pessoas chegando ao período de aposentadoria, os governos em todo o mundo estão estendendo a idade em que as pessoas podem finalmente se aposentar. Devido a isso, mais trabalhadores com mais de 60 anos se vêem forçados a trabalhar por mais tempo, e as organizações estão sendo pressionadas a adaptar seu ambiente de trabalho, assim como rever suas práticas de Recursos Humanos para contratar, reter e treinar funcionários mais velhos. Este artigo explora essa nova realidade de prolongamento da vida profissional e quais são as oportunidades e desafios para as organizações que ela traz. Estudos acadêmicos foram revisados para destacar se as organizações estão acessando as necessidades de seus funcionários e desenvolvendo e treinando seus funcionários idosos. Esse processo não é fácil, considerando os estereótipos e preconceitos enfrentados por trabalhadores idosos no mercado de trabalho.

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Palavras-chave: Trabalhadores idosos; aprendizado; treinamento; oportunidades; desafios.

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of this millennium, longer working lives have become the forefront subject in many countries. With the decline of births worldwide and the population age increasing, many countries are increasing the retirement age; while others are extending the default retirement age to allow workers to stay in the labour market for longer if they wish. It is a condition that many workers accept due to financial necessity (Egdell, Maclean, Raeside, & Chen, 2018) or because they want to maintain their social interaction and a sense of purpose.

Based on studies available, this article will discuss the challenges and opportunities for organisations regarding learning and development strategies for a maturing workforce and how organisations tackle this issue and how they are taking advantage, or not, of the 'golden ager' (Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994). This subject is still understudied in academia and faces many prejudices from employers, employees, and society. When it is said that this issue is understudied, the reason is based on the number of studies that focus on the employee perspective of working longer, against much less focusing on the employer's views of an ageing society as well as how learning and development impact older workers. Firstly, it is important to understand why employees stay longer in the labour market. Secondly, what are the issues that academia has pointed out as the reasons why there are challenges and opportunities in the learning and development of longer working lives.

2. Longer working lives

According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) bulletin released in June 2020, the total number of people in the UK in mid-2019 was estimated to be almost 67 million, with just above 12 million aged 65 and over. In another bulletin released a year earlier, October 2019, the ONS estimated that by 2043 it would be almost 16 million people in pensionable age against 44.2

million in working age. This estimate considered that retirement age would be 67 years old for both sexes by 2043 in accordance with the current legislation, simply put, the pensionable age population will increase by 30% by then. As reported by the UK government official statistics released in September 2020, the employment rate in the age group between 50 and 64 years old increased to 72%, followed by an increment of 10.4% in the age group above 65. Eleven years ago, Porcellato, Carmichael, Hulme, Ingham, and Prashar (2010) said there was a low percentage of employability of older workers in the UK. It was guided by a high proportion of people over their 50s with no qualification, modern deindustrialisation, the rise of technologies, and generous retirement packages, resulting in their early exit of the labour market. Compared with the 2020 UK's government data presented above, this reality is changing, with many older workers being reintroduced or maintained in the labour market during the past years. It is a fact that there will be more older workers in the workforce due to an ageing society and government policies, and many organisations are already aware of it.

From positivist and realist research through the lens of biological theories to critical, interpretivism, and postmodernism research through the lens of sociological and psychological theories, the approach foundations to ageism ranges between all ontological and epistemological paradigms. Biological, sociological, and psychological fields incorporate important considerations about ageing in society and the workplace. With the increasing numbers of older workers staying in the labour market for longer, Baltes, Rudolph, and Bal (2012) believe biological theories (stochastic, development-genetic, evolutionary, and reliability) will bring a lot of insight into the discussion; still, they remain believers that psychological (lifespan development, selection, optimization and compensation (SOC), socioemotional selectivity, cognitive, and personality) and sociological (life course, social exchange theory (SET), and age and society perspective) theories are the most helpful tools to deliver answers about its impact. A psychological and sociological approach to ageing considers it a complex process that does not initiate when a person reaches 60 years old, but it is being developed throughout a person's life. With the prospect of a career that lingers for longer, the way the working life of a person is built (education, career, and retirement) inevitably will change; employees will need to keep learning and employers will need to provide

resources for it.

What is still unclear regarding the 'new reality' is how much people over their 50s access training, education, and development while staying in the labour market or when being reintroduced to it. The question is also about how employers manage the skills and knowledge of these older workers and how they are using their lifelong professional experience in favour of the company's interests, without mentioning how governments are working with employers to facilitate this process.

3. Challenges Faced by Employers Towards Learning and Development of Older Workers

The biggest challenge that employers will face is related to the generalised idea that surrounds ageing. For Rudolph and Zacher (2020), organisations that take only the stance of an ageing society using a generational perspective would be making a mistake, considering that it is more complex than that. The baby boomers (defined as people born between 1946 and 1964) will be the first generation facing the perspective of working longer, opening the doors of this reality for the succeeding generations; but as said, comparing different cohorts of older workers is a mistake, because these groups had different access to education and training, without mentioning all technologies that became available to younger generations.

Academic articles that discuss the learning and development of older workers mention the very much stereotyped idea that older workers are not keen on participating in training and development (Beck, 2012; Egdell *et al.*, 2018), which is sometimes caused by the constant exclusion from training opportunities directed by employers' preferences (Canduela *et al.*, 2012). Many older workers have negative perceptions about their capabilities in learning something new (Porcellato, Carmichael, Hulme, Ingham, & Prashar, 2010) and the negative experiences that many of them had in the past with education and training episodes (Beck, 2012), which influences their desire for going back to the classroom to learn something new. Another explanation is that fluid ability decreases with age, and older employers avoid situations where fluid ability (the ability to

process and integrate information) is necessary, which is the case when they participate in training and development (Feldman & Ng, 2011).

In a research interview with 40 employers in Scotland, Loretto and White (2006) uncovered the views of the employers about why older workers are not keen on taking training, and employers believe it is because older people have no appetite for learning as the younger; more senior employees lack confidence in learning, and older workers training would only make sense if they would have a long career to pursue, what is not the case. These assumptions about older workers also influence the quality of training they receive. A laboratory experiment conducted by McCausland *et al.* (2015) shows that when trainers believe that they are teaching an older person how to use a computer, they provide worse training due to their lower expectation about the results. The authors consider the results alarming due to the consequences it can produce in the trainee's learning and, consequently, in their performance. It may be correlated to what Dostie and Léger (2014) found in their data analysis, from 1999 to 2005 collected by Statistics Canada and Workplace and Employee Survey, that firm-sponsored classroom (FSC) training did not increase productivity in older workers, at least in the form that this training was applied. However, they highlighted the need for further investigation to check if this lack of productivity gain is caused by the limitations of older workers in learning or if it is caused by the lack of training focused on productivity towards older workers.

Research confirmed that not only older workers receive fewer training opportunities (Beck, 2012; Canduela *et al.*, 2012), but they are expected to provide training to co-workers, passing on to them their knowledge and experience, which may not happen considering that older workers may strengthen themselves in the workplace by not sharing their knowledge (Beck, 2012). It shows how tacit knowledge still is an essential skill in workplaces and is quite challenging to substitute (Behaghel, Caroli, & Roger, 2014). Notwithstanding, some employers believe they do not have the responsibility in training and developing their mature workers, considering that the employability of an older worker depends entirely on their own hands, "as long as workers continue to perform, there is no need to invest or adapt workplaces" (Egdell *et al.*, 2018, p. 795).



Employers should be already preparing and benefiting from this demographic change, formally planning to manage the workplace to accommodate a high number of older workers instead of looking at it on an individual basis (Egdell *et al.*, 2018). Organisations are adopting a non-intervention approach towards their ageing employees, reinforcing the idea that investment in training will not pay off in the managers' views (Canduela *et al.*, 2012). Considering that training investments take years to transform into profit, and older workers are expected to stay no more than 5-10 years in the labour market, the investment is not profitable from the lens of the employers (Dostie & Léger, 2014).

Employers' approach brings to light the importance of treating the question of an ageing society with a more interpretivist and constructivist approaches, where practices on organisations should focus on preparing employees in their early and mid-careers to face longer working life (Oude Mulders & Henkens, 2019). In other words, a lifelong learning process, which would dilute all intervention costs for that preparation along many more years. This is in line with Rudolph and Zacher (2020), that applied the lifespan theory and its seven axioms, from the German psychologist Paul Baltes, to understand and manage older workers and an age-diverse workforce, suggesting that employers should consider the employees' development as long-term and that a person's knowledge and skills development occurs in multidirectional ways, highlighting how life contexts shape people's behaviour and how singular factors affect people's development in the workplace. The problem with this approach is that it could have worked with the baby boomer's generation, that "are thought to be more likely to remain loyal and attached to an organization" (Becton, Walker, & Jones-Farmer, 2014, p. 178; Hart, 2006), but it may not work with younger cohorts that switch jobs more frequently (Becton *et al.*, 2014; Hart, 2006), making the access to their needs more complex.

Another point to highlight is the type of organisation, considering that in more physical jobs, age can be counterproductive, considering the physical demand. In contrast, in office-based jobs, cognitive responses play a more critical role. That is why organisations must understand ageing from the perspective that it is a singular development trajectory, and the outcomes will be presented in several different ways (Rudolph & Zacher, 2020). Flexible working arrangements

(FWA) are crucial challenges to be taken into consideration because mature workers have a preference or need to work flexibly or on a part-time basis, which can be difficult and costly for an organisation to accommodate, mostly small ones (Atkinson & Sandiford, 2015).

Also, but not least, it is crucial to understand what makes the individual stay in the labour market, even after the retiring age, or their reasons to come back. Their experiences and feelings about it may impact their motivation to learn or engage in new activities in the workplace; for example, those who need to stay in the labour market due to financial necessity or because of the change in retirement law, might feel resentment or anger. According to the study of Van Solinge and Henkens (2017) about the emotional reactions in Dutch employees to the reforms, anger and worry were primarily found in groups with physically demanding jobs or with less personal and social resources, suggesting that employers and Human Resources departments should have an understanding and proactive approach towards employees in these circumstances.

4. Opportunities Presented to Employers Towards Learning and Development of Older Workers

In 2020, people over their 60's have, for the first-time, outnumbered children under five in some countries, and this has become possible due to the fact that older people nowadays have more access to better health system, better nutrition, and technological innovations that help to improve life expectancy (Akinola, 2021). Alongside better physical mobility, older people are growing in number as users of technological gadgets; in the US, for example, 53% of people over 70 years old own a tablet and use it daily (Kakulla, 2021). While some workers may have negative reactions about having to work for longer, others may praise the opportunity and engage happily due to the need to maintain their social interaction and a sense of purpose; which can bring a lot of options to employers regarding the transfer of knowledge, engagement, and motivation.

One opportunity can be found mixing different age people in mentoring schemes, where younger workers can learn organisational culture from the older workers. On the other hand, mature employees can learn from younger employees about information and communication

technologies; this approach can help mitigate prejudices between the age groups and enhance social interaction (Findsen, 2015).

Picchio and van Ours (2013), using data from The Netherlands in their study, show that older workers who receive 'on-the-job training' have a high potential to stay employed, reinforcing how training and retraining are important to retain them in the organisations. The impact of training can indeed be extended to all ages. In line with that, the study of Fleming, Becker, and Newton (2017) examined which factors affect acceptance, satisfaction, and future use of e-learning in an Australian rail organisation, and the results show "age was not a significant factor impacting either future use intentions or satisfaction with e-learning." (p. 84), suggesting three variables are the predictors of these results "low complexity, authenticity, and technical support" (p.84). These studies reinforce that older workers are, in fact, interested in learning; however, attention is necessary to their specific needs.

Although the study from Oude Mulders and Henkens (2019), also in organisations in The Netherlands, does not address the issue of learning and development of older workers, it shows possible strategies to be used by employers to house a higher rate of older workers, as the use of information, health, and person-job fit practices. This study shows that larger companies are starting to adapt their Human Resources departments to build up practices that contemplate a new perspective around their ageing employees. According to the article, organisations are concerned about the mental health of their workers, and they are likely to focus on information and health improvements to allow their employees to adapt and get prepared to work longer in life; within organisations that already have a high number of older workers, the attitudes are likely to focus on providing information to the more senior employees.

Many small opportunities can be a starting point when investing in the training and development of mature workers; for example, companies that implement physical activities slots as part of the working hours will benefit all age cohorts, contributing to a more engaged and healthy workers, because when people engage in physical activities, they are improving their mental, emotional, psychological, social, and cognitive health (Langhammer, Bergland, & Rydwick, 2018); while "having physical and mental health issues increase the risk of productivity loss and

absenteeism" (Karpinska, Henkens, Schippers, & Wang, 2015 p. 105). In their vignette study considering training opportunities for older workers, Karpinska, Henkens, Schippers, and Wang (2015) show that training opportunities are likely to be offered to older workers with better mental and physical conditions and that present more positive work attitude, while workers that are not performing well are not likely to be included in training opportunities, creating a sad reality in which those that need training opportunities the most are the least likely to receive them.

Rudolph and Zacher (2020), in their work, suggested, considering how age decreases some capabilities but increases others, that employers should intervene in implementing practices to support employees of all ages in their long-term health conditions; this is where placing experienced employees in roles of mentoring alongside changing job tasks to develop other cognitive functions appear as opportunities for taking advantage of the knowledge and experience of the mature worker. These could benefit immensely the organisation, considering employers believe that older workers are more ethical and loyal (Egdell *et al.*, 2018).

5. Conclusion

Even being a trending subject, working longer lives stills faces a lack of research, mainly regarding which effects training has on the employability and productivity of older workers (Behaghel *et al.*, 2014; Fenwick, 2012); as well as how multi-generation teams can be favourable to employers and productivity, considering it would be a natural way of exchanging knowledge. From the employer's perspective and considering the research available, opportunities for learning and development of maturing workers were relatively scarce, opposed to challenges, which already have a well-cemented consideration in academia and organisations.

Organisations need to think more in a holistic strategy focused on the collective instead of treating older workers as an individual problem, even because data shows that the idea of an 'individual older worker' will become 'collective' sooner than expected in many workplaces. Some older workers might need to be stimulated to engage in activities that will help them develop their

skills and knowledge and keep them motivated with their working life. Also, incentives towards physical activities would help to keep their mental and physical health in good order.

All the research presented here focus mainly on the idea that older workers need interventions to keep up their abilities, skills, and knowledge from a certain point in life, but the reality is that all workers along their careers need to be trained and developed by their employers, or by their own desire, to reach a better outcome, it does not depend on age. Focusing only on older workers limitations is just a form of perpetuating prejudices and stereotypes towards them. All workers have their limitations, depending on which age cohort they find themselves in. Organisations that create learning and development strategies for all workers considering their singularities will be at an advantage. All ageing prejudices and stereotypes presented here are very helpful in outlining to employers the various paths they could take to engage and re-access their senior employees in the workplace, reducing the costs of replacing them and most importantly, not losing their knowledge and expertise along the way.

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