The Aging Workforce Handbook

Individual, Organizational and Societal Challenges

Edited by Alexander-Stamatios Antoniou, Ronald J. Burke and Sir Cary L. Cooper, CBE
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Edited by

Alexander-Stamatios Antoniou
University of Athens, Athens, Greece

Ronald J. Burke
York University, Toronto, Canada

Sir Cary L. Cooper, CBE
ALLIANCE Manchester Business School,
University of Manchester, UK

Emerald

United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China
Contents

List of Contributors ix

CHAPTER 1 Mental Health of the Aging Workforce
Alexander-Stamatios Antoniou and Ioanna-Io Theodoritsi 1

CHAPTER 2 Organizational Initiatives to Develop and Retain Older Workers
Ronald J. Burke 27

CHAPTER 3 Successful Aging in the Workplace: A Comparison Study of Native Greeks, Pontic Greeks, and Albanian Immigrants
Marina Dalla and Alexander-Stamatios Antoniou 59

CHAPTER 4 Subjective Psychological Well-Being of the Aging Workforce in Times of Economic Crisis: The Case of Greece
Nikos Drosos and Alexander-Stamatios Antoniou 85

CHAPTER 5 Population Aging and Labor Market Policy in Germany, the United Kingdom, Japan, and the Republic of Korea: The Effects of Institutional Context on Old Age Employment
Heike Schröder, Matt Flynn, Thomas Klassen, Alexander-Stamatios Antoniou and Myung-Joon Park 109

Bruce Kirkcaldy and Adrian Furnham 135

CHAPTER 7 Stereotype, Prejudice, and Discrimination toward Older Workers: A Wind of Change?
Ulrike Fasbender 159
CHAPTER 8  Wisdom
Marc Schabracq and Roos Schabracq 185

CHAPTER 9  The Role of Human Resource Practices and
Other Factors Influencing the Continuing Work
Participation of Older Workers in New Zealand
Tim Bentley, Kate Blackwood, Bevan Catley,
Michael O’Driscoll, Maree Roche,
Stephen T. T. Teo and Linda Twiname 213

CHAPTER 10  Intergenerational Learning in Organizations:
A Framework and Discussion of Opportunities
Fabiola H. Gerpott, Nale Lehmann-Willenbrock and
Sven C. Voelpel 241

CHAPTER 11  Critical Skills Loss — The Effect of the
Disappearance of Non-Replaceable Workforce
Peter Sandborn and Michael K. Williams 269

CHAPTER 12  A Conceptual Framework for Managing
Intergenerational Relations in the Workplace
Donald Ropes and Antonia Ypsilanti 299

CHAPTER 13  Maintaining Work Ability to Support and Retain
Older Workers
Grant Brady, Jennifer R. Rineer, David M. Cadiz and
Donald M. Truxillo 323

CHAPTER 14  Hitting the High Notes: Healthy Aging in
Professional Orchestral Musicians
Dianna T. Kenny and Bronwen J. Ackermann 355

CHAPTER 15  Job Performance and Job Attitudes in Later
Life: The Role of Motives
Gregory R. Thrasher, Reed J. Bramble and Boris B. Baltes 377

CHAPTER 16  Job Insecurity, Job Loss, and Reemployment:
Implications for an Aging Workforce
Lixin Jiang and Tahira M. Probst 399

CHAPTER 17  On Elders’ Statesmanship. A View from
Greek Antiquity
Anthony Makrydemetres 419
CHAPTER 18  Demographic Trends and Implications of the Aging Workforce, with Some Policy Options for Consideration
Asif Mujahid and Ronald J. Ozminkowski 441

CHAPTER 19  Working: Time Bomb or Time Well-Spent?
Ashley Weinberg 469

CHAPTER 20  Employers Attitudes toward Older-Worker Job Seekers: A Comprehensive Review with Recommendations for Action
Hila Axelrad and Jacquelyn B. James 489

CHAPTER 21  Aging in Asia: Challenges and Opportunities in China, India, Japan, and South Korea
Sukhbir Sandhu, Saras Sastrowardoyo, John Benson and Christina Scott-Young 513

CHAPTER 22  Compassionate Leadership: Promoting Non-Discriminatory Practice toward Older Employees in Healthcare
Sue Shea and Christos Lionis 537

Index 557
List of Contributors

 Bronwen J. Ackermann The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia
 Alexander-Stamatios Antoniou National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece
 Hila Axelrad The Center on Aging and Work at Boston College, Boston, MA, USA
 Boris B. Baltes Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA
 John Benson Monash University Malaysia, Subang Jaya, Malaysia; Monash University, Melbourne, Australia
 Tim Bentley Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand
 Kate Blackwood Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand
 Grant Brady Portland State University, Portland, OR, USA
 Reed J. Bramble Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA
 Ronald J. Burke York University, Toronto, Canada
 David M. Cadiz Portland State University, Portland, OR, USA
 Bevan Catley Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand
Sir Cary L. Cooper, CBE  ALLIANCE Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, UK

Marina Dalla  Psychiatric Hospital of Attika, Athens, Greece

Nikos Drosos  National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

Ulrike Fasbender  Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK

Matt Flynn  Newcastle University, Newcastle, UK

Adrian Furnham  University College London, London, UK

Fabiola H. Gerpott  Jacobs University Bremen, Bremen, Germany; Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Jacquelyn B. James  The Center on Aging and Work at Boston College, Boston, MA, USA

Lixin Jiang  University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh, Oshkosh, WI, USA

Dianna T. Kenny  The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

Bruce Kirkcaldy  International Centre for the Study of Occupational and Mental Health, Düsseldorf, Germany

Thomas Klassen  York University, Toronto, Canada; Yonsei University, Seoul, South Korea

Nale Lehmann-Willenbrock  Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Christos Lionis  University of Crete, Heraklion, Greece
Anthony Makrydemetres
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

Asif Mujahid
Optum, Eden Prairie, MN, USA

Michael O’Driscoll
University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand

Ronald J. Ozminkowski
Optum, Eden Prairie, MN, USA

Myung-Joon Park
Korea Labour Institute, Sejong City, South Korea

Tabira M. Probst
Washington State University
Vancouver, Vancouver, WA, USA

Jennifer R. Rineer
RTI International, Waltham, MA, USA

Maree Roche
University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand

Donald Ropes
Inholland University of Applied Science, Haarlem, the Netherlands

Peter Sandborn
University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

Sukhbir Sandhu
University of South Australia Business School, Adelaide, Australia

Saras Sastrowardoyo
University of South Australia Business School, Adelaide, Australia

Marc Schabracq
RTM/Human Factor Development, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Roos Schabracq
Solid Online, Hoofddorp, the Netherlands

Heike Schröder
Queen’s University Belfast, Belfast, UK; Korea Labour Institute, Sejong City, South Korea

Christina Scott-Young
RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Institution and Address</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sue Shea</td>
<td>Middlesex University, London, UK; University of Crete, Heraklion, Greece</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen T. T. Teo</td>
<td>RMIT, Melbourne, Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ioanna-Io Theodoritsi</td>
<td>National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gregory R. Thrasher</td>
<td>Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald M. Truxillo</td>
<td>Portland State University, Portland, OR, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda Twiname</td>
<td>University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sven C. Voelpel</td>
<td>Jacobs University Bremen, Bremen, Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley Weinberg</td>
<td>University of Salford, Salford, UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael K. Williams</td>
<td>Modern Automation Consulting, Midland, MI, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antonia Ypsilanti</td>
<td>Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Introduction: From an Aging Population to an Aging Workforce

The population aging of the 21st century is a challenge with demographic, social, and financial consequences for countries worldwide. The populations of many countries are aging rapidly because of the dramatically declining fertility rates that have been reported over the past decades especially among the developed countries and the increased longevity due to the healthier living conditions (Beach, 2008). It is estimated that by 2018, people over the age of 65 years will outnumber children younger than five years old, and by 2040 they will represent 14% of the world population (Kinsella & Wan, 2009). Many studies indicate the age increase in the world’s population average over the last 25 years and confirm that the overall percentage of older people will continue to increase significantly, especially in developed countries (United Nations Secretariat Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2001; United States General Accounting Office, 2003).

In Canada, the elderly dependency ratio is expected to rise, leading to a larger number of retirees that have to be supported by a smaller number of workers (Guillemette, 2003). By 2031, it is expected that 25% of Canada’s population will be 65 years old or more (Denton, Feaver, & Spencer, 2005). Although the population of Canada is younger than in Europe or Japan, it is older than the population of the United States. It is aging more...
slowly than in Europe and Japan but more rapidly than in the United States (Beach, 2008).

The aforementioned demographic change has an important impact on the composition of the available workforce age (Leibold & Voelpel, 2006). It is estimated that by 2010 almost half of the workforce of the United States will consist of people aged 45 years or more (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004). Furthermore, it is believed that the percentage of older workers in Europe will increase by 25.1% in the next 25 years, while the number of young workers will decrease by 20.1% (European Commission, 2005). Early retirement plans seem to be being withdrawn worldwide meaning that most workers will continue working until the age of 65 years (De Lange et al., 2006). Consequently, companies and organizations will rely more and more on older workers as the years go by. This fact changes the way organizations work in many ways and requires their engagement with an aging workforce management.

As older workers leave the workforce a significant lack of labor will occur especially in important sectors such as health care, law enforcement, and many others (Judy, D’Amico, & Geipel, 1997). In particular, hospitals and other health care services will risk an important loss of institutional and workplace knowledge and productivity if they do not find ways to retain and accommodate their older workers (Harrington & Heidkamp, 2013). Globally, there seems to be a shortage of nurses in health care (Oulton, 2006) and the existing aging nurse workforce that wish to retire early renders the situation even more difficult (Cooper, 2003; Letvack, 2003). Particularly in times of increased need for world class care services due to the increase in the aging population worldwide (Burke, 2005) and chronic illnesses (Cooper, 2003), it is crucial to find ways for the retention of nursing staff.

Employers try to encourage older employees to delay their retirement, which consequently has led to an increasing interest in how we can help and support aging employees in order for them to remain safe and effective in their work (Beehr & Glazer, 2000). It is crucial for societies to remain productive despite their aging populations as well as for individuals to add healthy and meaningful years to their lives (Staudinger & Kocka, 2010). New strategies are needed in order to accommodate the changing abilities of older employees if we wish them to remain in the workforce.
Age Stereotypes and Discrimination toward Older Workers

Employers often have negative attitude toward older workers (Bowen, Noack, & Staudinger, 2010). The source of age discrimination takes us back to the shift from an agricultural to a manufacturing-based economy, where younger workers were preferred in order to set the machines more effectively (Hardy, 2006). Moving to the 20th century, older workers still faced difficulties in finding and maintaining a job (Wacker & Roberto, 2011). Nowadays, discrimination toward older workers is still present, despite the fact that older workers are not necessarily less healthy, less skilled, educated, or productive, in comparison to their younger colleagues (Burtless, 2013).

Studies indicate that negative stereotypes concerning older workers seem to exist among managerial staff in companies (Schruijer, 2006). These stereotypes mainly concern flexibility, use of technology, motivation for training, and the well-being of older workers (Warr, 2000). Furthermore, older workers themselves feel that they are treated negatively in the work environment (Shore, Cleveland, & Goldberg, 2003). More specifically, older nurses report feeling that they are negatively perceived by both younger colleagues and management (Kupperschmidt, 2006). Moreover, older nurses report that they have the impression that managerial staff often act as though they would like to get “rid” of older staff (Letvack, 2003) instead of seeing their age and experience in a positive way (Weston, 2001).

Many steps have to be taken within the work environment in order for these negative stereotypes to be eliminated. The truth is that older workers can represent very important employees due to their experience, working skills, loyalty, low absenteeism, and many more skills and characteristics that make them useful for the workforce (Staudinger & Bowen, 2011). Older workers have many assets that can be helpful within the workplace such as wisdom, maturity, many skills, recognition of the importance of values, etc. (Naumanen, 2006). However, employers may be resistant toward older workers due to their perceptions that they are more expensive, especially if companies have to contribute to their health insurance programs (Munnell & Sass, 2008).

It is of great importance to report that many countries globally have implemented laws against the discrimination of older