



# 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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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

# 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
CHAPTER 6	The Changing Face of Education and Work: Attitudes toward Work and Its Impact on Economic Growth and the Wealth of Nations Bruce Kirkcaldy and Adrian Furnham	135
CHAPTER 7	Stereotype, Prejudice, and Discrimination toward Older Workers: A Wind of Change? Ulrike Fasbender	159

CHAPTER 8	<b>Wisdom</b> Marc Schabracq and Roos Schabracq	185
CHAPTER 9	<b>The Role of Human Resource Practices and Other Factors Influencing the Continuing Work Participation of Older Workers in New Zealand</b> Tim Bentley, Kate Blackwood, Bevan Catley, Michael O'Driscoll, Maree Roche, Stephen T. T. Teo and Linda Twiname	213
CHAPTER 10	<b>Intergenerational Learning in Organizations: A Framework and Discussion of Opportunities</b> Fabiola H. Gerpott, Nale Lehmann-Willenbrock and Sven C. Voelpel	241
CHAPTER 11	<b>Critical Skills Loss — The Effect of the Disappearance of Non-Replaceable Workforce</b> Peter Sandborn and Michael K. Williams	269
CHAPTER 12	<b>A Conceptual Framework for Managing Intergenerational Relations in the Workplace</b> Donald Ropes and Antonia Ypsilanti	299
CHAPTER 13	<b>Maintaining Work Ability to Support and Retain Older Workers</b> Grant Brady, Jennifer R. Rineer, David M. Cadiz and Donald M. Truxillo	323
CHAPTER 14	<b>Hitting the High Notes: Healthy Aging in Professional Orchestral Musicians</b> Dianna T. Kenny and Bronwen J. Ackermann	355
CHAPTER 15	<b>Job Performance and Job Attitudes in Later Life: The Role of Motives</b> Gregory R. Thrasher, Reed J. Bramble and Boris B. Baltes	377
CHAPTER 16	<b>Job Insecurity, Job Loss, and Reemployment: Implications for an Aging Workforce</b> Lixin Jiang and Tahira M. Probst	399
CHAPTER 17	<b>On Elders' Statesmanship. A View from Greek Antiquity</b> 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



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# 1

# Mental Health of the Aging Workforce

Alexander-Stamatios Antoniou and  
Ioanna-Io Theodoritsi

## Introduction: From an Aging Population to an Aging Workforce

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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

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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