

Age Management as a Means of Reducing the Challenges of Workforce Aging

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The growing number of elderly people in Europe and other countries causes many issues related to age management aspects and practices. Changing demographics and increasing average age of employees highlight organizational threats such as unique knowledge loss and lack of qualified personnel. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine age management practices at the organization level, which could help to reduce the challenges of workforce demographic aging. The present article presents a theoretical study, which helps to identify the most frequently mentioned age management areas and their features outlined in the scientific literature. Authors used scientific literature analysis, data structuring, and evaluation methods. The theoretical research highlights that the key age management areas are as follows: job recruitment, learning and knowledge management, changing attitudes, flexible working practices, health management, workplace environment and ergonomics. It has been revealed that each of these age-management areas are closely related to each other. For example, older workers' training is closely related to the treatment of employees in this age group. In practice, it is very often assumed that older workers are unable or unwilling to learn; therefore, they are not included in the training programs. In this context, changing attitudes towards older workers is a crucial element.

Keywords: Ageing, Human Resource Management, Age Management, Age Diversity, Older Workers.

Introduction

Ageing is a concept which is gaining prominent role today. According to (Vernon, 2010), ageing is one of the most important problems in the world. This phenomenon affects various areas of public life. According to (Cepinskis & Kanisauskaite, 2009), the main impact areas of the ageing process are social security, labour market and employment, education and health care systems, pension schemes, income distribution and savings, relationships between different generations.

Research of the ageing phenomenon has increasingly focused on its impact to the labour market. According to the statistical projections, the EU will have over 123 million people aged over of 65 in 2030, while now this rate is 87 million (Eurostat, 2012). (Malanowski *et al.*, 2008) believe that from 2004 to 2050, the elderly population in the EU will increase by 77 %, while the working – age population will decline by 16 %. This means a significant reduction of working age population.

Ageing is also associated with new human resource management problems. The growing percentage of elderly people shows that attention should be paid to issues such as equal employee's opportunity assurance (Dromantiene & Kanopiene, 2004), workforce labour shortages, staff attracting and retaining (Loomes & McCarthy, 2011), avoidance of valuable institutional knowledge losses (Davidson *et al.*, 2007). (Voelpel & Streb, 2010) stress that population ageing in the long term causes new problems and challenges. For example, higher age personnel are less flexible and require a longer convalescent time period. Another serious challenge is knowledge transfer assurance, and this issue arises when workers having unique know-how knowledge retire, which may cause the organization serious

difficulties. According to (Stam, 2009), ageing will affect “the organizations ability to be knowledge productive” (p.1).

Population ageing also raises new challenges to team management because older subordinates are often managed by younger managers. It promotes age-related workplace conflicts because younger leaders are afraid to manage older workers who have more work experience (Cappelli, 2010).

According to (Fabisiak & Prokurat, 2012), in the context of workforce ageing, the future competitiveness of organizations and the whole economies will depend on older people's skills usage, their productivity and performance. Therefore, population ageing requires changes in the human resources strategies and labour market policy. For these reasons, older people are encouraged to actively participate in the labour market as long as possible and continue working into later life cycle; however, the older group of workers are the main victims of the organization's downsizing or restructuring (Aaltio *et al.*, 2014).

Rapoliene (2010) highlights that older people often are associated with negative characteristics. According to (Bal *et al.*, 2011), “attitudes toward older individuals are generally more negative than attitudes toward younger individuals” (p. 689). (Tamutiene *et al.*, 2009) argue that the main reason why older people face difficulties in work environment is their age, changing psycho- physiological processes, and unsuitability of existing competencies. However, (Beck, 2009) suggests that “older workers' productivity is not reduced by their age but by skill obsolescence” (p.10).

This situation highlights the importance of older people's work and life quality assurance. As a result, organizations increasingly focus on active aging and age-management practices. (Fabisiak & Prokurat, 2012) have

attempted to investigate the effectiveness of age management on a corporate level and have concluded that “Successful Age Management policy both on the corporate and state level would be to provide equal opportunities for training and skills development to all age groups, raising productivity, improving work quality and creating companies better adaptable to change” (p. 88).

The age management problem increasingly permeates into scientific discourse. Many authors analyze different ageing and age management aspects, some of which are positive and negative perceptions of older workers (Bal *et al.*, 2011), the active ageing concept at an organizational level (Henkens & Schippers, 2012), the psychological aspects of successful ageing (Mockus & Zukaite, 2012), and human capital crisis in the context of ageing workforce (Dumay & Rooney, 2011). The purpose of the present paper is to examine age management practices at the organization level, which could help to reduce the challenges of workforce demographic aging. Moreover, the study is based on scientific literature analysis, statistical data structuring and evaluation methods.

The Concept of Workforce Age Management

As a literary analysis shows, the age management concept is interpreted in different ways; hence, different definitions are formulated. (Kuperus *et al.*, 2011) present several age management definitions, one of which suggests that “age management is all about combating age discrimination and unemployment, promoting better human resources management, providing suitable working conditions, providing a lifecycle approach to work and lifelong learning” (p.35). Additionally, (Ilmarinen, 2012) argues that age management could mean that “age related factors should be taken into consideration in daily management, including work arrangements and individual work tasks, so that everybody, regardless of age, feels empowered in reaching [their] own and corporate goals” (p.2). In summary, age management can be understood as a set of measures of mitigating the consequences of aging and allowing the person to stay productive in spite of his age.

Ilmarinen, (2012) claims that workforce age management aims to ensure better awareness of aging issues and increase the employee’s productivity and the ability to work and promote lifelong learning and an equitable approach to aging. (Ilmarinen, 2012) emphasizes that the age management is a major task for managers, and this task must be included in the human resource planning processes.

According to (Fabisiak & Prokurat, 2012), age management can be analyzed from 3 levels:

- *individual level.* (Fabisiak & Prokurat, 2012) stress that age management programs could prevent diseases such as obesity or diabetes.
- *organization level.* From the organization’s perspective, age management is a part of human resource management. Using age management tools, organizations tend to retain qualified personnel, implement lifelong learning programs, raise awareness, etc.
- *macroeconomic labour market policy level.* This level is associated with a public policy, and policymakers and governments, who take care of age discrimination and other issues of the labour market.

Age management is depicted by adopting different models. For instance, (Voelpel & Streb, 2010) have produced a balanced scorecard for managing the aging workforce. (Tishman *et al.*, 2012) argues that recruitment, engagement, and retention are three actions which are addressed to changing workforce demographics, whereas (Cedefop, 2012) presents a concept of demographic sensitive staffing policy, which connects ergonomics, diversity management, health promotion, recruiting, payment, staff development and other elements.

There are two categories of age management benefit, and these categories refer to “securing of labour supply leading to reduced labour costs and greater productivity” and “maximisation of workforce utility leading to increased labour productivity, company competitiveness and share value” (Barnett *et al.*, 2008, p.11). (Skoglund, 2008) stress that the principles of age management could be adapted in various types of organizations; however, the scholar emphasizes that age management principles and methods should be applied in a unique way, at the right time and together with the help of the top managers. Moreover, age management should be a part of the organization’s development strategy. According (Barnett *et al.*, 2008), age management strategies being implemented within an organization should be comprehensive and include the four following elements:

1. emphasis on prevention (addressing risk factors);
2. focus on the whole life course, not just older age;
3. holistic focus (addressing a range of issues including health, education, training);
4. compensatory provision for older workers (p.12).

To summarize, the aging of population affects changes in the labour market and raises new organizational challenges. Organizations should pay more attention to those working environment areas that previously have not been emphasized. In order to ensure staff productivity, not only do organizations need to take care of the improvement of working conditions, but also focus on their health management, diversity management, or others key areas.

The Key Age Management Areas

Although the age-management systems or models are presented in different ways, they remain key elements. A theoretical analysis has shown that significant age-management areas are as follows: job recruitment, learning and knowledge management, changing attitudes, flexible working practices, health management, workplace environment and ergonomics (1 table).

Job recruitment. Based on the decreasing working-age population structure, employers have to pay more attention to the elderly recruitment in order to avoid a shortage of skilled labour. By carrying out objective recruitment processes, organizations can obtain various benefits such as increased employee productivity, motivation and adaptability, access to greater talent and perspective candidate’s pool (Singapore National Employers Federation, n.d.).

Table 1

Key Age Management Areas (Source: Developed By the Authors Discussed and Based on an Analysis of Scientific Literature)

| Author | Age management areas | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|--|---|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|--|---|
| Fabisiak, Prokurat (2012) | Learning, training and lifelong learning | Comprehensive approaches | Workplace design | Health protection, promotion | Flexible working time practices | Career development, redeployment | Employment exit and the transition to retirement | |
| Kuperus, Stoykova, Rode (2011) | Lifelong learning | Corporate social responsibility | | Occupational health | | Job recruitment | | Diversity management, anti-discrimination |
| Streb, Voelpel, Leibold (2008) | Knowledge management and learning | Managerial mindset | Work environment, ergonomics | Health management | | Human resources management | | |
| Ball (2007) | Training, development & promotion | Changing attitudes within organizations | Ergonomics, job design & prevention | | Flexible working practice | Job recruitment | Changes in exit policy | |
| Druny (2001) | Learning, training and development | Changing attitudes within organizations | Workplace design | Health promotion | Flexible working practices, the modernization of work | Job recruitment | Employment exit and the transition to retirement | Promotion and internal job changes |

According to (Walker, 2005), organizations should create equal opportunities for older person’s employment; for instance, this age group should not be discriminated against its age. (Fabisiak & Prokurat, 2012) encourage organizations to increase maximum age limits and maintain positive discrimination. For example, GlaxoSmithKline’s (GSK) realised the existing gap: company does not have a resource group for older staff. The organization has taken actions and established a Prime Time Partners program the mission of which consists of several components. One of the aims of the program is to “add value to the business by creating a positive and supportive network for GSK employees in mid-career and beyond” and “promote cross-generational understanding, cooperation and co-mentoring among GSK employees” (Roundtree, 2011, p.25).

In the job recruitment processes, job advertisement and job specifications play an important role. (Bruyere *et al.*, 2012) claim that employers must prepare detailed job descriptions and identify measurable expectations for every position. Singapore National Employers Federation (n.d.) emphasizes that line managers need to identify a set of criteria, for example, required skills, educational qualification, experience and specific job characteristics in order to evaluate potential candidate objectively.

Learning and knowledge management. One of the main challenges of ageing populations is the loss of unique organizational knowledge; hence, in this context, a dimension of learning becomes particularly important. (Bencsik & Trunkos, 2009) argue that adult education and training is related to competitiveness and economic growth. The scholars suggest that the level of education is the most important factor of employability. Moreover, (Stam, 2009) suggests that the usage of the potential of older people is related to the organization’s the opportunity to be knowledge productive. According to (Shacklock, K. Shacklock, A. 2006) “organizations need to embrace older workers and train them and retain their skills, to minimize the loss of (often irreplaceable) corporate memory and

skills” (p. 10). They stress that it is very important to create effective elderly workforce training opportunities and use suitable learning methodologies.

As a result, scientists from many fields are increasingly analyzing the concepts of knowledge management and knowledge retention. According to (Davidson *et al.*, 2007), knowledge management is associated with institutional knowledge identification and its occupation plays a great role in addressing institutional knowledge loss.

(Stout, 2007) distinguishes 3 main sub-processes which have to take place in order to retain the critical knowledge of the organization. These sub-processes include knowledge loss risk assessment, the knowledge capture and transfer, and monitor and evaluation. When implementing the knowledge loss risk assessment process, organizations should estimate positions where the probability of knowledge loss is the greatest. (Davidson *et al.*, 2007) present skills gap analysis method which allows the organization to be proactive and prepare for the future. This method helps the organization to learn more about its workforce and identify what institutional knowledge is at risk so that new strategic changes could be implemented. According to (Stout, 2007), organizations that are implementing the knowledge loss assessment process should take into account factors such as retirement and position risk. They should project workforce retirement dates and evaluate the difficulty level of each position. After a detailed analysis, organizations could provide an action plan to save the necessary knowledge. They could implement cross-training, mentoring provide formal training, and use others tools.

One of the areas of knowledge management is multi-generational training. The (IBM Business Consulting Services, 2004) provides an example of General Electric. The organization collected a group of 500 workers group which consisted of the most senior managers and junior employees of the organization. The group was formed in order to gain more knowledge about the potential usage of

Internet technologies. The younger and older generations were paired according to their skills and personality traits. They had to spend 2 - 4 hours per week together and study the features of the World Wide Web. The result justified the expectations that “the senior executives gained new insights that were critical to moving their businesses into the Internet age, while the junior people were able to gain access to a network of executives that under normal circumstances would be difficult to obtain” (IBM Business Consulting Services, 2004, p. 7).

Flexible working practice is another, but not the least, component of age management. (Fuertes *et al.*, 2013) stress that “opportunities for flexible working are crucial if older workers are to remain in, and re-enter, paid employment beyond a certain age” (p. 285). (Loomes & McCarthy, 2011) also support this statement. They argue that flexible workplace is the one of the needs of the mature worker, which should be taken into account. According to Boston College The Sloan Center on (Aging & Work, 2012), the definition of workplace flexibility is very broad and includes many ways of flexibility. As a result, table 2 excludes certain groups of flexible working

Table 2

Kinds and Examples of Workplace Flexibility

| Flexible working practices | |
|---|--|
| Workplace flexibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • telecommuting • work from home • work from more than a single location • snowbird programs |
| Work hour flexibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • part time employment • seasonal positions • job sharing |
| Work schedule flexibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • flex schedule (flexible breaks, core hours, daily flex) • compressed week (3-4 day workweek) • split shifts • online self-scheduling • reduced work schedule (35 or fewer hours) |
| Career flexibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • on/off ramps, leaves • reduced responsibilities • job changes • career coaching • retraining |
| Benefit flexibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • phased retirement • cafeteria plans |
| Flexibility in employment relationships | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • project work • consultation • independent contracts |

Source: Bruyere, Maybaum, Young, 2012, p. 21, Boston College The Sloan Center on Aging & Work, 2012.

An adaptation of flexible working practices can give an organization a variety of benefits. Firstly, it promotes the efficiency of the staff; secondly, it helps to maintain a balance between work and family. Flexible working practices also promote better staff engagement, lead better staff satisfaction, and reduce stress levels. Moreover, flexible working practices help to create a healthy and efficient workplace (Boston College the Sloan Center on Aging & Work, 2012). Thus, flexible working conditions can have a positive impact not only on older workers, but also on other age groups.

Health management. According (Kuperus *et al.*, 2011), early retirement could be related to health problems; thus, the importance of workplace safety and health promotion is growing. A theoretical analysis has revealed that special health management measures could help employees to avoid certain health problems. A study conducted by (Tuomi *et al.*, 2001) has showed that artistic hobbies and physical exercises during free time have a positive impact on the person’s health and work ability. According to Singapore National Employers Federation (n.d.), healthy workplace creation could attain employee’s mental, emotional and physical well-being. Changes in the workplace could help to strengthen the organization’s culture, reduce health care costs, and create a productive, satisfied workforce.

In order to enhance the healthy welfare, organizations take a variety of measures. According to (Kuperus *et al.*, 2011), organizations could adopt measures such as occupational health and safety services, employee’s health checks, health and safety education and trainings or others healthy lifestyle programs and incentives. (Barnett *et al.*, 2008) present an example of UK human research consulting agency. This organization was trying to create healthy workplace and promote a healthy lifestyle. One of the ways how to reach this purpose was a longer lunch break when staff could make health-promoting activities. It allowed people to use gym facilities. This program had a positive impact in such areas as: staffs work quality, productivity and healthy workplace development.

Workplace environment and ergonomics. Workplace ergonomics are important for all age groups; however, in the late working life time, this aspect is becoming increasingly more important. (Roy, 2010) argues that older workers face physical, physiological and psychosocial challenges. Alongside the increasing age, employees more often feel health problems such as impaired vision or hearing, increased blood pressure, fatigue and other health issues. Yet, these ailments can be softened by adapting suitable working environment. (Perry, 2010) stress that the goal of ergonomics is “to design tasks, jobs, activities, work areas, and environment to remove known risk factors and obstacles that impede optimum performance in order to prevent injuries, illnesses, errors, confusion, mistakes and to improve overall employee wellness and overall business performance” (p.2).

The literature analysed provides a variety of measures which should be implemented in order to improve workplace ergonomics. Workplace Safety & Prevention Services (2014) encourages employers to use of lighter materials, adjust the height of workstations, use adjustable seating, provide sufficient space for the work area, ensure adequate lighting, and use larger text fonts and non-glare materials. Additionally, (Walker, 2005) suggests that, workplace modification could help older workers to maintain their productivity. For example, changes in lighting system could help to solve poor eyesight problems.

(Pery, 2010) provides a structured approach to ergonomic job design and separates 6 ergonomic control measure groups (Table 3).

Table 3

Ergonomic Control Measures

| Task design | Workstation design | Environmental design |
|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Postures • Forces • Repetition • Boredom vs. complex jobs • Rate, duration, and recovery • Static vs. dynamic muscle activity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sit vs. stand • Work surface height, • Reach zones • Work envelopes • Visual zones • Chairs • Slanted surfaces • Sharp edges • Footrests • Floor mats/insoles | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lighting • Temperature • Noise • Vibration • Clothing • Footwear • Gloves • Office design |
| Tool design | Manual material handling design | Equipment design |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grips • Leverage • Weight • Balance • Triggers • Torque • Vibration • Handle design | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Push vs. pull • Manual material handling guidelines | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knobs and switches • Control locations • Lighting • Keyboard and mouse • Lettering and character size • Analog vs. digital • Colours |

Source: Perry, 2010, p. 4

Changing attitudes to ageing workers. Older workers are often associated with negative stereotypes. (Grima, 2011) claims, that older people feel age-related discrimination, which prompts them to retire early. According to (Bruyere *et al.*, 2012), older people are associated with myths that they are afraid to change, lack creativity, are less motivated, and slow to learn and others. However, facts show that they have strong work ethic, motivation, good attendance and punctuality, and low turnover rates.

Changing attitude to older workers could help to minimize the shortage of skilled worker; hence, (Shacklock & Shacklock, 2006) suggests changing negative stereotypical attitudes toward older workers and evaluating them according to their existing strengths. (Barnett *et al.*, 2008) emphasize that workplace relationships improvement could help to create greater trust in management and better relations between different staff age groups.

To bring positive change in this area, (Ball, 2007; Fabisiak & Prokurant, 2012) motivate organizations to initiate programs, which could help to change attitudes towards older workers. They encourage employers to undertake some research which would focus on the issues of the aging population. (Walker, 2005) also presents a similar position and suggests that organizations should highlight the benefits of older employment, return on investment, and focus on the increasing concern over the training of older workers.

In summary, older workers can successfully pursue both their own goals and the goals of the workplace to which they belong. Moreover, organizations need to make some changes in their human resources management policy. Both the employer and employ benefit mutually by implementing age management practices. Therefore, the literature discussed reasonably argues that age management should be part of the organization's strategy. Each organization is unique; hence, it is necessary to assess the real situation by following a detailed assessment plan in order to choose the best workforce age management strategy.

Conclusions

Health problems caused by the exposure of biological aging and the changes of the state's social security system affect each individual, organization and even the whole society. In the context of population ageing, a person's better health and productive life assurance are becoming not only the individual's but also the organization's purpose. Age management practices at an organizational level can not only help to keep more valuable employees but also to overcome other aging workforce challenges.

At the organizational level, this phenomenon poses challenges such as the loss of a unique organizational knowledge, a lack of qualified staff; inadequate evaluation of potential or current employees, equality issues, team management challenges, age-related staff conflicts and others. In order to ensure the productivity of ageing workers, organizations should implement appropriate measures of human resource management and pay more attention to their needs. When employees are satisfied with their working environment, they are motivated to hold their positions for a longer period of time

In order to avoid possible challenges in population aging, organizations should pay more attention to significant age-management areas such as job recruitment, learning and knowledge management, health management, flexible working conditions, workplace environment and ergonomics.

A more detailed analysis of these age management fields has showed that each age management area is closely related to each other. For example, the creation of an ergonomic workplace is inseparable from the workers' health guarantees. It has also been observed that the process of implementing best practices in each age management areas has certain stages which are follows: self-assessment, performance and risk management, and prevention. In many cases, the assessment of the real situation is of primarily importance. For example, it is essential to identify the organization's knowledge at risk, and prepare a plan of measures that could be taken to solve the existing problems.

Adapted age management practices can have a positive impact on the development of an organization. It could help to create a healthier and more efficient working environment, recruit more talented people from different age groups, fill existing organizational gaps, and bring new ideas. Employers can reduce labour costs, increase staff productivity and organizations' competitiveness. From the employee's perspective, age management practices can help employees to maintain a balance between work and family, increase their employability, improve health, reduce stress level, encourage greater trust in the government, and build better relationships.

A theoretical analysis of age management practices in organizations has revealed further directions of scientific research. Successful management of aging workforce requires deeper investigations of the changes of needs and values at the individual level. Aging society creates changes in the workforce structure, which in turn poses new challenges to the country's economic development and fields of investment. As a result, the challenges of ageing workforce require a complex and interdisciplinary solution.

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