

COMPETENCE OF OLDER EMPLOYEES

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ABSTRACT

Across the world, the number of old adults has grown significantly over recent decades. This has raised a number of questions related to the availability of human resources in the present day. One current concern, visible in society, is related to older employees' competence and performance. Often, older employees are perceived as less competent and perceived that they perform less well than younger employees, but this image does not meet the reality. Studies related to older employees' performance show that certain aspects of performance are either equal to, slightly lower, or even higher than those of younger employees. Important elements that make the performance of older adults comparable with the performance of younger adults, among others, include experience, and level of past and present cognitive and physical stimulation; elements with very large interpersonal variability.

KEYWORDS:

Competence, old employees, cognitive abilities, performance

1. Introduction

What happens in organizations is a reflection of what happens in a wider context, the social context. Therefore, a deeper analysis of the organizational context cannot be done without mentioning the social dynamics. One major change, at social level, is related to the demographic side. When it comes to the present day, it is noticeable that life expectancy and longevity have increased greatly (United Nations, 2013; Kontis et al., 2017). For instance, life expectancy in Europe is 80.7 years for women and 73.7 years for men; in North America it is 81.5 years for women and

76.8 years for men (United Nations, 2017a). In the last decade, global life expectancy has increased 3.6 years (United Nations, 2017b). The increase in longevity is also reflected in the higher number of old adults alive today, and in a higher number in the future. For example, today, the number of old adults over 60, in Europe, is 183.0 million but in the 2050 the number will be approximately 247.2 million (United Nations, 2017a). But the large number of old adults is not balanced by a large number of young people. For instance, in Europe, the proportion of people over 60 is 25 %, while that of the children (0-14 years) is just 16 %, and the

proportion of the adolescents and young adults between 15-24 years is only 11 % (United Nations, 2017b). This means that a large proportion of employees both today and in the future might be older.

2. Competence and performance of old employees

The present social context creates the opportunity to ask questions about the competence or performance of older employees. It seems that concerns about the capabilities and competence of older adults are raised in different contexts and in different cultures (Gordon & Arvey, 2004; Age UK, 2005; Abrams, Vauclair & Swift, 2011). One in three Britons doubt that old adults, after the age of 70, are capable and competent individuals (Age UK, 2005). According to Posthuma and Campion (2009) it cannot be said that older employees are less competent, overall, than young people. A meta-analysis carried out on 96 studies on the relationship between performance and age, revealed that these two variables are not related. This implies that the performance of employees, mainly, does not change as the years go by (McEvoy & Cascio, 1989). Another meta-analysis revealed that as age progresses there are no significant changes in task performance and creativity (Ng & Feldman, 2008). For example, in a computer task, old adults did not reveal differences compared with young and middle-aged adults at the level of the quality of the work that they performed, but the quantitative aspect was less than those of other ages (Czaja & Sharit, 1998). One study that investigated employee performance in two types of professional activity, clerical and craft jobs (with two degrees of complexity each), revealed that there is no correlation between performance and age, or just modest correlations for certain types of professional activities (Avolio, Waldman & McDaniel, 1990).

In contrast with the studies mentioned above, there is also evidence in favour of a

relationship between performance and age in the form of an inverse U. This means that up to the age of 49 years performance gradually increases, yet from this point performance progressively decreases as employees become older (Sturman, 2003). But there is also evidence that indicates that certain types of performance even grow with age advancement. In this sense the meta-analysis of Ng and Feldman (2008) revealed that older employees present more citizenship behaviours, are more inclined to avoid counterproductive behaviours, are more responsible, more punctual, more careful with work attendance, and are less likely to engage in substance consumption behaviours.

Therefore, despite the fact that, at the social level, there is a concern about the lack of competence of older workers, the above research data reveals that this concern is exaggerated. Professional performance in some sectors is identical, in other sectors it is modestly smaller, while in other sectors it is even better than the other ages (Posthuma & Campion, 2009; Erber & Szuchman, 2015).

3. Older employees' abilities

In order to deepen the performance aspects, different types of job demands should also be considered, taking into account, also, the dynamics of different abilities and age-specific characteristics. Although the definition of an old employee is vague (Phillips & Siu, 2012), it can be roughly revealed which abilities that are in a negative correlation with age and could lead to some differences in performance, in different job related tasks. Job related tasks that require intense physical strength may be difficult for some older employees, making their performance lower than at the other ages, due to the fact muscle strength starts to decrease with age (Metter, Conwit, Tobin & Fozard, 1997; World Health Organization, 1998). Therefore, tasks that involve, for example, carrying of high-weight products, tasks that involve moving

heavy objects, or frequent lifting, may be done with difficulty by older employees compared with younger employees. Resistance to intense physical effort also decreases with advancing age (Power, Dalton & Rice 2013), which may lead to a decreased performance in job activities that require intense physical effort for many hours, such as mining activities. Speed may decrease too, but except in situations where physical demands are intense, and where physical demands are often moderate, experience can offset these slowdowns (Bowen, Noack & Staudinger, 2011; Erber, 2013). Jobs with tasks that involve intense physical demands are not among the fastest growing jobs either today or in the future; jobs in great demand today are those that involve cognitive skills more than intense physical activity (Albright, 2012; Holmes & Mahyew, 2012). Cognitive abilities, on the other hand do not decrease at the same rate. Many people in their 60s or early 70s do not show a significant decrease in cognitive abilities (Schaie, 1994; Schaie & Willis, 2010;). Some of them even show some an increase at advanced ages. For example, semantic memory (knowledge) evidences an increase in performance in the 60s, and a decrease after ones 70s (Nyberg et al., 2003). Those cognitive abilities that evidence a relatively small decrease for adults in their 60s and early 70s are related with: working memory (Belleville, Peretz & Malenfant, 1996); episodic memory (Bender, Naveh-Benjamin & Raz, 2010); cognitive processing speed (Bashore, Ridderinckof & van der Molen, 1997) and so on.

Even if older employees may experience some slowdown in cognitive ability, it seems that experience makes these slowdowns barely visible at the level of professional performance for older workers (Bowen et al., 2011; Erber, 2013). Experience, staying cognitively active, exercising, working with certain tasks /

contents, can have a protective effect, maintaining cognitive performance (Schaie, 1994; Schaie, 2005). Employees who have had a complex career path demonstrate higher levels of cognitive abilities and cognitive performance at old age (Smart, Gow & Deary, 2014).

4. Implications of social stereotyping about older adults' competence

The fact that society portrays older employees' competence and performance in a negative way, has multiple implications. The effects of such a negative portrayal are observed in the level of performance. Studies have revealed that when older adults know that poor performance is expected of them (negative social stereotyping), there is a higher probability that they will perform poorly compared with a situation in which they are not exposed to such negative expectations on the part of others (Hess, Auman, Colcombe, & Rahhal, 2003; Haslam et al., 2012; Swift, Lamont, & Abrams, 2012). The negative implications are more visible in terms of cognitive activities; when older adults come into contact with negative stereotypes about cognitive performance at advanced ages, they underperform in cognitive tasks compared with adults who do not come into contact with such negative stereotypes (Lamont, Swift, & Abrams, 2015). The implications of this phenomenon, age-based stereotype threat (underperformance when coming in contact with negative stereotype about old age), are major, certainly at the organizational level, but also socially and emotionally.

5. Conclusions

As a result, society's concerns about the capabilities of older employees are not wholly justified. Older employees can be an important resource for organizations in the context of an aging world.

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