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An Organizational Perspective on Ageing and Age Diversity at Work

Despite the recent financial crisis, the employment rate of older workers (aged between 55 and 64) is increasing at a rapid pace. In 2015, older workers comprised 53.3% of the workforce in the 28 EU member states; in 11 of the member states, the rates ranged between 50% and 66%, with a peak of 74,5% in Sweden (Eurostat, 2016). These trends are common to most industrialized countries where people are working until later in life, often far beyond the retirement ages established in past decades when life expectancies were shorter.

In light of this demographic shift, successful age management arises as one of the most relevant global challenges faced by leaders and policy makers. The increasing ageing and age diversity of the workforce are not transient phenomena, and their implications are compounded by several global trends such as increasing immigration, worker mobility, and gender and ethnic differences. Galvanized by a growing awareness of these issues, both researchers and practitioners have produced a growing body of scholarly and popular publications that address this phenomenon. Researchers, in particular, have studied ageing and age diversity in the workplace from a number of disciplines, theoretical perspectives and levels of analysis. Much theoretical and empirical work has shed light on age-related changes at work (Truxillo, Cadiz, & Rineer, 2015) – whether that involves physical abilities (e.g., Ng & Feldman, 2013), cognitive abilities (e.g., Cattell, 1971), personality (e.g., Soto, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2011), work motivation (e.g., Kooij, De Lange, Jansen, Kanfer, & Dijkers, 2011), or employees' work attitudes and performance (e.g., Ng & Feldman, 2010).

One fact that arises from this literature is that ageing is a multidimensional process: One single definition of age cannot capture its multiple meanings. Accordingly, a stream of research has focused on the different meanings of age and ageing, going beyond chronological age to highlight the role of age perceptions (i.e., subjective age, relative age, psychological age) in shaping individual attitudes and behaviors (De Lange et al., 2006). Such researchers suggest that we need to reconceptualize age if we want to change the way we manage age diversity.

Most of the literature on workforce ageing shows a theoretical emphasis on negative predictions (Shore et al., 2009), focusing on the effects of age stereotypes (Posthuma & Campion, 2009), age discrimination (Maurer & Rafuse, 2001), career

timetables (Shore, Cleveland, & Goldberg, 2003), and prototype matching (Perry & Finkelstein, 1999). This field of research highlights individuals' implicit or explicit exclusion from job opportunities, human resource investments, and decision-making processes because of their actual or perceived age. A recent meta-analysis shows that ageism significantly predicts personnel discriminatory selection and serves as a more subtle form of discrimination (in opposition to diversity-supportive policies) (Jones et al., 2017).

This growing body of research provides a strong theoretical and empirical basis for understanding the reality of an ageing workforce. However, there has been little direct research into how organizations could and should utilize the knowledge of differently aged workers (Truxillo et al., 2014) and thereby capitalize on the benefits of age diversity. The European Commission (2014) underlines the need to support the mature workforce by promoting active ageing policies that target better working conditions, better opportunities for job creation, and an overall better labor market that values an older and more skilled workforce. To this end, more research needs to investigate how organizations can customize people management practices (e.g., hiring, training, development and rewarding decisions), as well as redesign jobs and the work environment (e.g., flexible work times and spaces), to ensure that older workers utilize their strengths and perform successfully (Schalk et al., 2010).

Of course, the workforce is not only ageing, but also becoming more age-diverse, which means that older workers are not the sole concern. Very young employees must work together with considerably older colleagues and vice versa, which creates a management challenge that organizations must address (Rabl & Triana, 2014). Despite the growing relevance of this phenomenon, the research on age diversity's workplace implications remains much less developed than that on race and gender diversity (Shore et al., 2009). This may be due to the ambiguity of age diversity's significance in the literature. Like age, age diversity has different meanings. For instance, one can distinguish between age diversity at the individual level, which captures the dissimilarity of one member compared to others, and age diversity at the group/organizational level, which refers to "the distribution of differences among the members of a unit" with respect to age (Harrison & Klein, 2007, p. 1200). In addition, it seems that perceived diversity, which depends on group members' diversity beliefs, is as important as objective diversity (Homan, Greer, Jehn, & Koning, 2010). Finally, it is worth noting that researchers often use the terms "diversity," "heterogeneity," "dissimilarity," and "dispersion" rather interchangeably; however, these terms are rooted in different concepts and thus need to be treated with caution. Indeed, the meaning we associate with the age diversity concept impacts its consequences, antecedents, and operationalization. Case in point: Diversity can indicate *separation* when it refers to differences of opinions, values, or attitudes among members, any of which may cause disagreement or conflict. It can indicate *variety* when it reflects individuals' unique sets of information, knowledge, and experience. It can indicate *disparity* when it represents differences in how valuable resources are concentrated among certain members (Harrison & Klein, 2007). And if we adopt a generational perspective, diversity takes another

meaning: It denotes individuals' differences in terms of the values and attitudes they develop in response to social and historical events (Twenge & Campbell, 2008).

Despite these conceptual and operational concerns, there is a growing body of research about age diversity and its effects on individual outcomes (e.g., Ellwart, Bündgens, & Rack, 2013; Liebermann, Wegge, Jungmann, & Schmidt, 2013; Sammarra, Innocenti, & Profili, 2015), group functioning (e.g., Schalk et al., 2010; Wegge, Roth, Neubach, Schmidt, & Kanfer, 2008), and organizational performance (e.g., Backes-Gellner & Veen, 2013; De Meulenaere, Boone, & Buyl, 2016). However, there is no clear consensus yet about whether age diversity has an overall positive or negative effect on these various dimensions and levels of analysis. According to the Information and Decision-Making Perspective (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998), positive effects should prevail because age-diverse teams benefit from a wider range of non-redundant knowledge, experiences, relationships, and perspectives. This not only gives age-diverse groups a larger pool of resources, but also encourages team members to process various sources of task-relevant information, leading to more innovative solutions (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992). The Social Categorization Perspective, on the contrary, posits that individuals' age differences can be used to categorize oneself and others into groups, which then activates in-group and out-group distinctions. As a result, people become more positively inclined toward a group and its members when they are more similar to the group members in terms of age (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In this sense, group homogeneity should result in higher group performance. A third model, the Categorization-Elaboration Model of work-group diversity (Van Knippenberg, De Dreu, & Homan, 2004), seeks a middle ground. Specifically, it argues that age diversity could have both positive and negative effects; the extent to which the negative effects of social categorization overcome the positive impact of information elaboration depends on several moderating and mediating variables (e.g., task motivation, task ability, social category salience).

Given this foundation, there is a need for more research into the processes underlying the effects of work-group diversity, which could ultimately produce better practical strategies for dealing with age diversity. To that end, this volume bridges the theoretical and empirical approaches: It discusses the challenges of valuing workers at various points in their professional lives, from youth to retirement, as well as the benefits that arise from leveraging an age-diverse workforce. Embracing perspectives that span from the individual to the organizational levels of analysis, the book explores the two distinct, but intertwined, phenomena of workforce ageing and increasing workforce age diversity. That said, the book primarily assumes an organizational perspective for two reasons:

First, we believe that age is a diversity element that requires more sensitivity on the part of employers and leaders. Among CEOs who are adopting strategies to promote diversity and inclusion, only 8% say they are focusing on age, compared to 33% for gender and 24.5% for race/ethnicity/nationality (PwC, 2015).

Second, just like the societies they inhabit and the individuals they employ, organizations are grappling with the complexity invoked by unprecedented demographic changes. Such changes raise questions about conventional ways of management

thinking, doing and being. Overlooking age as a diversity factor means forfeiting many of the benefits of full inclusiveness and exposing the organization to several risks. However, while scholars generally agree on the need to engage a more age-diverse workforce, the literature lacks the same consistency regarding the constructs' conceptualization, strategic impact, and related organizational practices. For this reason, research should focus on contingency factors that make age diversity work (Guillaume, Dawson, Otaye-Ebede, Woods, & West, 2017), especially those that managers can control, such as strategy, leadership, unit and task design, climate and culture, and HRM practices.

In order to assist readers in parsing this issue, this book is divided into two parts. The first section raises questions about the meanings of age and age diversity, as well as how and when age matters in organizations.

Any considerations related to age diversity management in the workplace must rely on data about population ageing, the ageing workforce, and labor force participation trends. Addressing this need, the first chapter, written by Catherine Earl, Philip Taylor, Chris Roberts, Patrick Huynh, and Simon Davis, presents labor supply and demand scenarios for 10 OECD countries. The authors offer an extensive analysis of older workers' labor force participation trends against the backdrop of workplace changes resulting from globalization, casualization, and, increasingly, automation. They also discuss a number of implications for policy makers across the world.

The second chapter, written by Hannes Zacher and Cort W. Rudolph, proposes a comprehensive analysis of successful ageing at work. Drawing from theories in the gerontology, lifespan development, and organizational literatures, the authors discuss what success means in the context of an ageing workforce, what time frame is necessary to observe ageing in the work context, and why some workers are ageing more successfully than others.

The third chapter, written by Justin Marcus and Michael P. Leiter, analyzes generational differences at work by accounting for contextual factors. To this end, the authors test a set of countervailing hypotheses by comparing the effect of age cohorts with that of generational cohorts. Their results favor a generational hypothesis regarding the positively valenced construct of job satisfaction, but an age-based hypothesis for the negatively valenced construct of turnover intentions. This suggests that the generational and age approaches may have different effects on work outcomes based on the situation at hand.

The fourth chapter, written by Silvia Profili, Laura Innocenti, and Alessia Sammarra, discusses the conceptual issues involved with theoretically defining and empirically measuring the age diversity climate construct. After reviewing and comparing age diversity climate with other age-focused climate concepts, the authors discuss several open issues related to the operationalization of age diversity climate, including the level of analysis, the choice of referent, and the dimensions of analysis. They conclude by outlining implications for future research on one of the most relevant boundary conditions of age diversity effects.

The second part of the volume examines the role and contribution of HR practices in forging an age-inclusive workplace. To this end, the fifth chapter, written by

Jeanette N. Cleveland, Lena-Alyeska Huebner, and Madison E. Hanscom, introduces an intersectionality perspective to the study of diversity effects. Their starting point is that ageing workers are a diverse group and have multiple identities. Therefore, the authors examine the joint effects of age and gender upon various life domains and decisions, suggesting that the experience of ageing differs for women and men in terms of health, resilience, and life domains. Further, they argue that HR practices are more likely to succeed if they recognize and accommodate the needs of a diverse workforce – acknowledging, for example, that older men and older woman differ in their needs, preferences, and experiences, or even that the concept of “age” may play out differently for men and women.

The sixth chapter, written by Franco Fraccaroli, Sara Zaniboni, and Donald Truxillo, explores the relationship between job design and older workers. The authors assess the theoretical approaches to job design that have emerged in recent last decades, as well as highlight job characteristics that may be more suitable or beneficial for people in older age groups or later stages of their careers.

The seventh chapter, written by Alessia Sammarra, Silvia Profili, Fabrizio Maimone, and Gabriele Gabrielli, inspects the HRM system’s role in facilitating effective knowledge sharing in age-diverse organizations. To this end, the authors synthesize research on HR planning, training and development, performance appraisal, and reward systems. By strengthening their HRM practices, the authors argue, organizations can better capitalize on the unique knowledge-based resources held by their younger and older employees.

We hope that, taken together, these studies will contribute to the literature on ageing and age diversity by exploring their implications on individual, group, and organizational outcomes. This work should appeal to not only scholars and researchers, but also leaders, managers, and practitioners who are interested in the management of people and want to draw upon workforce age diversity in order to obtain competitive advantages.

To conclude, we would like to thank Tanya Bondarouk and Miguel R. Olivás-Luján, Editors of the Emerald Advanced Series in Management, for believing in our project and ensuring continuous support during the book’s preparation. The very idea of editing a book on ageing and age diversity in the workplace was born during a lunch we had with Tanya at the EURAM Conference in Warsaw on June 2015, where we jointly chaired the Human Resource Management Standing Track. Thank you, Tanya, for giving us this opportunity. Further, we want to thank all the book contributors, whose expertise and commitment made this work possible and enjoyable. It is a privilege to have you all in our edited book. We are also grateful to all the colleagues who provided useful reviews and comments to improve the quality of the book. Finally, our thanks to Emma Stevenson and the team of Emerald Group Publishing for helping us keep the book on track.

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