

Aging and work — coping with strengths and weaknesses

The working population over 50 years of age will grow considerably during the next 15 years, particularly in developed but, with some delay, also in developing countries. After 2010, the number of retired people over 65 years of age will be almost double that of 1995. The dependency ratio, that is, the number of people of working age in relation to the number of retired people, will therefore change dramatically (1). There is, however, an increasing trend towards age discrimination against older workers in both the European Union and elsewhere (2, 3). Age discrimination appears in recruiting, training, promotion and recognition. One consequence of age discrimination is that people 50 years of age and older disappear in great numbers from worklife, and the dependency ratio becomes worse much earlier than expected. Signs of a continuous decrease in the participation of older workers in the work force have been evident since the 1960s. In the European Union about half of the people in the age group of 55-59 years were working in 1990, and for the age group of 60-64 years the corresponding figure was only 25%. Therefore, the actual retirement age in many European countries is less than 60 years, one result being great socioeconomic consequences.

Ageing is a worldwide phenomenon. By the year 2000, about two-thirds of the world's 600 million people over 60 years of age will be living in the developing countries. The increase in the 60 years and over population will be particularly marked in Asia as a result of the growth expected in China and India. Compared with the situation in developed countries, the definition "aging worker" should apply in developing countries to workers younger than 45 years of age. The life expectancy, for example, in many Latin American countries, still differs greatly from that of developed countries, and the promotion of work ability should start, at the latest, with people aged 30-35 years.

In developed countries the population over 60 years of age is expected to increase from 120 to 250 million during 1980-2020 (1). In most developed countries the age for pensioning is 65 years, and national policies aim at maintaining older workers in a socially and economically meaningful role.

One can wonder why older workers do not seem to be needed in today's society and why aging is becoming more and more a negative issue in worklife. Actually, the situation should be the opposite when one thinks about the improvements that have occurred in the general health of the population and the general development of worklife. In gerontology, aging has been a great concern after 75 years of age. From the biological perspective aging means predictable, progressive, universal deterioration in various physiological systems — mental, physical, behavioral and biomedical — but not to such a degree and severity in middle age that we should label the majority of the 50 years and older population as too old or unsuitable for worklife. In accordance with the fair-play rule, the advantages of aging should be taken into account, too. Aging involves mental growth. Capacities for strategy, sagacity, prudence, wisdom, reasoning, and experience are the strengths of age (4). Are these indisputable advantages of less value today than earlier in worklife? Hardly. It is obvious that there is no single truth to explain the correct age behavior of worklife; instead there is a complex chain of factors affecting it.

In our 11 years of follow-up of 6257 aging employees, at least 4 factors proved to modify the 45 years and older population: the biological aging process, health, work, and life-style (5). These factors interact strongly. Life-style, work, and aging influence the severity of disease. In the absence of disease, life-style and work affect the rate of aging. The presence of disease modulates life-style and work and may influence aging as well, and both disease and aging modify life-style. Therefore, measures to promote the work ability of older workers should be multifactorial. In the multidisciplinary

FinnAge — Respect for the Ageing program, carried out by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health in 1991—1996, a comprehensive model for promoting the work ability of aging workers was created and tested in practice in several projects (figure 1). The model is based on 3 types of measures, described in the top of the figure with an inverted triangle. On the left, the actions are directed towards such aspects as ergonomic measures as decreasing the physical load, poor work postures, and repetitive movements. On the right, organizational and leadership issues are emphasized, including a new concept of age management and worktime arrangements.

The third group of measures focuses on the functional capacities of the individual worker. Because a worker's physical resources decline first with aging, physical exercise has often been a major tool in the health promotion of older workers. Regular aerobic exercise has been introduced as a tool to prevent the premature decline of central nervous functions (6). The integration of the 3 groups of measures have, in several FinnAge projects, succeeded in improving the work ability of the workers in 1—3 years. As a consequence, productivity and the quality of life have improved. Those who had taken part in preventive measures during their work career went on to enjoy a meaningful, independent, and active "Third Age". An international evaluation of the FinnAge program is available (7), and a final report is under preparation.

One major concern of older workers has been the lack of professional development. They often feel that, in spite of their long experience, younger people, with their modern training, are more competent. The information society has speeded up the polarization of the different competencies of younger and older workers, too. Computer skill is one area where older workers feel themselves incompetent. It is more difficult to understand terms and find information from user's manuals with advancing age, merely because of a lack of familiarity. On the other hand, older employees only need more training and more time to become familiar with new technology, because age is not an obstacle to learning. It is understandable that, when older workers are put in courses constructed to teach computer skills according to the readiness and needs of youngsters, the result is far from optimal for the older workers. Better training methods tailored to middle-aged workers is one key solution for competence development during ageing (8).

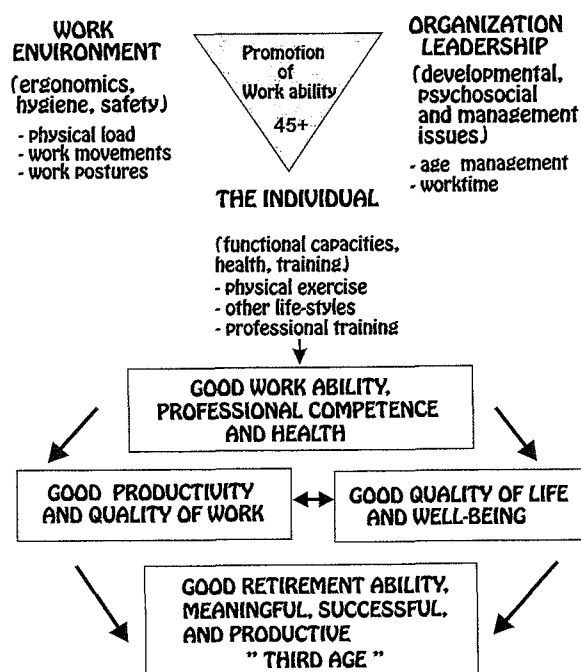


Figure 1. Model for promoting the work ability of aging workers.

Much information is available on how the workplace should be adjusted to fit the needs of older workers. Appropriate ergonomic measures to cope with decreased joint mobility, reduced elasticity of tissues, loss of strength, slowed perception and decision making, attention deficit, memory deficits, difficulties to make mental transformations, visual deficits, less tolerance for heat and cold, greater occurrence of low-back pain, increased risk of falling, and the like have been given by Spirduso (9). It is important to note that the idea is not to adjust the older worker to the workplace, but to adjust the workplace to the worker. The individual variation, in physical, mental and social meaning, grows with age, and therefore more flexible and individual solutions are needed. Proper age management observes positive and negative changes during aging and adjusts the work by increasing the role of growing strengths and decreasing the meaning of appearing deficits. Therefore, managers, supervisors and foremen will be key persons in the future in creating workplaces for a more heterogeneous and older work force.

To achieve a meaningful role for older workers, the competitiveness of their worklife should be improved. This meaningful role can be achieved by, for example, adjusting workplaces according to age, promoting the professional competence of older workers through tailored training, and finding individual and flexible solutions for the transfer from work to retirement.

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