It's All about the Attitudes, not the Age: The Role of Future Time Perspective and Goal Orientation for Older Employees' Employability

Dominik E. Froehlich

Simon Beausaert

Mien Segers

Maastricht University

Aim

Adult learning is high on the international policy and research agenda. One major reason is the increasing share of older employees – especially in Western societies. However, many European countries, which are hardest hit by the demographic shift, do not sufficiently integrate older people in the workplace (OECD, 2011). Indeed, older employees are often viewed as inflexible, as unwilling to learn, and as having obsolete knowledge, and therefore as not contributing to business goals. While research finds changes in learning and performance during the process of aging, stereotypes in the workplace often ignore the positive effects of age and amplify the severity of negative attributions (Rothwell, 2008). These (perceived) impairments of older employees may have adverse effects on their employability (Froehlich, 2017b, 2017a; Froehlich, Beausaert, & Segers, 2016, 2015), i.e. "the continuous fulfilling, acquiring or creating of work through the optimal use of competences" (van der Heijde & van der Heijden, 2006, p. 453) and hinder older people's integration in the workplace. Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) define employability as containing five dimensions: anticipation and optimization, occupational expertise, personal flexibility, corporate sense, and balance between professional and private life (Froehlich, Liu, & Van der Heijden, 2017, 2018, 2016; Van der Heijden et al., 2017, 2018).

In this study, we draw from socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999) and goal orientation theory (Elliot & McGregor, 2001) to investigate how older white-collar employees' attitudes relate to anticipation and optimization, occupational expertise, and personal flexibility. Goal orientation theory is concerned with the overarching purposes individuals set out to attain that guide their behavior and provide "a mental framework for how individuals interpret and respond to achievement situations" (Brett & VandeWalle, 1999). Based on how competence is defined (task and self-referential, i.e. mastery orientation, or other referential, i.e. performance orientation) and valenced (approach success or avoid failure), four orientations - mastery approach (MAP), mastery avoid (MAV), performance approach (PAP), and performance avoid (PAV) – are distinguished.

We hypothesize that chronological age has no direct effects on employability. Instead, it affects employability indirectly via the attitudes about goal orientation and future time, i.e. whether employees perceive the time left in their (working) life as endless or limited (Lang & Carstensen, 2002) (Figure 1).

Method

We distributed the questionnaires in a Dutch emergency services organization; 117 employees responded (sample descriptions are given in Tables 1a and 1b). Measures were extracted from validated scales and reach satisfactory internal reliability (see Table 2). We employ hierarchical multiple regression analyses for direct effects and the bootstrapping method for indirect effects – which is statistically more sound than the causal steps approach (Hayes, 2009).

Findings

Tables 3-5 show three important findings. *First*, chronological age does not seem to matter; we find no effect on any of the subscales of employability. This supports our hypothesis and advocates the search for better predictors. *Second*, attitudes do make a difference: having an extensive future time perspective and a mastery approach goal orientation helps employees to stay employable. Contrarily, a mastery avoid orientation makes employees more inflexible and thereby less employable. *Third*, we find evidence for our hypothesis that future time perspective and goal orientation are intermediaries in the relationship between chronological age and employability. In sum, the findings suggest that individual employees are at least potentially in control of their own employability – age has no direct effect.

Theoretical and Educational Significance

This research is important for several reasons. *First*, the increased share of older people in the workplace is an imminent and inevitable phenomenon. However, we have little knowledge about how exactly the learning of older employees happens and what antecedents could be addressed in practice. By investigating into psychological antecedents of employability, this study narrows this gap. *Second*, while the effects of chronological age are researched frequently – at least as a covariate – closer explanation of the effects or potential mediators are mostly excluded from the discussion. This is problematic, since age and aging are related to several spheres: physical and mental characteristics, social attributions, political agendas, etc. This study includes mediators and finds significant indirect effects of future time perspective and goal orientation. *Third*, we take a holistic approach to the issue, incorporating and extending literature at the intersection of the fields of human resource development, psychology, educational science, labor economics, and gerontology. Such

interdisciplinary research is still lacking in literature and might reveal important insights for human resource development practice.

References

- Brett, J. F., & VandeWalle, D. (1999). Goal orientation and goal content as predictors of performance in a training program. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 84(6), 863–873. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.84.6.863>
- Carstensen, L. L., Isaacowitz, D. M., & Charles, S. T. (1999). Taking time seriously: A theory of socioemotional selectivity. *American Psychologist*, 54(3), 165–181. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.54.3.165>
- Elliot, A. J., & McGregor, H. A. (2001). A 2x2 Achievement Goal Framework. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80(3), 501–519.
- Froehlich, D. E. (2017a). Alte Führungskraft, lernende Führungskraft? Eine Studie über die Zusammenhänge zwischen Alter, Führungsstil und Lernstil bei Führungskräften. In *Internationales Personalmanagement Rollen – Kompetenzen – Perspektiven. Implikationen für die Praxis*. SpringerGabler.
- Froehlich, D. E. (2017b). Older managers' informal learning in knowledge-intensive organizations: investigating the role of learning approaches among Austrian bank managers. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 28(2), 399–416. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2016.1244897>
- Froehlich, D. E., Beausaert, S. A. J., & Segers, M. S. R. (2015). Age, employability and the role of learning activities and their motivational antecedents: a conceptual model. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 26(16), 2087–2101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2014.971846>
- Froehlich, D. E., Beausaert, S. A. J., & Segers, M. S. R. (2016). Aging and the motivation to stay employable. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 31(3), 756–770. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMP-08-2014-0224>

- Froehlich, D. E., Liu, M., & Van der Heijden, B. I. J. M. (2016). Work in Progress: Towards a Progression Model of Competence-Based Employability. In *Paper presented at the EARLI SIG 17*. Maastricht.
- Froehlich, D. E., Liu, M., & Van der Heijden, B. I. J. M. (2017). Work in Progress: Towards a Progression Model of Competence-Based Employability. In *Paper presented at the annual general meeting of the American Educational Research Association*.
- Froehlich, D. E., Liu, M., & Van der Heijden, B. I. J. M. (2018). Work in Progress: The Progression of Competence-Based Employability. *Career Development International*, 23(2), 230–244.
- Hayes, A. F. (2009). Beyond Baron and Kenny: Statistical Mediation Analysis in the New Millennium. *Communication Monographs*, 76(4), 408–420.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03637750903310360>
- Lang, F. R., & Carstensen, L. L. (2002). Time counts: Future time perspective, goals, and social relationships. *Psychology and Aging*, 17(1), 125–139.
<https://doi.org/10.1037//0882-7974.17.1.125>
- OECD. (2011). OECD.Stat (database). <https://doi.org/10.1787/20752342>
- Rothwell, W. J. (2008). *Adult Learning Basics*. Alexandria: ASTD Press.
- van der Heijde, C. M., & van der Heijden, B. I. J. M. (2006). A competence-based and multidimensional operationalization and measurement of employability. *Human Resource Management*, 45(3), 449–476. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm>
- Van der Heijden, B. I. J. M., Notelaers, G., Peters, P., Stoffers, J. M. M., De Lange, A. H., Froehlich, D. E., & Van der Heijde, C. M. (2017). Development and Validation of the Short-Form Employability Five-Factor Instrument. In *Paper presented at the EAWOP 2017*. Dublin.

Van der Heijden, B. I. J. M., Notelaers, G., Peters, P., Stoffers, J. M. M., De Lange, A. H., Froehlich, D. E., & Van der Heijde, C. M. (2018). Development and validation of the short-form employability five-factor instrument. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 106, 236–248. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.02.003>

Beausaert, S. A. J., Froehlich, D. E., Devos, C., & Riley, P. (2016). Effects of support on stress and burnout in school principals. *Educational Research*, 58(4), 347–365. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2016.1220810>

Appendix

Figure 1: Conceptual model.

Table 1: Sample characteristics.

Characteristic	%
Sex	
Female	27.4%
Male	72.6%
Highest level of education	
Lower vocational education	2.6%
Vocational education	48.7%
University of applied sciences	42.7%
University	4.3%
Post-graduate	1.7%
Contract	
Full time (36 hours per week)	70.9%
Part time (less than 36 hours per week)	29.1%
Status	
Living alone	18.8%
Living with others	81.2%
Has children at home	72.6%
No. of different functions	
1-2	30.8%
3-6	61.5%
>6	7.7%
No. of different organizations	
1-2	39.3%
3-5	51.3%
>5	9.4%

Characteristic	M	SD
Age	43.3	8.1
Years in same function	9.8	6.7
Years in same organization	10.5	7.2

Table 2: Description and internal reliability of the scales.

Scale		Items	Alpha	Sample Item
Occupational Expertise	OE	15	.930	I consider myself competent to engage in in-depth, specialist discussions in my job domain.
Personal Flexibility	PF	7	.780	I adapt to developments within my organization.
Anticipated Optimization	AO	8	.833	I take responsibility for maintaining my labor market value.
Future Time Perspective	FTP	10	.860	Many opportunities await me in the future.
Mastery Approach Orientation	MAP	3	.840	I want to learn as much as possible from trainings.
Mastery Avoid Orientation	MAV	3	.684	I worry that in trainings I may not learn all that I possibly could learn.
Performance Approach Orientation	PAP	3	.752	It is important for me to do better than other employees
Performance Avoid Orientation	PAV	2	.660	I just want to avoid doing poorly in trainings.

Table 3: Means, standard deviations, and bi-variate correlations.

	M	SD	Age	AO	OE	PF	FTP	MAP	MAV	PAP	PAV
Age	43.3	8.1	1								
AO	4.5	.70	-.099	1							
OE	5.0	.49	.015	.544**	1						
PF	4.8	.45	-.098	.632**	.662**	1					
FTP	3.4	.70	-.497**	.257**	.182	.233*	1				
MAP	4.2	.62	-.204*	.445**	.432**	.378**	.239**	1			
MAV	2.5	.74	-.109	-.014	-.326**	.036	.031	-.129	1		
PAP	3.2	.79	-.153	.141	.046	.190*	.054	.281**	.289**	1	
PAV	3.9	.89	-.123	.260**	.167	.228*	.111	.454**	.253**	.369**	1

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Abbreviations: AO – Anticipation and Optimization; OE – Occupational Expertise; PF – Personal Flexibility; FTP – future time perspective; MAV – mastery avoidance orientation; MAP – mastery approach orientation; PAP – performance approach orientation; PAV – performance avoid orientation.

Table 4: Hierarchical regressions of age, future time perspective, and goal orientation on employability.

Model	Anticipation and Optimization			Occupational Expertise			Personal Flexibility		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
R	.289	.290	.536	.366	.366	.514	.317	.317	.594
ΔR^2	.083	.001	.203**	.134*	.000	.131**	.100	.000	.252**
<i>Control Variables</i>									
Children	-.021	-.020	.026	-.013	-.013	.019	-.011	-.010	.035
Full time work	-.054	-.052	-.023	.021	.021	.025	.013	.015	.110
Sex	.008	.007	.040	.040	.040	.081	.063	.062	.036
Exp. on Funct.	-.029	-.035	-.035	.112	.113	.125	.333*	.329*	.279*
No. of Funct.	-.217	-.214	-.368**	-.161	-.162	-.290*	.024	.026	-.113
Exp. in Org.	-.154	-.174	-.036	-.236	-.234	-.127	-.277	-.292	-.197
No. of Org.	-.008	-.012	.252	-.190	-.189	.021	-.257	-.261	-.022
<i>Independent Variables</i>									
Age		.035	.129		-.003	.084		.027	.139
FTP			.213*			.196			.204*
MAP			.417**			.313**			.346**
MAV			.019			.064			-.276**
PAP			.027			.087			.012
PAV			.035			-.008			.056

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Abbreviations: FTP – future time perspective; MAV – mastery avoidance orientation; MAP – mastery approach orientation; PAP – performance approach orientation; PAV – performance avoid orientation.

Table 5: Mediation of the effects of age on employability through future time perspective and goal orientation.

	Point Estimate	Lower	BC 95% CI Upper
DV: Anticipation and Optimization			
FTP	-.0058	-.0157	.0003
MAV	.0000	-.0026	.0033
MAP	-.0050	-.0173	.0021
PAP	-.0003	-.0044	.0027
PAV	-.0004	-.0061	.0012
TOTAL	-.0114	-.0270	-.0002
DV: Occupational Expertise			
FTP	-.0045	-.0101	-.0010
MAV	-.0006	-.0047	.0039
MAP	-.0034	-.0123	.0010
PAP	-.0001	-.0025	.0015
PAV	-.0003	-.0036	.0006
TOTAL	-.0089	-.0204	.0003
DV: Personal Flexibility			
FTP	-.0038	-.0086	-.0007
MAV	.0001	-.0010	.0032
MAP	-.0027	-.0107	.0007
PAP	-.0008	-.0045	.0006
PAV	.0000	-.0021	.0017
TOTAL	-.0072	-.0163	-.0014

Abbreviations: BC – bias corrected; FTP – future time perspective; MAV – mastery avoidance orientation; MAP – mastery approach orientation; PAP – performance approach orientation; PAV – performance avoid orientation.

Covariates: Experience on the job; Number of jobs previously held.

Note. Relationships are significantly different from zero if zero is not included in the 95% Confidence Interval (95% CI).