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Old and Out? A social network approach towards age, self-responsibility, and their effects on
employability

Dominik E. Froehlich, Maastricht University

Abstract

The share of older people on the workplace is increasing and thereby also the dependence of organizations on older employees rises. However, at the moment, older people are in general not well integrated into the workforce. This stresses the need for continuous learning in order to stay employable also in higher ages.

Unfortunately, several factors limit the learning potential of older people in practice. Next to a decline in fluid intelligence, several negative stereotypes about old people exist on the workplace, especially in connection with learning and change. Empirical findings about age and learning on the workplace are inconsistent and give little guidance. We therefore aim to take a fresh look on the learning of older employees and focus especially on personal antecedents (goal orientation and future perspective) and the feedback exchange behavior of employees employing a social network analysis approach. Specifically, we hypothesize an effect of chronological age on goal orientation, which is partially mediated by future time perspective. A learning goal orientation and a open future time perspective are in turn hypothesized to be positively related to formal and informal learning (feedback seeking), which will eventually increase employability.

After the basic model has been validated in different sectors and countries, a longitudinal field-study will be conducted in order to get a even more detailed look on the learning processes at the workplace.

Extended Abstract

The share of older people especially in Western countries has increased dramatically over the last decade and is still getting higher (also developing countries, for example India (Bakshi & Pathak, 2010), experience this trend, though). Due to Europe's population's low fertility rate and high life-expectancy, the European Union's (EU 25) median age, which was 32 in 1960 and 38.5 in 2005, is expected to raise to 48 years by 2050 (Münz, 2007). As a result, organizations and societies are more and more dependent on older people's competences and knowledge. At the moment, however, the rate of employment among older people is lower in most European countries than the OECD average of 54% (OECD, 2011), which hints at a relatively poor integration of older people on the workplace.

In order to remain employable (Froehlich, Liu, & Van der Heijden, 2018, 2016; Van der Heijden et al., 2017, 2018) also in higher age, people need to learn (S. A. J. Beusaert et al., 2015; Froehlich, 2015; Froehlich, Beusaert, & Segers, 2015a). Older employees, however, often face substantial barriers when attempting to undertake developmental activities (Cully, Heuvel, Curtain, & Wooden, 2000). To some extent this is attributable to physical and mental changes associated with the process of aging (Froehlich, Beusaert, & Segers, 2016). For instance, various studies note a decline in fluid intellectual abilities, which describe the capacity to solve novel problems independent of already acquired knowledge (Segal, Qualls, & Smyer, 2011; Verhaeghen & Salthouse, 1997). In part, however, these barriers are also erected by negative perceptions about elderly people, which are especially evident on the workplace, where older employees are often seen as resistant to change and less capable of learning new things (S. A. J. Beusaert, Van Erp, Froehlich, Segers, & Gerken, 2014; Cappelli & Novelli, 2010; Froehlich, 2017b, 2017a; Grima, 2011; Maurer, Barbeite, Weiss, & Lippstreu, 2008).

However, while some studies have examined separate aspects of older people's learning, such as the undertaking of learning activities (Froehlich, Beausaert, & Segers, 2015b; Froehlich, Beausaert, Segers, & Gerken, 2014; Livingstone, 1999) or formal training performance (Kubeck, Delp, Haslett, & McDaniel, 1996), to the best of our knowledge no research has been undertaken yet that integrates both formal and informal learning of older people on the workplace. In an attempt to close this gap we take a fresh look at how learning among older employees can be facilitated. Specifically, we investigate how information and feedback sharing behavior in one's social network at the workplace (informal learning) and the undertaking of formal learning activities affect older employees' employability. Thereby we also draw from goal orientation theory (Dweck, 1986) and socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999; Lang, Staudinger, & Carstensen, 1998; Raemdonck, Beausaert, Froehlich, Kochoian, & Meurant, 2015) by hypothesizing effects of individuals' goal orientation and future time perspective. Specifically, goal orientation theory posits that individuals pursue two classes of goals, namely learning goals and performance goals. These broad orientations influence how alterable individuals perceive their personal (intellectual) abilities, how they value effort, and how they respond to failure. In turn, these orientations are suggested to have a large impact on people's learning (Brett & VandeWalle, 1999; VandeWalle, 2003; VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997). Likewise, the concept of future time perspective, which describes how much time individuals perceive to have left in their (working) life, has been associated with learning and age (Lang & Carstensen, 2002).

This multi-disciplinary study is conducted in two steps: In the first phase, cross-sectional data is gathered in several organizations from different sectors in Austria, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Based on this data, we attempt to validate the model outlined in the previous paragraph. In the second phase, we take a longitudinal approach to gauge the effects of an

intervention, which is targeted on improving older employees' learning. The intervention as such is not specified yet, because it largely depends on the individual features and challenges of the participating organizations. In general, the intervention can focus on either the employees' attitudes (e.g. by giving trainings to increase future time perspective or learning goal orientation, or by implementing personal development plans (S. Beausaert, Segers, Rijt, & Gijssels, 2011)), their social and informal learning processes (e.g. by implementing collaborative and information-sharing social platforms (DiMicco et al., 2008; Erickson & Kellogg, 2003; Richter & Riemer, 2009) or expert identification systems on the intranet (Ehrlich, 2003; Yimam-Seid & Kobsa, 2003)), or both. By incorporating an ego-social network analysis (Freeman, 2004; Scott, 2007) to gauge the effects of information (Borgatti & Cross, 2003), feedback sharing (Ashford, 1986; Froehlich, Beausaert, & Segers, 2017; Gupta, Govindarajan, & Malhotra, 1999; VandeWalle, 2003), and support (S. A. J. Beausaert, Froehlich, Devos, & Riley, 2016), we take a novel approach in order to examine the relational aspects of workplace learning (Froehlich & Harwood, 2016; Froehlich & Messmann, 2017; Harwood & Froehlich, 2017).

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