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THE INFLUENCE OF EMPLOYMENT ON WELL-BEING IN OLDER AGE: A MULTIFACETED ANALYSIS

WPŁYW AKTYWNOŚCI ZAWODOWEJ NA DOBROSTAN W STARSZYM WIEKU – ANALIZA WIELOASPEKTOWA

Streszczenie: Artykuł porusza kwestię wpływu aktywności zawodowej i zatrudnienia na dobrostan starszych pracowników oraz starszych dorosłych ogólnie. Opierając się na najnowszym badaniach i modelach teoretycznych, pokazuje, jak zadowolenie z pracy, równowaga między życiem zawodowym a prywatnym oraz czynniki społeczne wpływają na dobrostan starzejących się pracowników. Wyniki sugerują, że satysfakcjonująca praca, szacunek ze strony przełożonych oraz wspierający klimat organizacyjny są kluczowe dla utrzymania wysokiego poziomu dobrostanu wśród starszych pracowników. Z drugiej strony, stres i złe warunki pracy mogą nasilać problemy zdrowotne i przyspieszać chęć przejścia na emeryturę.

Słowa kluczowe: Starsi pracownicy, dobre samopoczucie, satysfakcja z pracy, równowaga między życiem zawodowym a prywatnym, podejmowanie decyzji o przejściu na emeryturę, wsparcie organizacyjne

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Abstract: This article addresses the issue of the impact of professional activity and employment on the well-being of older workers and older adults in general. Drawing on the latest research and theoretical models, it demonstrates how job satisfaction, work-life balance, and social factors influence the well-being of aging employees. The findings suggest that satisfying work, respect from supervisors, and a supportive organizational climate are crucial for maintaining high levels of well-being among older workers. On the other hand, stress and poor working conditions can exacerbate health problems and accelerate the desire for retirement.

Keywords: Older Workers, Well-Being, Job Satisfaction, Work-Life Balance, Retirement Decision-Making, Organizational Support

Introduction

As populations age and workforces shrink, the issue of maintaining the well-being of older workers has become increasingly important, particularly in Poland and other European countries. The labor market faces significant challenges due to the growing number of retirees, with the percentage of people aged 65 and older expected to rise sharply in the coming decades. This demographic shift, coupled with the evolving nature of work, places older employees in a precarious position, where they must navigate new job demands, flexible work arrangements, and extended career paths. The impact of professional activity and employment on the well-being of older adults is multifaceted. While satisfying work, respect from supervisors, and a supportive organizational climate are critical for sustaining high levels of well-being, negative factors such as stress and poor working conditions can exacerbate health issues and hasten retirement. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of the psychological and sociological dimensions of retirement, as well as the factors that influence older workers' decisions to remain in or leave the workforce. This article explores the complex relationship between employment and well-being among older adults, drawing on recent research and theoretical models. By examining key factors such as job satisfaction, work-life balance, and organizational support, it aims to provide insights into how older workers can be supported in maintaining their well-being and extending their careers in a rapidly changing work environment.

The need for support during the transition to retirement

Ageing societies along with a shrinking workforce present various challenges concerning the labor market and retirement decisions in Poland. As in many other European countries, Poland is experiencing a significant demographic shift. The number of retirees (people aged 60+) in Poland is expected to increase substantially in the coming decades. According to the Central Statistical Office of Poland (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2021), the percentage of the population

aged 65 and older is projected to rise from 18.8% in 2020 to 30.2% by 2050. This demographic shift will result in a significant increase in the dependency ratio, putting additional strain on the working-age population to support the growing number of retirees (GUS, 2021).

To address these challenges, Poland has implemented several pension system reforms over the past two decades. These reforms include promoting private pension savings, gradually increasing the statutory retirement age, and adjusting pension benefits to ensure the sustainability of the pension system (Chłoń-Domińczak, Strzelecki, 2013). The statutory retirement age in Poland is currently set to gradually increase to 67 years for both men and women by 2040 (OECD, 2021). Despite these reforms, the employment rate among older workers in Poland remains relatively low compared to other European countries. In 2020, the employment rate for people aged 55-64 in Poland was 52.6%, which is below the EU average of 60.5% (Eurostat, 2021). However, there has been some progress; in 2005, only 27.2% of people in this age group were employed (GUS, 2021). Several factors contribute to the low employment rate among older workers in Poland, including inadequate access to lifelong learning opportunities, health issues, and age discrimination in the labor market (Szypulewska, Ruzik-Sierdzińska, 2018). To improve the situation, Poland needs to focus on policies that promote the employability of older workers, such as providing better access to training and education, improving workplace health and safety, and combating age discrimination.

Simultaneously, the world of work is rapidly changing and new dynamics in a global market especially exert pressure on older workers. Until now, they are not quite appreciated as human capital, but due to the demographic change, organizations have to start rethinking and trying to recruit and retain older employees. For them, global acceleration is particularly challenging as it comes along with some trends that may seem unfamiliar to the older generation. Nowadays, organizations are getting flatter, which means that they are arranged less hierarchically coming along with a change in leadership style. Additionally, work contracts are becoming more flexible so that it is not common anymore to remain at a job for one's whole working life. Finally, there is a new responsibility for older workers in planning their own career. These factors enable lots of opportunities and autonomy in decision-making which could lead to uncertainty and overburdening if employees are not used to it. Nevertheless, just a small amount of people works until statutory retirement age to the full extent. Permission refers to the fact that recruitment rates among younger workers are higher than among older workers, as they are often supposed to be less productive. The last dimension points to work motivation, as many people, who would even be able to continue working from perspective of health, simply do not want to.

Current research also agrees on the point that a lot of things can be done to face these problems in labor market. Due to the shortage of skilled workforce, it is not expedient to retire older workers and replace them with younger ones. Apart from

the difficulty and costs to find a suitable and qualified young worker, organizations must be aware that they also lose some important skills experienced workers have at their disposal, for example their great experience, composure and variety of problem-solving strategies. Therefore, lots of employers pursue the goal of keeping the qualified and experienced employees in their company until retirement or even beyond. As it is not sufficient to simply force employees to work longer by raising the retirement age as workers also need to be productive, key approach is to secure the long-term health, work ability and motivation of older workers. To achieve this, counselling and coaching were found to be useful tools which can simultaneously support the transition to retirement. Retirement is a challenging and stressful life transition for employees who often do not have any reliable retirement plans and do not even have a realistic perception of what retirement life is like.

Psychological and Sociological Dimensions of Retirement: A Comprehensive Overview

Retirement is an important occasion in one's working life. It can be defined as "an individual's exit from the workforce, which accompanies decreased psychological commitment to and behavioral withdrawal from work" (Wang, Shi 2014, p. 211). Depending on theoretical focus, retirement can either be seen as a psychological process or as a life status.

According to the *Temporal Process Model of Retirement*, the actual retirement transition follows the two phases of retirement planning and decision-making (Wang, Shi 2014, p. 215-217). Retirement planning starts as soon as individuals begin to imagine what their retirement will be like and share these ideas with their family and friends. Retirement plans always involve some financial as well as cognitive plannings including the concrete circumstances of life after withdrawal from the labor market.

As retirement approaches, the stage of decision-making begins. The major aim is to agree on a point in time to conclusively exit the job. Taking the values of work and leisure as well as personal circumstances into consideration, a few options will arise from which the future retiree has to choose. The last step already consists in the implementation of first organizational activities to arrange the exit.

With the actual exit, the phase of transition and adjustment is entered. The new retiree has lots of options and time to think of desirable changes in daily life. While others do not want to work ever again, for some it might be an option to enter bridge employment or do some voluntary work. Bridge employment allows a flexible transition from the former career job to complete labor market withdrawal by offering paid employment even after official retirement (Wang, Shi 2014, p. 216). As previous research shows, bridge jobs actually seem to be quite popular among retirees.

Another explanatory approach is the *Socioemotional Selectivity Theory* SST (Carstensen, 2021). It predicates that the approach of endings – like the end of paid employment – causes motivational changes. With rising age, there is an increased awareness of the narrowness of time which leads to a different prioritization of (life) goals. As time horizons become limited, emotional goals are prioritized over explorational goals which are particularly important for younger adults. This may be the reason why social support, meaningfulness, recognition and appreciation by colleagues and supervisors was found to be one of the most significant pull-factors for older workers in several studies (Garthe, Hasselhorn 2023).

Another approach which captures retirement as a multilevel phenomenon is the conceptual framework of Szinovacz (2013):

At the macro-level, retirement can be conceived as an institution [...] which reflects cultural norms and values and their manifestation in diverse societal support systems. The meso-level consists of diverse organizations that exert influence on retirement processes, including employers, work colleagues, and other organizations that deal with retirees [...]. The focus at the micro-level is on individuals' own retirement plans, decisions and behaviors. (Szinovacz 2013, p. 153)

This model shows that it is not satisfactory to reduce retirement on the individual's decision of when to exit the labor market. There are lots of factors influencing this decision, known as push- and pull-factors.

There are a lot of factors influencing work ability and like this also retirement decisions and leaving intentions. On the one hand, there are Push-factors that determine employees to leave the labor market, on the other hand, there are Pull-factors which rather lead to extending working lives. Concerning the Pull-factors, stay-/retain-factors can be distinguished from stuck-/need-factors. The former includes factors that promote work ability on a voluntary basis, such as measures to improve work motivation or flexibility while the latter focuses on factors which force employees to continue working, for example financial reasons (Garthe, Hasselhorn 2023).

Another approach focusing on keeping employees healthy and capable of working is the *salutogenic model of health*. According to the model, the so-called *sense of coherence* is the key factor for ongoing and healthy careers. The sense of coherence can be understood as a global orientation and positive perception of life as filled with meaningfulness. It is thus a personal way of thinking and acting, including assumptions about life as structured and comprehensible, manageable and meaningful due to having necessary resources at one's disposal. The sense of coherence thus consists of the three components of comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness (Mittelmark et al. 2022). Transferred into working contexts, the sense of coherence can be systematically fostered by

the employer. Organizations should aim at consistency in roles and responsibilities of employees to support comprehensibility. They should also strengthen (the access to) job resources and adapt job demands and working conditions in a way that employees perceive their job as manageable. The most important factor is to achieve a general awareness of the meaningfulness of one's work for the success of the whole organization. All together, these three components enable coherent work experiences which help to build up the employees' sense of coherence. The sense of coherence was found to have positive effects on employee well-being. Strong sense of coherence leads to lower levels of psychosomatic symptoms and emotional exhaustion and also protects from adverse effects of certain job demands like time pressure (Mittelmark et al. 2022).

In general, there are lots of possibilities for the classification of important predictors. Wang und Shultz (2010) identified four categories within the scope of their framework. They discriminate between individual attributes, job and organizational factors, family factors and socio-economic factors. Individual factors turned out to be particularly important, especially economic and health-related factors.

These multilevel considerations are also subject to the *lidA conceptual framework on work, age and employment* (Hasselhorn, Ebener, Müller 2016). This model summarizes possible determinants in eleven domains which include several factors contributing to retirement decisions. Another benefit is the identification of four main characteristics concerning employment participation. As the variety of domains shows, retirement decisions are quite complex, taking into consideration that some factors may change over time and like this affect other domains, too because of interdependency. Furthermore, withdrawal from the labor market does not usually happen all of a sudden. Instead, retirement has become a successive and thirdly, highly individualized process. Especially domains like health, motivation, private environment, social standing and finances suggest that each employee has a different initial position concerning retirement decisions.

And lastly, withdrawal from employment also depends on some structural aspects, like the current situation at the labor market and legislation, which influences the cost-value ratio of early retirement decisions. The model suggests that interventions with the aim of extending working lives should not only focus on health promotion but also target on work ability and motivation to continue working as these factors are supposed to be at least of the same importance. Because of the high individuality, it recommends interventions which meet the specific situation and needs of each worker, indicating that coaching may be a helpful approach. Although it is approved that social context factors like social standing, private environment and lifestyle influence the moment of retirement, current research within the past two decades focuses on work-related factors and how adaptation of certain working conditions affects retirement decisions (Garthe, Hasselhorn 2023).

According to previous research, four main factors can be identified which seem to be particularly important concerning employment decisions. Physically straining work due to working speed, work environment or inappropriate posture was found to be an important push-factor in several studies (Garthe, Hasselhorn 2023). The opportunity for a flexible organization of working time, including a high degree of work time control, is also considered to be a reason for extending working lives as well as the opportunity for personal development irrespective of age. Finally, it is especially important for older employees that their work is appreciated and valued by colleagues and employers (Garthe, Hasselhorn 2023). Li et al. (2023) investigated if training participation of retirement-eligible employees lead to delayed withdrawal. They found that the workers' individual growth need as well as a (age-inclusive) climate for developing older workers positively influenced training participation, which in return is positively related to employees' decision to stay despite retirement eligibility.

Job-demands-resources-model (JDR-model)

To face the variety of push- and pull-factors concerning retirement decisions, coaching programs are often based on the job-demands-resources-model, which is a popular framework to examine relationships between job characteristics (demands and resources) and job performance and well-being on the employee side. The model classifies working conditions into job resources, which correspond to pull-factors, and job demands, which equal possible push-factors. Meeting high job demands requires increasing effort, which leads to higher job performance in the short-term. In the long-term, high job demands result in exhaustion if there is no adequate balance between demands and resources. Thus, it is important to promote job resources, as they not only compensate high demands but also lead to work motivation, satisfaction and achievement (Lesener et al. 2019).

The JDR-model distinguishes two different types of processes which may even occur simultaneously and which are equally important for our research question. The motivational process is triggered by job resources which fulfil basic psychological needs and thus foster work engagement, motivation and well-being in the long-term. The health-impairment process is triggered by high job demands and the resulting stress and strain which can have negative consequences on the employees' health. Although both processes will be represented in our study, the motivational process seems to be a little more important for the study's purpose. It is our aim to develop practical implications to support and promote older employees and their job resources in order to preserve their work ability and motivation. Health status is of course also an important predictor for retirement intentions but apart from (preventive) workplace health promotion and age-appropriate working conditions there is no way to sustainably influence it. By contrast, job resources can be fostered by trainings or coaching and thus directly

affect work motivation and indirectly – thanks to their buffering effect on job demands – also help in health issues (Lesener et al. 2019).

Bakker and Demerouti (2017) also published an extended version of their JDR-model. They criticized that employees are largely seen as the passive part of the system by simply reacting to the work environment provided by the organization, which is of course not realistic. Instead, employees can proactively change and adapt working conditions (job demands and resources) to increase the meaningfulness of their work. This process is called job crafting behavior, leads to an individually optimized working environment and also contributes to the employee's work motivation. Previous research has already provided evidence for the effectiveness of job crafting. A three-wave study by Vogt et al. (2016) found that job crafting positively influences psychological capital as a work-related personal resource as well as work engagement over time. The study proves that it leads to variegated positive outcomes concerning health and well-being when employees are allowed to create a resourceful and challenging work environment based on their individual requirements by themselves. As highly motivated employees reciprocally are also more likely to use job crafting behaviors, leading to even higher levels of resources and motivation, there is the chance of creating a gain spiral of resources and work engagement due to job crafting. In terms of retirement intentions, this approach has a huge potential to convince older workers to stay in paid employment longer as the person-job-fit is optimized. The JDR-model is one of the most popular frameworks in occupational health psychology and is used in several thousand scientific papers, frequently in the context of burnout research. But thanks to its flexibility, it can also be applied to any work environment (Lesener et al. 2019).

Frins et al. (2016) were the first to apply the JDR-model to a retirement context. They investigated how job demands and resources affect older employees' desired retirement age through an energy-depletion and a motivational process. The findings showed that anticipated and perceived work conditions directly affect retirement decisions as well as indirectly through the outcomes of energy-depletion and motivational processes. Exhaustion – which is directly linked to high job demands and a lack of job resources – lead to the desire to retire at an earlier age compared to those who experienced dedication through owing more job resources.

Another approach, which is more linked to health-related preservation of work ability is the so-called *health-oriented leadership* (HoL). As health is a crucial factor in fostering employees' motivation and performance, leadership should also focus on health promotion. Health-oriented leadership contains self-care of leaders as well as employees and the responsibility of leaders concerning staff care: "Leader and follower self-care each positively influence one's own health by taking one's own health seriously (value), by recognizing own health-related warning signals at an early stage (awareness), and by thus actively promoting health by engaging in health-promoting behaviors" (Krick et al. 2022, p. 215). Leader self-care is also important in terms of role modeling and represents a good basis for staff care:

“Leaders’ staff-care positively influences followers’ health by giving high priority to their followers’ health (value), by paying attention to their warning signals and signs of overload at an early stage (awareness), and by demonstrating specific health-promoting actions” (Krick et al. 2022, p. 215).

Leadership is an important predictor for our study, as it affects retirement decisions directly (through the interactions with supervisors and their social support) but also indirectly through task arrangements and the corresponding scope in getting their work done (Moreover, it was proved that staff care in terms of HoL can emasculate the effect of job demands on strain, general health and job satisfaction (Krick et al. 2022).

As previous research does not agree on a specific leadership style which promotes extended working lives, we measure social support by the immediate supervisor as an indicator of leadership style. All in all, leadership coaching seems to be another important scope to secure employee satisfaction.

Summary

The article explores the complex relationship between employment and the well-being of older adults. The authors examine various factors that impact older workers’ well-being, including job satisfaction, work-life balance, social integration, and the organizational environment. Key findings suggest that satisfying work, respect from supervisors, and a supportive organizational climate are crucial for maintaining high levels of well-being among older employees. Conversely, stress and poor working conditions can exacerbate health issues and hasten retirement. The article highlights the importance of tailored human resource policies to address the diverse needs of older workers, which benefits both the employees and the organization.

The study also discusses the challenges associated with retirement in aging societies, particularly in Poland. It notes the increasing demographic pressure on the workforce and the need for reforms to encourage older workers to remain employed. The authors emphasize the role of supportive work environments, health promotion, and flexible working conditions in enhancing older workers’ motivation and ability to continue working. The article also explores psychological and sociological dimensions of retirement, suggesting that well-prepared transitions, including counseling and coaching, can mitigate the stress associated with retirement and promote continued engagement in the workforce.

The article concludes that maintaining well-being in older workers is a multifaceted challenge that requires a combination of supportive work environments, respect, and tailored human resource policies. It underscores the importance of job satisfaction, social support, and meaningful work in prolonging older employees’ participation in the labor market. Additionally, the authors stress the need for effective retirement planning and support mechanisms to ensure a smooth transition from work

to retirement. By addressing both the physical and psychological needs of older workers, organizations can enhance their productivity and well-being, ultimately benefiting both the employees and the broader society.

In summary, the well-being of older workers is closely linked to how organizations manage job satisfaction, work-life balance, and the transition to retirement. Proactive measures, such as health promotion and flexible work arrangements, are essential in supporting older workers' ability to remain in the workforce and ensuring their overall well-being.

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