

Meeting the challenge of supervising older workers in the retail homebuilding industry

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Abstract

The number of older adults remaining or returning to the labor force is growing due to the financial and social benefits associated with work. Although businesses recognize that older workers will be vital to the global economy in the future, few studies have examined the job designs that optimize generational needs for older workers. This study explored the perceptions of job characteristics (opportunities for decision-making, skill variety, coworker support, supervisor support) as related to healthy aging (social network, emotional support, personal sense of control, generativity) in 109 older sales associates in the retail homebuilding industry. Older workers completed four standardized surveys measuring job characteristics and qualities associated with healthy aging. The job of a sales associate enabled them opportunities to make decisions, use a variety of skills, and experience social support in their jobs. These job design characteristics contributed to healthy aging outcomes of generativity and personal control. The most important job design characteristics for healthy aging were skill variety and coworker support. Recommendations are provided for supervising older workers based on these findings.

Introduction

Older workers have become the fastest growing labor sector across industrialized nations. In the United States, workers aged 55 and older represent 18% of the labor force with projections to 24% by 2018 (BLS, 2009). In Japan, the percent of employed older workers has increased from 66% in 2002 to 73% in 2009 (Japan Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2008). Older workers are shifting from part-time to full-time employment in their “retirement” years such that between 1995 and 2007, the number of full-time older workers increased from 44% to nearly to 56% (Glendall, 2008). Further, at least 60% of all older adults now enter “bridge work,” (full or part-time work following career employment) and remain in these jobs long past traditional

retirement age (Cahill, Giandrea, & Quinn, 2006). These statistics illustrate the increasing participation of older workers and raise questions about their unique needs as a labor force. This paper offers evidence-based strategies for managing older workers and optimizing their work experiences based on a study of older sales associates in the retail homebuilding industry.

Age Management in the Workplace

In the European Union, managers are examining strategies to promote positive work experiences for older workers in order to retain them in the labor force (Ilmarinen, 2006). Ilmarinen coined the term “age management” to refer to managing workers according to their generational strengths. Age management has promoted training for supervisors in age-related issues, modifying jobs for older workers, changing cultural attitudes about older workers, and providing occupational health programs for older workers (Karazman et al., 2000). Studies have only begun to consider how the design of jobs may optimize work experiences for older workers by promoting their generational strengths and needs for healthy aging.

Older Workers: Generational Strengths and Healthy Aging Needs

Generational Strengths. Researchers underscore the value of older workers to business as role models. Older workers demonstrate a strong work ethic, loyalty, and commitment to their jobs. They have lower rates of absenteeism, turnover, and even higher productivity in customer service jobs than younger labor group. Older workers excel in customer relations and bring an extensive knowledge base to the job (McNaught & Barth, 1992). As a labor force sector, they bring dependability and stability to a workplace along with a broad understanding of organizational systems (Brooke, 2003; (Hedge, Borman, & Lammlein, 2006; Smola & Sutton, 2002).

Needs for Healthy Aging. Just as older workers benefit the workforce, participation in work may also benefit older workers themselves. Rowe and Kahn (1998) explained that older adults age optimally by maintaining good health, high cognitive functioning, and by staying actively engaged in meaningful activities (which include social interaction and support, feeling control over life choices, and passing along knowledge to younger generations) (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Erikson, 1997). While older adults work to fill gaps in retirement income (Wenger & Reynolds, 2009), the American Association of Retired Persons (2003) found that “retired” older adults were working to remain productive (73%), stay mentally engaged (68%), physically active (61%), earn money (51%), do something enjoyable (49%), and be around people (47%), personal and social reasons primarily associated with healthy aging. Noonan (2002) added that older adults seek opportunities to pass along knowledge to younger generations. Generative experiences are limited in today’s society due to differences in communication styles (McCann & Giles, 2007), work values (Smola & Sutton, 2002), and our current emphasis on sociotechnical skills (Cheng, 2009).

If workplaces seek to retain older workers, and if workers seek work experiences to fulfill personal and healthy aging needs, then retail managers should examine how the design of jobs for older workers may contribute to positive work experiences.

Job Design and Older Workers

Preliminary research suggests that design of a job may impact social support, a sense of personal control, and ultimately, productivity for older workers. Wahlstedt, Nygard, Kemmlert, Torgen, and Bjorksten (2000) demonstrated that older workers experienced higher levels of coworker support when workplace roles were re-organized from a traditional chain-of-command, hierarchical structure to a work team unit. McNaught and Barth (1992) found that older workers' autonomy at controlling the pace of calls in a reservation center yielded higher sales than younger workers. Ross and Wright (1998) found that jobs designed with opportunities for autonomy, decision-making, task variety, social interaction, and freedom from close supervision, generalized to workers' sense of having control over life, an important indicator of healthy aging. These studies demonstrate that job design can impact the productivity of older workers and possibly transfer into opportunities for healthy aging.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the job characteristics of older sales associates to determine which job design characteristics optimized their productivity and healthy aging needs. Older workers in the retail homebuilding industry were chosen because the retail industry employs a large percentage of older workers (18% of all older workers in 2008 [GAO, 2001]); and, sales associate job positions in the homebuilding industry have grown consistently over the last 10 years from 13% in 2005 to 16.1% by 2008 (U. S. Department of Labor, 2010).

The research questions were:

1. How do older workers perceive job design characteristics for a sales job in the homebuilding industry?
2. How do job design variables contribute to healthy aging outcomes?
3. How can managers optimize older workers' generational skills in the workplace?

Methods

Research Design and Instruments

A survey design was used to study older workers' perceptions of their job design characteristics and healthy aging outcomes. *Job design characteristics* were measured using the Job Content Questionnaire (JCQ), a standardized test that addresses job characteristics as reflected in the Demand Control Model, a model of healthy work (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). According to the DCM, a healthy job is one in which the worker has control over the job, makes autonomous decisions related to the job, uses a

variety of skills, and has the support of coworkers and supervisors (Karasek, Brisson, Kawakami, Houtman, Bongers, & Amick, 1998).

Four subscales of the JCQ (Karasek, 1986) were used to measure job design: *skill discretion* refers to the level of skill, creativity, problem-solving, and use of a variety of skills on the job; *decision authority* refers to the organization's policies that allow workers to make decisions regarding their own work; *supervisor support* and *coworker support* refer to helpful interactions and concern from supervisors and coworkers at work.

Healthy aging was measured using four outcome variables: personal sense of control, a measure of older workers' perceptions of control over their lives (*Mirowsky - Ross 2 X 2 Index of Sense of Control scale*); generativity, passing skills to younger generations and being creative and productive (*Loyola Generativity Scale*); social networks, the number of social ties (*MacArthur Studies Social Network*); and emotional support from close social contacts (*MacArthur Studies Social Network*) (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; Mirowsky & Ross, 1991; Seeman, Lusignolo, Albert, & Berkman, 2001). All scales were scored according to a 4-point Likert scale whose final score created a continuous variable, which allowed for statistical analysis. All scales had adequate internal validity and reliability for this population according to previous studies.

Sample Selection and Data Collection

Older workers were recruited from national chain and independently-owned retail home building stores in the Northeast, United States. The inclusion criteria were: workers must be aged 55 and older, employed full or part-time in the homebuilding industry, and be fluent in English. Researchers approached the older workers while working, explained the study and informed consent, then returned to each store to retrieve the completed surveys. The content and procedures for the study were approved by two University review boards, (approval numbers 02-22-08-0289222 and 7307).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 18.0. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic information and scores from job content scale. The relationships among variables were analyzed using Pearson product-moment correlations. The contribution of job design variables to successful aging outcomes were analyzed using a standard multiple regression. Missing values were computed using both pair wise and list wise analyses.

Results

A total of 142 older workers from 64 home building stores were recruited to participate in the study; 115 older workers completed the surveys for a response rate of 81%. The final sample size was 109 after six surveys were excluded due to inclusion

criteria violations or incomplete responses. Sixty two percent (62.2%) worked for an independently- owned hardware store; whereas 35.8% worked for a national home building chain.

Characteristics of the Sample

Personal demographics. The sample consisted of primarily white men (82.6% men, 17.4% women) who were married (74.3%), in good health (93.5%), and educated beyond high school (62%). The mean age of the participants was 64 years old, ranging from 55 - 81 years ($SD = 6.26$ years). Fifty eight percent (58.7%, $n = 64$) were in the age group 55 - 64 and 41.3% (45) were in the age group 65 or older (termed old-old workers).

Work-related demographics. Older workers had been employed in the labor force a mean of almost 45 years (range 15 to 63 years; $SD = 9.22$ years) and had worked at their present job for a mean of 9.54 years (2 months - 60 years; $SD = 10.40$ years). Over two-thirds of these older workers (71%, $n = 76$) had worked in previous trade jobs that were directly related to their current job position (e.g., electrical contractor now working in the lighting or electrical department); 100% of the sample indicated they had previously worked with "people" in their past careers.

Job roles, age, and decision-making. Sixty-three percent (63%) worked in entry-level sales jobs without supervisory responsibilities, while 37% of older workers supervised one or more workers. There was a small, yet significant, negative correlation between age and supervisory responsibilities ($r = -.20$; $p = .05$) suggesting that old-old workers had fewer opportunities for supervising others. However, longevity in the current job position was positively related to supervising others.

Older Workers' Perceptions of Job Design Characteristics

Older workers reported high levels of each job characteristic in their current jobs. They had ample opportunities to use a variety of skills, make decisions, and experience the social support of supervisors and coworkers (See Table 1). Older workers expressed opportunities to learn new things (97%), be creative (83%), and perform a variety of tasks (93%). They reported making some decisions on the job (80%), but only about half of all workers (57%) agreed they "had a lot of say" in their jobs, which may reflect the reality of entry-level sales jobs. Older workers felt that supervisors and coworkers were helpful in collaborating to fulfill job tasks, concerned about them, and paid attention to what they were saying.

The ability to make independent job decisions and develop their own abilities appeared related to age. Old-old workers (65 and older) perceived significantly less control over their jobs than young-old workers (55 - 64 years) ($t = 2.10$, $df (107)$, $p = .038$), less opportunity to "have a lot of say" ($t = 2.03$, $df (107)$, $p = .044$), and fewer opportunities to develop their own special abilities ($t = 2.34$, $df (107)$, $p = .02$). However, working at

their jobs for a long duration was positively related to assuming supervisory roles ($r = .30, p = .002$) which allowed for the ability to impact job decisions ($r = .353, p = .000$).

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Variables under Study

Variable	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	Norm	Mean per 4-pt scale
Job Design Characteristics					
Skill Discretion	109	34.89	4.35	31.50	2.91
Decision Authority	109	34.53	6.68	32.00	2.87
Coworker Support	109	12.37	1.55	12.46	3.08
Supervisor Support	96	12.35	2.18	11.65	3.09
Healthy Aging Variables					
Social Network	106	14.92	8.67	-	
Emotional Support	108	3.59	.51		3.60
Personal Control	108	24.74	2.89		3.09
Loyola Generativity	109	18.48	3.55		3.07

Job design characteristics and organizational structure. A comparison between perceptions of job characteristics in independently-owned stores versus corporate-owned home building indicated that older workers in both types of organizations perceived similar opportunities to make independent decisions and experience coworker support. However, older workers in independently-owned stores indicated more supervisor support than workers in corporate-owned stores ($p = .014$). Conversely, older workers in corporate-owned stores perceived significantly more opportunities to use a variety of skills as compared to workers in independently owned stores ($t(107) = -1.999, p = .048$).

Healthy aging outcome measures. The mean scores for all measures of healthy aging (social network, emotional support, personal sense of control, passing along knowledge) were also comparable to, or higher than, scores on age-related samples. This sample had well developed social networks and strong emotional support by friends, and family, perceived themselves as having strong control over their lives, and indicated generative opportunities and concerns similar to age-related peers (McAdams, personal communication, 2009; Mirowsky & Ross, 1991; Seeman, et al.,

2001). Close to the entire sample reported passing along knowledge to coworkers (97.2%, $n = 106$) and customers (99.1%, $n = 108$) during their daily job tasks.

Job design contributions to healthy aging. The design of sales associates' jobs contributed to two indices of healthy aging: generativity (passing along knowledge to others) and personal sense of control. The most important job design characteristics were skill discretion, coworker support, and decision authority. Table 2 shows that generativity was positively correlated with skill discretion ($r = .438, p = .000$), decision authority ($r = .276, p = .004$), and coworker support ($r = .219, p = .022$). Personal sense of control was correlated with coworker support ($r = .339, p = .000$) and skill discretion ($r = .257, p = .007$).

Table 2
Correlation Matrix for Pearson Product-Moment Correlations for Job Design and Healthy Aging Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Skill Discretion	1	.57**	.22*	.26**	-.13	.19	.26**	.44**
2. Decision Authority		1	.26**	.33**	-.08	.20*	.13	.28**
3. Coworker Support			1	.41**	.07	.19	.34**	.22*
4. Supervisor Support				1	-.09	.02	.15	.03
5. Social Network					1	.27**	-.08	.14
6. Emotional Support						1	.23*	.35**
7. Personal Sense of Control							1	.32**
8. Loyola Generativity Scale								1

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Generativity. In a multiple regression analysis, all job design variables contributed to 23% of the total variance in generativity scores ($R^2 = .23$; Cohen's d effect size = .30; power = .99) suggesting that job design had a large effect on the variance in the generativity scores. Only skill discretion ($\beta = .414, p = .000$) and coworker support ($\beta = .21, p = .04$) were significant contributors to the generativity outcome when controlled for age, health, income and education.

The MR equation for the outcome variable of generativity was:

$$\text{Loyola Generativity Scale} = 3.953 + 0.34 (\text{Skill Discretion}) + 0.42 (\text{Coworker Support}) + 0.03 (\text{Decision Authority}) + (-0.28) (\text{Supervisor Support})$$

Personal Sense of Control. Job design variables explained 15.5% of the total variance in personal sense of control ($R^2 = .155$). The job design variables of coworker support (β

= .312, $p = .005$) and skill discretion ($\beta = .239$, $p = .047$) were found to be significant contributors to personal sense of control. When income, health, and education were entered into the MR equation, collectively, all variables explained 27.5% of the variance ($r = .524$; $r^2 = .275$) in personal control, indicating that education and income were significant independent contributors to sensing personal control over life choices.

The MR equation for the outcome variable of personal sense of control was:

Personal Sense of Control = 13.42 + 0.58 (Coworker Support) + 0.16 (SkillDiscretion) + (-0.04) (Decision Authority) + (-0.01) (Supervisor Support).

The design of the job did not significantly impact Social Network or Emotional Support. It appeared that older workers valued the support of coworkers but did not have time on the job to develop close, personal relationships as measured by these two tests.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study surveyed 109 older sales associates in the retail home building industry to determine how they perceived job design characteristics and to examine job characteristics that contributed to healthy aging. The sales associate jobs offered opportunities for older workers to make autonomous decisions, use a variety of skills, and receive support from workers and supervisors. Thus, the job design for a sales associate in retail homebuilding provided positive work experiences for these older workers.

The job design also promoted healthy aging. Two healthy aging outcomes were impacted by the job design: feeling a sense of personal control over their lives and generativity (passing along valued information to younger generations). The job characteristics of skill discretion and coworker support were most important for healthy aging.

Job Design for Older Workers

This study provides evidence that a well-designed job can serve the needs of both retail businesses and older workers themselves if job are designed to optimize older workers' strengths. Based on this study, four recommendations are offered.

First, retail managers should provide opportunities for older workers to *use a variety of skills*, update skills regularly, and establish a niche expertise. While most workers reported good use of skills, old-old workers perceived less opportunity to develop and maintain specialized abilities, an important conduit for passing along knowledge to customers and coworkers. The BLS (2001) reports that older workers typically receive about 50% less training than younger workers, although they remain committed to their jobs. Strategies to increase older workers' use of skills includes enlarging the tasks, increasing responsibility, or rotating workers to different jobs (within the same

responsibility level) in order to promote new learning, skill acquisition, knowledge, and creative application of skills.

Second, retail managers should promote *coworker support* through creating work teams in which workers collaborate to complete job tasks. In this study, older workers perceived cooperation and concern from coworkers which created a sense of having control over their immediate social environment, and more broadly, over life events. A team-based organization may also promote knowledge transfer, a concern for the future transitioning of business knowledge (Hedge et al., 2006; DeLong, 2004).

Third, managers should capitalize on older workers' experiences and desire to pass along knowledge since generativity may also promote positive customer relations. In this study, over 97% of all workers passed along knowledge to coworkers and customers (whether or not they had trade experience) and reported this being the most rewarding aspect of their jobs. Generativity can be fostered by enlisting older workers to act as role models for customer service, managers for project work teams, or mentors to younger workers.

Fourth, managers should heed the suggestions of older workers, even though workers may not be up to "speed" with technical systems. The findings that workers over age 65 perceived limited control over their jobs may reflect the nature of "bridge jobs" in which workers have less opportunity to innovate procedures in entry-level work; however, it may also indicate that the experiential knowledge of old-old workers is not being effectively utilized by management. Managers need to create a culture of respect for older workers.

Age Management for Older Workers: Cultivating their Strengths

Supervising older workers. The concept of age management may be extended to address approaches for supervising older workers and making use of their generational strengths for new work roles. Studies have not specifically identified the best approaches for managing older workers who occupy entry-level, "bridge jobs", yet who have considerable work experience. This study supports what is intuitive: older workers thrive when given responsibilities to execute tasks and interact with customers and coworkers independently, without close supervision, yet with supervisor support. This "delegating" style of supervision may be ideal for older workers, who are competent and committed to the jobs and need little feedback from superiors. Similar to the findings of Ross and Wright (1998), this study found that work that was free from close supervision fostered a stronger sense of control and autonomy. In this study, a delegating style of supervision enabled older workers to optimize their generational strengths by assuming responsibility, relating to customers, and working independently yet with-in a defined work group.

New roles for older workers. Retail management may consider developing new for older workers based on their generative strengths of teaching and passing along knowledge to others. In this study, older workers cherished opportunities for problem-solving do-it-yourself (DIY) solutions with customers such that they developed a loyal “following” or client-base who sought them out for help. The ability to promote customer loyalty is consistent with the current concept of relational capital in which high-performing companies who build long term relationships with key constituents such as customers, suppliers, and partners, etc...to the benefit of the organization (Gulati & Keller, 2009). Gulati and Kletter explain that relationship-oriented organizations move beyond a straight transactional exchange of commodities with customers, to a bond of loyalty with the customer that transcends the products sold. In many instances, the seller takes responsibility for the customers’ solutions, as is often found in the home building industry. Older workers’ abilities to develop relationships and collaborative partnering with customers seems created a large sphere of influence related to customer sales, customer loyalty, and a positive DIY environment for consumers that extended beyond the discreet sales interactions.

Unique job positions could capitalize on older workers’ relationship-building strengths while inviting collaboration with coworkers. Such non-traditional job positions for older workers could include roles as mentors for younger workers, customer service specialists, educators for special customer workshops, a member on a special project team, or subject matter experts for special policies related to customer service, among others.

Rewarding older workers. Finally, the study indicated that older workers valued opportunities to update skills (in order to be “the expert” and pass along knowledge), interact with others, and learn new things. Thus, traditional corporate rewards (such as career promotions) may not be motivators for this work force generation. Rewards therefore should be individually-designed and based on generational or personal goals. More classic rewards may be public recognition, personal thanks, or flexible working hours; non-traditional rewards may related to personal development through training as a new product specialist, working with vendors on new projects, or becoming a team leader for training programs as discussed previously. A collaborative supervision, goal-setting, and rewards process would encourage communication between older workers and supervisors in order to identify motivators that will help retain older workers in the labor force. These approaches may ultimately promote the organization’s mission and productivity while contributing to the personal development for older workers, minimizing workplace ageism, and keeping older workers engaged as valuable, productive employees, whose long term assets are valued.

Conclusion

This study provided evidence that a sales associate job in the homebuilding industry contributed to healthy aging for this sample of older workers and may promote optimum performance. A job design in which older workers used a variety of skills and experienced the support of coworkers contributed to two indices of healthy aging: generativity and having personal control over life. Analysis from a generativity perspective has identified and even provided preliminary indications that this class of worker brings to the workplace a wealth of information, patience, and intuition when dealing with customers.

This growing sector of workers brings with them knowledge and skills that, if properly tapped, using appropriate supervisory and goal-setting approaches, could provide solutions to management issues and concerns related to customer relationships, coworker training, expertise in skills, and other areas supporting improved business performance. Optimal work experiences will promote older adults' personal control over their lives and their abilities to pass along culturally-valued information which mutually benefit themselves and the business environment.

Limitations and Future Directions

The sample was a convenience sample of older workers who may not be representative of all older workers. Thus, results can only be generalized to older workers in the stores studied. Further, those who participated may have possessed a brighter outlook than workers who refused to participate. Finally, limitations existed in the measurement tools used in the study: the Social Network scale did not appear to capture the value of workplace relationships and was not found to be a reliable instrument for this sample. The entire JCQ inventory was not used due to the length of the questionnaire. Information on job demands and job stressors may have provided a more complete understanding of the physical job demands for this sample of older adults.

Future research might examine findings from more diverse workers (including women and those with different backgrounds) and study older workers' experiences in different retail settings. A closer look at intergenerational workplace communication may promote an understanding of how workers of different generations work together, how knowledge is communicated, and how cultural forces in a workplace shape the receipt of generative messages (Cheng, 2009; Smola & Sutton, 2002).

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