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OLDER WORKERS' LEARNING WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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A commonplace observation is that as the age structures in many societies change towards increasing numbers of older adults, the dynamics of the workplace are also in a process of ongoing adaptation. The reasons for greater numbers of older people in society are well known: decreased fertility; increased life expectancy; better access to higher quality health care (Beatty & Visser, 2005). Correspondingly, older workers in organizations are increasing numerically, either as full-time employees, part-timers, casual workers or volunteers (Rothwell, Sterns, Spokus and Reaser, 2008). This article analyses the changing character of workplaces in a global economy and the effects on older workers and organizations. It initially explores the notion of "older worker", ideas of what constitutes learning for older workers (via training or education), and then focusses on selected issues facing managers and older employees alike in contemporary organizations.

THE CHANGING DYNAMICS OF WORKPLACES

Casey (1999) has outlined how the acceleration of economic, technological and organisational developments has impacted on the world of work. Nearly every aspect of work has been reconfigured in the new global economy as industry and commerce enterprises seek to find competitive advantage. One important mode of improving productivity and competitiveness is to enhance the knowledge and skills of the organization's workforce through a variety of learning strategies. The extent of labour market participation for people

beyond “the working age” (15-64) is steadily increasing. In the UK, in June 2013, there were over one million workers over the age of 65, the highest number since records have been kept; the proportion of 55 to 64 years old persons in work is expected to increase from 60% to 70% between 2010 and 2060 (ILC, 2013). Similarly, in the USA, the national labor force is transforming the world of work as more middle-aged people enter or are retained in the workforce when they seek new careers, change their roles within a workplace, gather more credentials or rebalance their work-life directions (Rothwell et al., 2008). All workers are expected to acquire sufficient competencies to boost the productivity of their organizations while the organizations themselves manoeuvre into spaces of greater innovation. The previous need for industry-specific skills from employees under a Taylorist regime has been replaced largely by a drive for generic or capability skills among employees where “the flexible worker” is now more highly valued (Casey, 1999).

For organizations there are manifold challenges in respect to recruiting, retaining and retraining older workers as they endeavour to be retain their place in an ever-changing economic environment. Yet, as noted by Beatty and Visser (2005: p.35), “there are persistent stereotypes regarding the capability of older workers to perform and learn”. In contemporary times familiarity and expertise with Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is expected of workers and on occasion employers are loath to provide the necessary training for acquisition of this knowledge (perhaps expecting that training providers or higher education prepare employees immediately ready for work tasks). A global economy demands flexible labor markets, sophisticated technological modes of communication involving networked systems and infrastructures wherein patterns of work and of consumption are forever on the move. In what Barnett (1999) describes as “supercomplexity”, how might older workers cope? What kinds of learning/training/education can workers reasonably expect? What issues are faced by older workers? by employers/organizations?

WHO ARE OLDER WORKERS?

The notion of “older adult” is problematic. So, too, is the idea of an “older worker”.

Chronological age is a clumsy way of identifying older adulthood (Withnall, McGivney & Soulsby, 2004; Phillipson, 1998) yet governments use age in developing policy, especially in terms of retirement and the award of pensions. The working age group in Western societies is usually identified as post-school to pension eligibility (often 18-64) so that an older worker might be perceived as 65+ in age. These demarcations are becoming more meaningless as greater numbers of people decide to continue working into their third age (Laslett, 1989) or are forced to engage in paid work because of economic stringencies, some of which have been caused by harsh neo-liberal reforms. In addition, compulsory retirement has been outlawed in significant numbers of countries thus raising the likelihood of greater numbers of older people continuing to engage in paid work. In terms of older adulthood, it is important to acknowledge that it is characterised by heterogeneity where diversity of lifestyles and life-chances is the new norm (Findsen, 2005). As more baby-boomers influence the patterns of work and the composition of the workforce, older workers will be diverse in their occupations, in (encore) careers and in aspirations. As a consequence, they may engage in a full array of work arrangements in the full-time, part-time and volunteer spectrum (Clayton, Greco & Persson, 2007).

CONCEPTS: LEARNING, TRAINING AND EDUCATION

The concept of “learning” is broad and is usually associated with processes associated with an individual’s daily activities. It is both lifelong and life-wide (Wain, 2004). It may include

informal (more incidental or non-intentional), and/or non-formal (systematic, organised and non-credentialed, often in a non-educational setting) and/or formal (highly structured, usually hierarchical, sometimes accredited) opportunities (Jarvis, 2001). “Training” is often more formalized and is usually attuned to the achievement of specific skills and/or knowledge (Gonczi, 2004); “education” is more generic in character and is structured, systematic learning in one or more of cognitive, social or emotional domains (Illeris, 2004). These distinctions are important for (older) workers: opportunities for learning exist in multiple forms and processes (e.g. through mentoring); training may be available only for particular sub-groups of workers (younger people may be given precedence); education may seldom be a possibility for workers, given that their primary function is to demonstrate proficiency in skills within an ethos of performativity. In this article it is assumed that learning is omnipresent and can occur in any of the above mentioned contexts.

A tripartite arrangement of the organization (the employer), the worker (as an individual or part of a group) and the government (in terms of policy development in specific sectors) potentially interact to provide a set of cultural, political and economic conditions in which a worker might engage in learning and development. Learning prospects for workers are necessarily related to this over-arching environment in which organizations are responding to wider societal dynamics which include diverse attitudes towards older workforce membership. Government policy may enhance or impede organizations’ abilities to provide training/education for workers; if policy conditions are deemed coercive by organizations, then training and development for any workers may be diminished; older workers, more typically on the fringes of the workforce, are even more subject to the whims of organizational vision and capacity (Bytheway, Ward, Holland & Peace, 2007).

As indicated above, what is possible in terms of training and development is framed by an arrangement involving individual workers, employers/organizations and the state. If the

organization is directly state-funded, then the government may have an immediate stake in worker education and professional development. In private organizations, the state may only have a role from the viewpoint of policy (regulations and legal requirements) and the main protagonists become the employer and the individual (older) worker. In some instances, trade unions will have significant input into a worker's learning portfolio in locations where trade unions still have influence.

It is important, nevertheless, to recognize that learning for workers can occur despite less favourable organizational policies and practices. At an informal level, workers' learning on the job is often through day-to-day observation and trial and error in task performance; through conversations held in "work-time" or in tea/coffee and lunch breaks. Much is learned from these informal exchanges within the informal culture of an organization (Boud & Garrick, 1999). Further, through "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) workers tend to develop greater understanding and knowledge about their organization and job tasks. Training in organizations can be of a more formal variety (as in explicit mentoring schemes) and/or seminars deliberately planned to enhance participation and productivity of workers. Yet, the prospect of learning may be more self-directed (Knowles, 1984) as individuals assemble an array of learning possibilities within the informal-formal continuum. It is argued here that both employers and workers need to acknowledge and go beyond prevailing (often erroneous) assumptions about older adult learning and appreciate the diverse potential purposes of workplace learning within a lifelong learning agenda (Findsen & Formosa, 2011).

Older workers, defined arbitrarily as 65 years old and beyond (though some studies describe people beyond 45 in this same category – see the study by Lundberg & Marshallsay, 2007), constitute an important element in the sustaining of industries and organizations in this rapidly changing world of work. While the attitudes of significant numbers of employers are ageist, older people continue to increase numerically in most countries and cannot be ignored

as important human capital, especially in the future when purportedly younger workers will be fewer proportionately than older (Centre for Research into the Older Workforce, 2005).

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

In the context of the changing employment dynamics faced by older workers, there are some issues which need to be debated and challenges faced up to. The following are suggestive of the range of issues prevalent beneath the surface for older people as employees in organizations.

Overcoming powerful myths

Myths concerning older people and older workers' learning capabilities prevail in many locations within societies. These myths can be of a more general nature and/or can be extended to older workers, to learning environments, including workplaces.

Withnall, McGivney and Soulsby (2004) focus on myths connected with the nature of older adulthood and learning in later life. They identify myths of a cognitive character (e.g. "older people are too slow to learn anything new"), physical (e.g. "older people have mobility problems"), dispositional (e.g. "older people live in the past and don't change") and attitudes towards learning (e.g. "older people are not interested in information and communications technology" and "older people only want to learn with other older people"). As with any myth, there are usually elements of truth – hence, their persistence when objective evidence points to other interpretations.

Further, Rothwell et al. (2008) have identified seven myths about older workers. The seven myths are:

1. *You can't teach an old dog new tricks.*

2. *Training older workers is a lost investment because they will not stay on the job for long.*
3. *Older workers are not as productive as younger workers.*
4. *Older workers are less flexible and adaptable.*
5. *Older workers are not as creative or innovative.*
6. *Older workers cost more than hiring younger workers.*
7. *Benefit and accident costs are higher for older workers.*

In each case, the validity of the myth is indeed suspect. In every instance, counter arguments based on evidence can be produced to challenge the assumption. It is unfortunate that numerous beliefs about what work that older people can undertake and what learning they can do are erroneous and based on ageist assumptions. These assumptions are not easy to eradicate and persist in many work situations (McGregor & Gray, 2002). While education for general society is required to help alleviate the detrimental effects of such beliefs, in workplaces it is arguably even more urgent. While some managers operate from an ageist perspective, even older workers themselves can believe that they do not deserve their paid work and/or they are taking the place of a younger worker (Beatty & Visser, 2005).

Social stratification in the workplace

Depending on one's position in an employing agency, unless the organization is organized along the lines of a flat, democratic structure, the social stratification of the workplace may impede the capacity and/or autonomy of that person to meet learning needs. Stratification may occur according to many intersecting factors such as age, race/ethnicity, gender, (dis)ability, sexual orientation and social class. In terms of age stratification and management-worker power differentials, more typically, managers have greater discretion

about and access to funding for professional development; in comparison, workers tend to have little relative autonomy in what constitutes really useful knowledge for them. Further, as older workers tend to be more marginalized in part-time, casual or seasonal jobs, their likelihood of securing training and development is severely diminished (Rothwell et al., 2008). According to Cervero and Wilson (2001), if there is a likelihood of training or education, workers may need to negotiate with powerful employers and work hard to sustain their interests in a potential conflictual situation.

One of the possible strategies for limiting the effects of age stratification is to develop work teams that straddle age demarcations. While the notion of intergenerational learning/education is not new, the practice of it in workplaces is relatively unexamined. While it is more convivial to study inter-generational learning in family contexts (for instance, among grandparents and grandchildren), useful innovation and reciprocity within organizations may be enhanced through deliberately mixing younger and older employees for specific tasks and/or through developing mentoring schemes on a one-to-one basis (Zachery, 2000). Older workers may learn more about ICT from younger; young employees may learn much about organizational culture from older. Rationales for inter-generational learning (including the workplace) are discussed by Kump and Krasovec (2014) and they include social identity and conflict theories in the explanations. In this instance inter-generational learning can potentially enhance social capital (Field, 2003) and clarify aspects of contestation for resources among different age cohorts. At a practical level, many of the current misconceptions of younger towards older workers (and vice-versa) can be mitigated or resolved through increased social interaction. Pre-conceptions based on age differences tend to fade away in such instances.

Different perspectives from managers and (older) workers

Understandably, from an employer's perspective, the paramount objective is to develop the efficient worker to contribute positively to the organization's primary outputs (and profit, if a private company). In return, workers commonly expect conducive physical and psychological conditions for employment, a sustainable wage/salary, and recognition of the value of their labor. Additional rewards may be welcomed but not necessarily part of the core employment package. Older workers may have different motives for continuing employment in later life to include the benefits of social interaction, personal fulfilment and on-going self-development (Withnall, 2010). At times, managers may feel that money spent on older workers for training and development is wasted, given the perception that there is more limited timespan of their employment. This belief has little substance in reality. Learning for older workers may be determined by the employer or, perhaps less often, negotiated by employees with managers to meet perceived and real needs in the work context. Amid the key factors in organizational renewal are open communication among staff, transparency in task allocation and trust among employers and employees (Anderson, 2012). Older workers like to feel that they belong in developing and sustaining any relevant initiatives affecting them. Social inclusion is very important in work contexts for older workers in how they are valued (see McGregor and Gray, 2002, for a critique of the treatment of older workers in the New Zealand context).

A principal ingredient in job satisfaction in almost any work context is the degree to which employees (in this case, older workers) can exercise autonomy and control over their work and learning (Findsen, 2014). An elemental principle from humanistic psychology and adult learning is to honor the self-worth and experiential learning base which older workers bring to the workplace (Tennant, 1997). While not all older people are "older and wiser" (Withnall, McGivney & Soulsby, 2004) and some may have more rigid notions of life and work, it is

more frequently the case that older workers can offer considerable life experience, insight, and stability, characteristics which most employers would value highly. For a fortunate few, the ideal of a “protean career” (one which is directed primarily by the worker rather than the employing organization) may be possible (Rothwell et al., 2008). In this scenario, workers contract themselves to employers and tend to be more mobile. From this approach there tends to be greater flexibility for workers, though they will still be subject to prevailing labor force dynamics. Older workers, given their more extensive work experience, can be well placed to undertake this more autonomous but risky path (Beck, 1992).

CONCLUDING REMARKS: PROSPECTS FOR LEARNING AMID OLDER WORKERS

Myths abound concerning the nature of older adulthood, including older people’s learning capabilities both inside and outside the work environment. The vast majority of these stereotypes and ageist assumptions have little credibility, especially as the advent of baby-boomers is actually smashing such preconceptions. However, within the workplace such false assumptions are not easily replaced by more positive views of older people as workers/learners. Among employers particularly, there needs to be a spirited attack on ageist views and age discrimination. In addition, older people themselves need to avoid negative self-labeling and engaging in self-prophecy related to perceived limitations.

In the workplace the kinds of learning can be of a varied nature ranging from informal to formal. For many workers, especially older, their employment circumstances are potentially constrained by political and economic conditions. Government policy that does not impede organizations to invest in training and development (i.e. it is not oppositional) and organizational development that values all workers, are useful starting points for older workers to sustain their commitment to paid work. Learning for older workers in a

workplace can be influenced by a myriad of factors from individual to organizational to societal, such that learning opportunities will necessarily vary from workplace to workplace. In line with an ideology of individualism, at least some responsibility for creating and taking learning opportunities lies with individual workers themselves (Knowles, 1984); yet, managers can play an important role in fostering favorable working conditions for older people to become active contributors in a beneficial work culture that minimises distinctions based on age stratification.

Invariably, a multitude of possible barriers may confront older workers in their bid to engage in learning in the formal to informal continuum. Older workers should have equal rights to training opportunities and should bring a complementary set of attributes to the work context compared with younger workers. Usually, the provision of positive conditions of work for older people will also benefit all workers (Short & Harris, 2014). Intergenerational work tasks and educational programmes that draw upon institutional knowledge and the more substantial experiential base of older workers should help boost the overall positive culture of an organization. More regular contact and communication across generations of workers in organizations should help to alleviate the ill effects of stereotypical assumptions about older people's capabilities; managers themselves could benefit from participating in anti-aging educational programs and develop specific strategies to limit ageist practices. Elements which are supportive of older workers in the workplace include flexibility of work/learning patterns, rewards systems which appeal to older people (quite often intrinsic rather than extrinsic), challenging tasks, job sharing and opportunities to enlarge job projects (Rothwell et al., 2008).

A way forward could be to go beyond mechanistic notions of learning in organizations and to embrace the relatively new emphasis in adult learning on *situated learning*. From this perspective, knowledge is created through group participation involving novices (new recruits) and experienced workers (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Collectively they engage in work

tasks in a community of learning context. The idea of “learning to do” is inextricably connected to “learning to become”. Learners/workers are engaged in a continual process of co-constructing knowledge, exemplified in some apprenticeship situations. Through a variety of means (scaffolding, modelling, mentoring and coaching), (older) workers build their own personal and collective knowledge. In this way a community of learning is developed, sustained and improved and older workers can engage on an equal footing with younger counterparts.

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