

Developing a “win-win” scenario: Understanding how older workers’ learning can be enhanced within organizations.

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As the population structures in most countries continue to age, many older adults are faced with dilemmas concerning their future engagement with on-going employment. The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) has produced special, usually detrimental, conditions for older people who may be forced out of the labour market prematurely or voluntarily choose to reduce or surrender full-time paid employment (Beatty & Visser, 2005; Davey, 2006). For organizations there are manifold challenges in respect to recruiting, retaining and retraining older workers as they endeavour to be competitive in an ever-changing economic environment. However, such organizations seldom operate without consideration of national/regional governmental priorities, particularly policies which may inhibit or enhance agencies’ likelihood of supporting employability of older workers and associated training and development opportunities.

This chapter investigates the perspectives of employers and older employees to learning and development within an organizational framework. Such a framework is nestled within a dynamic global economy in which neo-liberalism has taken hold in many countries. Learning prospects for workers are necessarily related to this over-arching environment in which organizations are responding to wider societal attitudes and practices towards older workforce membership. Current issues pertaining to older workforce participation are analysed: this includes how myths can actively dissuade older workers from active engagement in workplaces; and discussion about what constitutes knowledge for workers and the extent to which they can control its acquisition. It is argued that both employers and workers need to acknowledge and go beyond prevailing assumptions about older adult learning and appreciate the diverse potential purposes of workplace learning within a lifelong learning agenda. In addition, the broader possibilities for learning are outlined in accord with adult learning perspectives and effective principles. The final section of this chapter discusses learning strategies for individual workers and their employers that are more likely to result in mutually positive outcomes.

A changing world; a changing workplace

The dynamics of a particular workplace and workers within it need to be contextualised from the perspective of globalization and its multiple impacts at varying levels of organizations. Barnett points to the connections between learning and work as problematic, primarily related to “conditions of supercomplexity” (1999, p. 29) in which the pace of change renders understanding as partial at best. A global economy demands flexible labour markets, sophisticated technological modes of communication involving networked systems and infrastructures wherein patterns of work and of consumption are forever on the move. Globalization has immediate effects on organizations, both private and public, in regard to producing a workforce that can be responsive and efficient; in this sense, the market is a primary determinant in the development of information/knowledge in a “learning economy” (Field, 2002). Yet large corporations do not usually function entirely independent of the state. Governments have a responsibility to weigh up the relative influence of open markets on citizens and to monitor the effects of neo-liberalism (heightened accountability; quality assurance; minimal government spending) in a democracy. Often governments intervene in the market to minimise the negative impact of market forces. The rise of the “evaluative state” (Barnett, 1999) is no accident. There is an imperative to measure the effectiveness of public spending in manifold types of organizations such as in education, health and social welfare; in the private sector similar fine-tuning of expenditure is the rule rather than

the exception. In short, many organizations may interpret learning and development as a luxury rather than as a necessity for workers in hard economic times (Beatty & Visser, 2005).

So, what does this have to do with older workers? Regardless of the precise kind of industry – agriculture, business, health, tourism, manufacturing, trade, personal services – older adults occupy places of employment, either full-time or part-time, where these macro forces influence the decision-making of investors, managers and other stakeholders. 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). For a variety of reasons such as decreased fertility, longer life expectancy and better health services, the population structures in most countries will age to the extent that the dependency ratio will precipitate economic crises unless governments, employers and individuals respond imaginatively. State provision of pensions and superannuation schemes may be under special scrutiny to limit public spending; thus, this forces individuals to account for their own financial security in a more expanded lifespan (Encel, 1997). This ideology of individualism is consistent with a neo-liberal agenda: it is the responsibility of individuals to look after themselves in a “risk society” (Beck, 1992).

In most countries, there is an arrangement of training and development involving individual workers, employers 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 worker. In some instances, trade unions will have significant input into a worker’s learning portfolio in locations where trade unions still have influence.

In many societies the traditional pattern of the lifecourse involving education, work and leisure has been thoroughly disrupted (Riley & Riley, 1994). The assumption that we are educated first, get a job/career and then retire to leisure no longer holds. Further, life transitions seldom occur in an orderly manner. There is a need for a person to engage in lifelong learning (Wain, 2004) and not think of schooling or tertiary education as a finishing post; to thrive rather than survive in a postmodern world we need to engage in on-going learning across numerous sites (e.g. workplace; family; religious institutions). While formal education may prepare people for work, it is not necessarily the case. Education is not always wedded to employment though this may be a principal purpose in many governments’ and students’ minds; education also has diverse purposes beyond the acquisition of work (Findsen & Formosa, 2011). The notion of *retirement* needs to be retired itself. The super-complex world necessitates a divergent range of options for people entering their third age (Laslett, 1989) where continuing full-time or part-time work is a possibility, not a certainty. As identified in an Australian-based study (Lindberg & Marshallsay, 2007), many current older workers want to carry on working beyond “retirement age” (usually associated with the provision of superannuation) for a multitude of reasons.

Older people and prevailing myths

Many myths have been perpetrated within most societies which limit the extent to which people in later life objectively conduct their lives. These myths can be of a more general nature and/or can be extended to older workers, to learning environments, including workplaces. At a more general level Findsen (2005) describes the following myths:

Homogeneity – older adults are not a uniform group and consist of considerable diversity according to gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, (dis)ability etc. There is no generic “older adult” without qualification of usage of this term. Yet, paradoxically, older adults in terms of effecting political influence may wish to be labelled in a collective fashion.

Decrepitude – A powerful image derived from a medical perspective is that older people are frail, in declining health and suffer cognitive and physiological decline. This is based on a deficit notion of older adulthood. The reality is that the majority of older people are in good health, are mentally alert and wish to contribute to the society of which they are part.

Dependence – older people are often depicted as dependent on the younger generations, especially family, for their daily needs. While the reality of some decline in physical functioning is not to be ignored, most older adults wish to retain their independence. However, the notion of inter-dependence is perhaps a more accurate concept to describe older people’s relationships inside and outside the family environment, including places of work.

Consumerism – while older adults may be portrayed as “takers” from the rest of society, particularly in terms of social provision, many older people contribute significantly to local communities and in the workplace. Older adults engage in volunteering to a large degree, helping to prop-up community agencies and social services. Many older people want to contribute positively to their communities and offer considerable life experience and wisdom in the process.

In terms of a learning context (inclusive of workplaces), Withnall, McGivney and Soulsby (2004) identify myths of a cognitive character (e.g. “older people are too slow to learn anything new” and “older people forget things”), physical (e.g. “older people have mobility problems” and “older people are deaf”), 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 learning”; “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.

Finally, Rothwell, Sterns, Spokus and Reaser (2008) have identified myths about older workers. Given the importance of these mistaken beliefs to the central argument of this chapter, they are reproduced here with a brief critical comment. The seven myths are:

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

Comment: The decline in cognitive functioning of older people up until around age 70 is negligible. Older people can learn new things while it may take a fraction longer than for youngsters.

2. *Training older workers is a lost investment because they will not stay on the job for long.*

Comment: In comparison with young workers, they provide greater stability and arguably are less likely to leave the workplace, given employment uncertainty.

3. *Older workers are not as productive as younger workers.*

Comment: productivity does not decline as a function of age. In fact, older people can offer greater dependability and a capacity to make more informed decisions in comparison with younger groups.

4. *Older workers are less flexible and adaptable.*

Comment: Older workers are just as adaptable as younger. They may more readily question why change needs to occur.

5. *Older workers are not as creative or innovative.*

Comment: general intelligence levels are comparable to younger workers. New production ideas are more frequent from workers over the age of 40.

6. *Older workers cost more than hiring younger workers.*

Comment: Regardless of age, workers with tenure tend to cost more. The reality is that many older people are on the periphery of the workforce and once outside of it, find it difficult to re-enter.

7. *Benefit and accident costs are higher for older workers.*

Comment: Older workers tend to take fewer sick days. While some costs such as workers' health and insurance may be more, older workers have fewer dependents. They statistically have lower accident rates than other age groups.

This discussion around myths emphasizes that in many locations, the capacities of older people are under question. 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 they are 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. Sooner or later, the reality of changing age structures and on-going human capital demands from globalization will require managers and workers alike to rethink their positions, as there will be fewer younger people eligible for work and more seniors around with considerable wisdom that employers can take advantage of.

Lifelong learning and older workers

While the concept of lifelong learning has proven quite elusive, it has nevertheless been adopted enthusiastically at multiple levels of international organizations (e.g. UNESCO; ILO), national (governments), institutional and of individuals. It has often been coupled with allied concepts such as "the learning economy", "the learning society" and "the learning organization" and has been recognized by corporations and companies as expressive of ideals of engaging workers in on-going enquiry, usually, but not exclusively, related to their work tasks. The learning organization has been defined by Pedler, Burgoyne & Boydell (1991, p.1) as one which "facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself in order to meet its strategic goals". This learning 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. While learning itself may take many different forms according to varying purposes, it is usually related to one or more approaches – cognitive, social or emotional (Illeris, 2004). It may be competency-based (Gonczi, 2004) or self-directed (Knowles, 1990) or according to some other philosophical orientation. Depending on one's position within an organization, unless it 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. 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 and for the employer. 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).

In the wider perspectives of lifelong learning (Findsen & Formosa, 2011), there are often four major themes that are emphasized in the literature and pertain to the work environment:

The learning economy: workers, including older adults, need to respond to global market forces which pressurize organizations into a competitive mode and expect workers to be flexible, knowledgeable and adaptable. Given the uncertainty attached to retaining one's paid job or the need to change occupations later in life, many older people are rethinking retirement plans and may seek further qualifications in a formal education context. If their early education achievement was not high, then a return to education is normally beyond the bounds of possibility (and compounded by the fact that few governments have proactive policy to support such initiatives). At the other end of the financial scale, those older adults with solid education careers and extensive social capital (Field, 2003) may more readily return to study, including for more recreational purposes (Findsen & McCullough, 2008).

Personal fulfilment: Consistent with the liberal tradition in adult education, the need for personal advancement and human development has always been strong. This aspect of lifelong learning relates to an individualistic stance as opposed to a collectivist approach. Learning in a work environment may lead to personal growth, depending on the nature of the task or knowledge construction, but for most workers their endeavours are restricted by employers to more utilitarian purposes. Yet within this discourse, Beck's (1992) notion of the reflexive individual is consistent with a postmodern agenda. While we may live in "the risk society", from a government perspective it is incumbent upon us as individuals to reduce uncertainty through our self-directed learning.

Active citizenship: This third theme emphasises the social responsibility of citizens to develop themselves for their own betterment but more especially for the maintenance of a democratic society. Active citizenship requires a person to participate in civil affairs, to go beyond the "economic citizen". Older people through active ageing strategies can enhance their prospects of contributing to society. In the world of work, the potential to consolidate social capital is enhanced, as social relationships in the work environment can positively support personal and community development. In short, being a worker does not negate the role of engagement as an active citizen.

Social inclusion: Given that historically there have been subordinate groups who have not prospered in mainstream educational provision and for whom neo-liberalism has been problematic, many governments have initiated social equity schemes (those providing additional resources to marginalized groups) to minimise the detrimental effects of market forces. In particular, indigenous sub-populations (e.g. Māori in New Zealand) and new immigrants have exemplified this theme in action. Some older people may also be seen from this perspective of deserving of additional social services to counter-balance poverty or poor adjustment to older age. The underlying idea is one of social justice, to minimise social exclusion. Arguably, when older adults engage in paid work they are more likely to avoid social exclusion; access to education either in the workplace or elsewhere may also help to alleviate potential social isolation.

In the work context these themes still have considerable relevance. 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 effect, this is an emphasis on the first theme. Yet the other themes should not be lightly dismissed. The "economic citizen" should also be a "critical citizen", one with a critical intelligence (Mayo & Thompson, 1995), one who connects work with the rest of his/her life and thinks expansively about global/national issues. Self-growth and fulfilment may not be a direct objective of training and development but this should also be encouraged. In addition, social inclusion is directly applicable to work contexts for older workers in how they are valued (see McGregor & Gray, 2002, for a critique of the treatment of older workers in the New Zealand context).

What kind of learning/education?

At a fundamental level it is useful to distinguish between "learning" and "education". Learning is more commonly believed to occur in a wide variety of contexts and may be formal, non-formal or informal. Jarvis (1985) explains these terms as follows:

Informal learning – the process whereby every person acquires knowledge, skills, attitudes and aptitude from daily living;

Non-formal learning: any systematic, organized, educational activity carried on outside the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular sub-groups of the population;

Formal learning: the institutionalized, chronologically graded and hierarchical educational system.

The significance of these distinctions in types of learning should not be lost because older adults have traditionally been involved in non-formal and informal learning rather than formal. This relates to their frequent membership of various clubs and community organizations in which they may have responsibilities (Golding, 2011) and the realisation that we continue to learn on a daily basis from more incidental happenings in our lives. Having noted this point, there is still considerable potential for older adults, perhaps supported by an enlightened employer or government policy, to participate in formal learning for a variety of purposes such as job enhancement, changing one's career in later life or for self-fulfilment (see research by Findsen & McCullough, 2008, in Greater Glasgow on the engagement of older adults in formal learning). These forms of learning are complementary and not mutually exclusive.

The distinction between "learning" and "education" can be significant too. This point is well explained by Withnall (2010) in her investigation of "learning" in the UK. Older people in the survey held a myriad of perspectives of what might constitute learning (e.g. acquiring knowledge; changing one's understanding; it's about living) but were more conversant with education (as an extension of schooling). Learning tends to be individualistic and concerned with processes associated with cognitive, social and emotional growth. On the other hand, education relates to organized, often hierarchical learning and is commonly graded and credentialized. In the context of older workers, they are more likely to undertake on-the-job learning on a daily basis; however, their desire and/or access to training/education may be less plentiful and usually associated with improved performance in work.

Prospects for learning amid older workers

To be explicit, in the workplace the kinds of learning can be of a varied nature ranging from informal to formal. For many workers, learning will be in the form of training wherein they are expected to grasp specific skills and knowledge to perform their tasks more efficiently; they may have little option but to be involved and there could be coercion to participate; on the other hand, particularly aligned to self-directed activities, the learning may be self-determined, discretionary and not necessarily tied to measurable outcomes. Hence, the motivation to be involved may be multi-faceted and ever-changing; it may be intrinsic or extrinsic. Ideally, intrinsic motivation is more desirable as it tends to be longer-lasting and not based on external rewards (Knowles, 1984). However, employers may offer a combination of incentives for workers to get involved in further learning.

Rothwell et al (2008) identify the “Protean Career” pattern as one which is directed primarily by the worker rather than the employing organization. In this sense, 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 labour force dynamics. Alternatives in these careers include the person finding a new career; building on skills in an existing job; changing the location of work to another organization; phasing work and learning to retirement; joining the contingent workforce. This career pattern is more indicative of professionals whose expertise is more likely to be in demand but may apply to self-employed workers.

Perspectives of learning for older workers

The field of adult education more generally is replete with learning principles from a variety of philosophical perspectives (see Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2008, for coverage of many of these approaches). While most of these are readily transferable to a work context, a key dimension is the extent to which workers have control of what to learn. Gonczi (2004) has stressed how organizations and employers have accepted the learning paradigm of competence, based on behaviouristic notions of learning, too readily and unthinkingly. In this scenario, learning in the workplace is usually reduced to workers performing prescribed behaviours to maximise outputs in the most efficient available means. Learning outcomes are predetermined by employers; workers become little more than cogs in a machine in a factory-type environment. Gonczi argues that if organizations accept the concept of competence as problematic then managers/human resource personnel at least can argue for a more holistic approach that incorporates humanistic elements. He does not dismiss a competency-based paradigm but stresses that such an approach needs to be counter-balanced by learning which enables (older) workers to be thinking, imaginative beings. He recommends the integration of propositional knowledge (knowing *that*) with instrumental and pragmatic (knowing *how*). As a consequence, the restrictive dichotomies of mind-body and thinking-doing are usually dissolved.

A relatively new emphasis in adult learning has been on the concept of *situated learning* which has conceptual links back to the work of Lave and Wenger (1991). From this perspective, knowledge is created through group participation involving novices (new recruits) and experienced workers. 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), workers build their own knowledge that should lead to better understanding of the overall context of work. In this way a community of learning

is developed, sustained and improved. In this context, it is not assumed that an older worker is necessarily the source of wisdom (a mentor); even if the older worker is very experienced, he/she is able to continue learning in this on-the-job situation.

Another way of conceiving of the work environment, applicable to older workers, is from the Canadian author, Daniel Pratt (1998). He explains the rationale for five different perspectives on teaching and learning. In its broadest sense, teaching may be described as the art and science of helping adults to learn (Knowles, 1984). Such a definition opens the door to manifold roles for both teachers and for learners, from more traditional, passive renditions of learners to more proactive ideas of learners engaged in active learning, consistent with Gonczi's more integrated view of learning. Pratt explains that learning cannot be understood in isolation from other factors in the teaching-learning environment, namely, the teacher, learners as a group, content (curriculum), context (as in a training and development site in an organization) and the ideals of the teacher that influence the direction of learning. He refers to five approaches to teaching-learning:

1. *A transmission perspective*: delivering content. This is a longstanding and traditional mode of teaching, commonly used in higher education but also in training contexts; it is teacher-centred and content heavy. Learners are usually relatively passive as portrayed critically in Freire's (1984) banking education methodology.
2. *An apprenticeship model*: modelling ways of being. In this perspective learning is usually enacted outside the classroom in real life situations. The purpose is to enculturate learners into a learning community. The content and teacher take central stage but the learner develops competence over time.
3. *A developmental perspective*: cultivating ways of thinking. This approach is related to developing intellectual capabilities among learners wherein they develop cognitive maps of content. It tends to be learner-centred as the development of intellectual ability is valued highly.
4. *A nurturing perspective*: facilitating personal agency. In this approach, it is the skill and knowledge of the teacher that is crucial in facilitating learning. Learning is most influenced by a learner's self-concept and self-efficacy. A high degree of reciprocal respect from teacher to learner is a key component in the success of this approach. Ultimately, the learner should become self-reliant and self-sufficient.
5. *A social reform perspective*: seeking a better society. From this perspective the objective of learning is to change the world for the better through the articulation and implementation of a social vision. The teacher adopts an explicitly ideological position of effecting social change. In this approach, the ideals of the teacher (and then the learner) become a key driving force. The focus is upon the collective rather than individual learner aspirations.

Obviously, none of these perspectives is mutually exclusive; most teaching-learning environments, including those of older workers, include a hybrid approach. In an organizational context, the traditional transmission model, once dominant and reinforcing of social hierarchies in organizations, has largely given way to more learner-centred approaches which seek to develop, nurture and cognitively stimulate workers. The challenge for older workers as learners is to actively engage in whatever opportunities emerge and dissociate themselves from a dependent relationship often associated with more formal learning contexts.

Given the new dominance of electronic communication and social media in many workplaces, the emphases for training and development have to change to keep agencies competitive. There is latent high risk here for older workers whose knowledge and competence in new technology is doubtful, at least for the current generation of older workers. Employers need to be patient and understand that most older adults did not have access to this kind of technology until well into their careers. Organizations such as Senionet provide some opportunities outside the workplace for older people to upgrade their capabilities in new technologies but similar experiences need to be provided inside work environments. It is quite commonplace for older people to experience considerable anxiety around new technologies; once this attitudinal barrier is overcome then progress can be quite rapid (Findsen, 2005).

Barriers to and challenges for older workers to learn

In the adult education literature, barriers to learning are commonly classified as personal/dispositional, institutional, situational and informational (e.g. Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). Applied to older workers, these can be presented as:

Dispositional: the tendency to believe that one is not capable of learning. This myth has previously been discussed in this chapter but is nevertheless difficult to overcome. The notion of workers learning in a community can help to break down this self-doubt as group support may be more available.

Institutional: in this case, an organization can unintentionally erect barriers to exclude groups/individuals. An agency may convey the message that older adults in the workforce are less worthy of training. The organization may have structured learning contexts which work against the interest/abilities of older workers (e.g. based primarily on e-learning). Equally, work teams may be set up that render older workers as marginal to the enterprise. Policies and practices may inadvertently favour younger workers (e.g. provision of childcare facilities; gymnasium has equipment unsuited to older adults). The relative advantage of this set of barriers is that providing there is an anti-ageist attitude among employers, these barriers are relatively easy to dismantle.

Situational: these barriers are related to hindrances often outside the control of the company but still a nuisance for the older worker. For instance, this may include transport that is not conducive to getting workers to the job readily; there may be a complex family arrangement or crisis that may lessen the commitment of a worker to concentrate on work tasks. These may be remediated should an employer become cognisant of the impediment but this relies on an open communication system.

Informational: these barriers relate to how organizations organize their communication systems, including marketing. Do what extent are workers on the shop floor included in company messages? How much leeway do workers have to participate in organized company training and development? In a democratic work context, these issues are less problematic but if the organization is large and/or bureaucratic, this kind of barrier may persist.

When these barriers act in tandem, the overall context for workers can be quite negative and the motivational level can be affected accordingly. Sensitive employers will know their workers and life circumstances to minimise the effects of learning barriers.

Strategies for employers to engage older workers in learning

It is a taken-for-granted assumption in adult learning/education literature that the needs, interests and aspirations of learners (older workers) be negotiated in terms of design for learning (e.g. Freire, 1984; Knowles, 1984; Merriam et al, 2007). In the workplace such considerations are significant in terms of “buy-in” from workers, control of the learning and the quality of eventual outcomes. No employer/trainer who wants to gain commitment from workers would operate differently. In line with this approach, Rothwell et al. (2008, pp.116-7) identify specific “learner characteristics” of older adults which should be taken into account in planning and implementing learning opportunities for older workers. They present ten “key foundational principles” as follows:

1. Adults are problem-centred in how they regard learning experiences.
2. Adults are motivated by consideration of personal growth or gain. They wish to know “what’s in it for them”.
3. Trainers can plan ways to increase learners’ motivation to learn.
4. Gauging expectations before a learning event is critical.
5. Trainers should plan to provide feedback and recognition to learners.
6. Individual differences in learning style should be considered when learning activities are planned.
7. Planned learning experiences should take into account adult life-span development, needs, and values.
8. Learning experiences should take into account ways to encourage on-the-job transfer.
9. Mature workers need a physiological supportive climate in which to learn.
10. Hands-on activity promotes learning.

It is important to acknowledge that each of these principles is not necessarily unique to older adults as workers. Items 7 and 9 are closer to being more directly applicable to older workers but, as previously argued, heterogeneity is a hallmark of older people. From a critical standpoint, the characteristics of (older) adult learners framework is problematic in the sense that it may be more accurate to refer to the life circumstances and material conditions in which older workers conduct their lives (Phillipson, 1998) which, in turn, influence their propensities and access to learning opportunities, both within and outside work environments.

From an organization’s perspective, it is imperative to demonstrate at least equality of treatment to older workers in comparison with younger. A sound knowledge of the circumstances of older workers both as individuals and as a collective is a fruitful starting point for devising relevant learning events with and for older workers. While the notion of “career” for workers may be problematic (given that in our neo-liberal economic/political context people may need to change employment often), an employer’s awareness of longer term learning goals for workers is recommended. 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).

Concluding remarks

Older workers’ need for learning and development should be understood from a variety of perspectives. At a macro level, the neo-liberal environment, related to dynamics of globalization, has created a

workplace context where organizations operate competitively and learning outcomes associated with work tasks often take precedence. Accordingly, a competency-based learning paradigm has assumed prominence because behaviours of (older) workers can more readily be monitored and assessed. Counter-arguments for different, more open conceptions of learning need to be continually asserted to avoid the reduction of training and development to only those events that are measurable and “official” skills and knowledge.

Myths abound concerning the nature of older adulthood, including older people’s learning capabilities. 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. Yet, older workers themselves are not exempt from labelling themselves in similar ways, suggesting that social change in wider society and in workplaces will be evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

The ideas of what constitutes effective teaching and learning in workplaces also need attention. As the perspectives presented by Pratt (1998) demonstrate, there are several legitimate ways of viewing learning and learning, all of which potentially can be operationalized in specific work contexts. While barriers to learning for older workers continue to hamper some people’s engagement in learning, there should be on-going dialogue between management and workers as to what is most effective in that context. It is dangerous to be overly-prescriptive, even when attempting to identify those principles of adult learning that best suit mature workers.

While the viewpoints of management, trainers and workers of what constitute suitable learning opportunities are likely to continue to differ, an integrated and holistic stance towards learning and development is likely to reap better outcomes. The co-construction of learning plans at individual and team contexts are useful ways of gaining input and commitment from workers for more formal learning. In addition, it is important to recognize that non-formal and informal learning can also be very positive elements of a worker’s overall experience. Hence, encouraging workers to engage in a variety of contexts, in terms of formality and hierarchy, should enhance their learning and development to create a win-win scenario for employers and workers.

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