

# The Impact of Leadership on Successful Aging at Work

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## Abstract

The increasing proportion of older employees in the workforce underscores the need to understand how leadership can support sustained motivation, health, and workability across the working lifespan. This paper explores how leadership contribute to Successful Aging at Work (SAW) at the individual level. Leadership behaviors such as individualized consideration, ethical conduct, and inspirational motivation are proposed to serve as critical resources that enable older employees to adapt to age-related changes and maintain high levels of engagement and effectiveness. Employing a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, combining qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys, this research seeks to examine how different leadership styles influence older workers' capacity to age successfully within the workplace. The anticipated findings are expected to identify key leadership practices that facilitate SAW and provide evidence-based insights for organizations aiming to support aging employees through leadership. By focusing on individual experiences, this research contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of leadership's role in shaping successful work trajectories in later career stages and offers practical guidance for human resource management and leadership development in the context of demographic changes.

**Keywords:** aging workforce, age management, successful aging at work, leadership.

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## Introduction

One of the most pressing challenges facing contemporary organizations is how to sustain the motivation, health, and productivity of an increasingly aging workforce. Across Europe, demographic shifts have led to rising employment rates among workers aged 55 and over, highlighting the urgency of identifying workplace factors that enable individuals to remain effective and engaged later in their careers (Eurostat, 2024). For both policymakers and organizations, ensuring that employees can age successfully at work is not only a matter of individual well-being but also of economic competitiveness and organizational sustainability.

Recent research conceptualizes Successful Aging at Work (SAW) as a process of maintaining or regaining high levels of ability and motivation to continue working despite age-related changes (Kooij et al., 2020). This approach emphasizes adaptation, resilience, and proactive management of personal and job resources. Evidence suggests that SAW is shaped not only by individual strategies such as Selection–Optimization–Compensation but also by contextual factors that provide support and opportunities (Zacher, 2015). Among these, leadership has been repeatedly highlighted as a key determinant of how older employees experience and manage their later career trajectories.

Leadership can be understood as a critical resource in the workplace, operating through multiple pathways. Transformational behaviors, such as inspirational motivation and individualized consideration, have been linked to higher engagement across age groups (Ng & Feldman, 2015). Ethical and authentic leadership, emphasizing fairness, trust, and transparency, are associated with well-being and sustained workability (Walumbwa et al., 2008; Den Hartog, 2015). More recently, the concept of age-differentiated leadership has been introduced, suggesting that leaders who adapt their practices to age-related needs without stereotyping are better able to support older workers' performance and satisfaction (Franke et al., 2019). Despite these insights, empirical research directly connecting leadership styles to SAW remains limited.

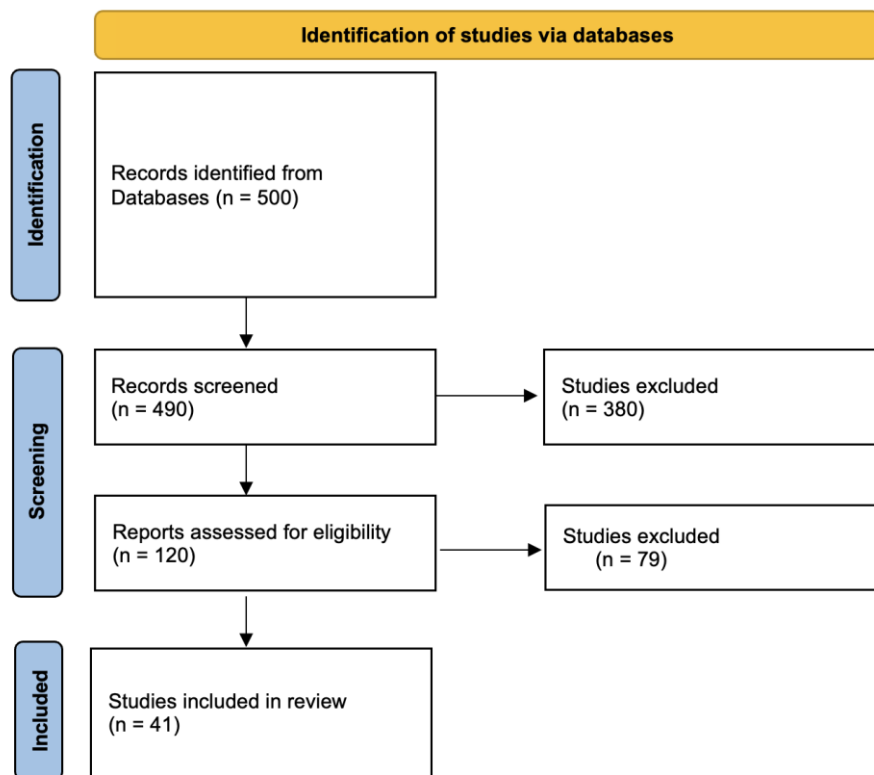
This research addresses this gap by examining how leadership behaviors contribute to SAW at the individual level. Specifically, the main research question is: How do transformational, ethical, authentic, and age-differentiated leadership styles influence older employees' capacity to age successfully within the workplace? By integrating theories of job demands–resources, conservation of resources, and lifespan development, we aim to identify leadership practices that sustain motivation, health, and workability in later career stages. In doing so, this research contributes to the growing literature on SAW and offers evidence-based implications for human resource management and leadership development in the context of demographic change.

## The Literature Review

The growing demographic shift toward an aging workforce has stimulated increasing scholarly attention to the role of leadership in sustaining work ability, motivation, and well-being across later career stages. In line with the PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021), a structured search was undertaken to identify empirical evidence on leadership behaviors and Successful Aging at Work (SAW). From an initial pool of 500 records retrieved through Semantic Scholar, 120 full-texts were screened for eligibility.

After excluding studies unrelated to leadership or aging outcomes, 41 unique studies were included for synthesis. Eligibility criteria required studies to focus on working adults aged 40 and above, examine leadership styles or behaviors in organizational settings, and measure SAW-related outcomes such as work ability, engagement, well-being, or retention, using empirical designs including surveys, longitudinal studies, mixed methods, or experiments (Cheung et al., 2018; Kooij et al., 2020).

Figure 1  
PRISMA diagram presenting the selection of included studies



Source: Author's work (2025)

The studies reviewed encompassed diverse occupational and national contexts, including public administration, healthcare, academia, and multinational corporations (e.g., Gnewikow & Berghammer, 2025; Bishop, 2013; Zacher et al., 2011; Kunze & Bruch, 2010). Participants were typically mid- to late-career employees, with ages ranging from the mid-40s to early 60s. While most investigations applied cross-sectional designs, several longitudinal and multi-source studies offered stronger inference regarding causal mechanisms (Koziel et al., 2021; Peng et al., 2023). SAW was operationalized in multiple ways, including work ability (Ilmarinen, 2009), engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Roche et al., 2022), psychological well-being (Choi et al., 2020), and retirement intentions (Wöhrmann et al., 2017). Leadership constructs included transformational, ethical, authentic, empowering, inclusive, and age-differentiated leadership, as well as Leader–Member Exchange and coaching approaches.

Thematic synthesis revealed three main domains of leadership approaches with relevance for SAW:

- (1) Transformational and Empowering Leadership: These styles were consistently associated with enhanced engagement, performance, and well-being.

Empowering leadership, emphasizing autonomy and participation, in some contexts demonstrated stronger effects than transformational leadership, particularly in age-diverse groups (Scheuer & Loughlin, 2018; Rožman & Čančer, 2019).

- (2) Age-Differentiated and Inclusive Leadership: Tailored approaches showed incremental value by addressing age-related needs without stereotyping. Longitudinal evidence indicated that age-differentiated leadership predicted higher work ability across time, while inclusive leadership combined with age-friendly HR practices improved psychological health, particularly in public sector settings (Kozziel et al., 2021; Teo et al., 2021).
- (3) Relational, Respectful, and Coaching Leadership: These approaches fostered trust, fairness, and individualized care, contributing to higher well-being, reduced burnout, and delayed retirement intentions (Roche et al., 2022; Wöhrmann et al., 2017; Russo et al., 2017).

In contrast, laissez-faire or destructive leadership behaviors were consistently linked to reduced engagement and poorer health outcomes (Cheung et al., 2018; Larsson et al., 2022). Contextual moderators shaped these relationships: leader–follower age gaps influenced team performance (Kearney, 2008), sectoral differences affected perceived leadership effectiveness (Larsson & Björklund, 2020), and congruence between leaders' and employees' perceptions of age-friendliness enhanced well-being (Finsel et al., 2023).

Despite growing evidence, several limitations remain. The literature is dominated by cross-sectional designs, limiting causal inference regarding how leadership supports SAW over time. General leadership styles such as transformational leadership have been extensively studied, but age-specific approaches like age-differentiated and inclusive leadership remain underexplored. Furthermore, contextual factors, including HR practices, organizational culture, and subjective age perceptions, are rarely integrated into multilevel analyses, despite evidence of their importance. Addressing these gaps, the present research examines how transformational, ethical, authentic, and age-differentiated leadership contribute to SAW, employing a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design that integrates qualitative depth with the generalizability of survey data.

## Methodology

### *Research Design*

This research employs a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to investigate how leadership behaviors influence SAW among public managers in Slovenian municipalities. The qualitative phase uses semi-structured interviews with mid- and late-career managers to explore how leadership supports or hinders SAW, defined as the maintenance or recovery of work ability, motivation to continue working, and engagement despite age-related changes. Findings inform the refinement of survey instruments. The subsequent quantitative phase applies a cross-sectional survey across municipalities to test relationships between leadership styles and SAW, including mediating mechanisms (autonomy, support, meaningful work) and moderating influences (chronological age, subjective age, organizational context). Data collection was conducted between April and July 2025. This design addresses the dominance of cross-sectional studies in the field (Kozziel et al., 2021; Rožman & Čančer, 2019) and the scarcity of evidence in public administration (Gnewikow & Berghammer, 2025; von Kalm, 2013).

### *Data collection and analysis*

The sample consisted of public managers employed in Slovenian municipalities. In the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was applied to recruit 8 managers aged 40 and above from municipalities of different sizes and regions to capture variation in leadership experiences. In the quantitative phase, data were collected through an online survey distributed via official municipal channels between April and July 2025. A total of 98 managers provided valid responses, representing a diverse set of Slovenian municipalities.

Semi-structured interviews of 45–60 minutes explored how leadership behaviors influenced SAW. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized. In the survey phase, respondents completed an online questionnaire containing validated measures of leadership styles, SAW, and demographic background variables.

Leadership was measured using established instruments, including transformational leadership (MLQ-5X; Bass & Avolio, 1995), authentic leadership (ALQ; Walumbwa et al., 2008), ethical leadership (ELS; Brown et al., 2005), and age-differentiated leadership (Koziel et al., 2021). SAW was assessed with the Successful Aging at Work scale (Kooij et al., 2020), which captures employees' ability to maintain or regain work ability, motivation to continue working, and engagement despite age-related changes. Demographic and organizational characteristics such as age, gender, education, tenure, and municipality size were included as control variables.

Qualitative data were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns in how leadership facilitated or constrained SAW. These themes informed the refinement of the survey instrument. Quantitative data were analyzed using structural equation modeling to test the effects of leadership on SAW, including mediation by job resources such as autonomy, social support, and meaningful work, and moderation by chronological age, subjective age, and organizational context. Robustness checks included subgroup analyses across age cohorts and municipality sizes.

## **Results**

### *Descriptive Statistics*

The sample comprised 98 public managers employed in Slovenian municipalities. The majority of participants were women (77.6%), while 19.4% were men and one respondent identified as other. The age distribution showed that 5.1% of participants were aged 30–39, 19.4% were 40–44, 31.6% were 45–49, 35.7% were 50–54, and 7.1% were 55 years or older. Educational attainment was relatively high: 9.2% had completed secondary education, 10.2% post-secondary vocational education, 48.0% a bachelor's degree, 30.6% a master's degree, and 1.0% a doctorate. Work experience was substantial, with 5.1% reporting fewer than five years of employment, 18.4% between 6 and 10 years, 21.4% between 11 and 20 years, 34.7% between 21 and 30 years, and 19.4% more than 30 years. A large majority of respondents (83.7%) reported holding a formal managerial position.

Descriptive statistics of the SAW items (Kooij et al., 2020) indicated generally positive evaluations of successful aging at work (see Table 1). Respondents expressed relatively high confidence in their ability to maintain motivation and adapt to work demands, particularly in relation to using prior experience to handle challenges and sustaining optimism in demanding situations. Lower values were reported for items

reflecting formalized organizational procedures, such as systematic knowledge transfer across generations. Across the 20 SAW items, mean values ranged from 3.4 to 4.0 on a five-point Likert scale, with standard deviations between 0.6 and 0.9, indicating moderate variability.

Table 1  
Descriptive Statistics for SAW Items (N = 98)

Item	M*	SD
At work, I feel confident because of the knowledge and experience I have gained.	3.9	0.7
I now handle relationships with colleagues better than in the past.	3.7	0.8
More than in the past, I now dare to raise an issue with my supervisor when necessary.	3.6	0.8
More than in the past, I now know how to solve complex work tasks.	3.8	0.7
I can now establish more meaningful relationships with colleagues than in the past.	3.7	0.8
I now solve conflicts at work more easily than in the past.	3.6	0.9
More easily than in the past, I remain calm and focused when dealing with difficult work situations.	3.7	0.8
I am now calmer and more optimistic when facing work challenges than I was in the past.	3.8	0.7
I am confident that I can easily adapt to changes in my workplace.	3.9	0.6
I am now more aware of my strengths than in the past and know better how to use them at work.	4.0	0.6
I have access to appropriate training to update my work skills.	3.5	0.9
My organization provides me with opportunities to keep my work knowledge up to date.	3.4	0.9
At work, I feel recognized and respected.	3.7	0.8
I am confident that I can stay in this organization as long as I want.	3.8	0.7
At work, I have a lot of flexibility.	3.6	0.8
I can always rely on quick and useful feedback from my supervisor.	3.5	0.9
I have the freedom to decide how to carry out my work.	3.7	0.8
I receive support and understanding from my supervisor.	3.6	0.9
My organization is open to negotiating customized work arrangements with employees.	3.4	0.9
In my organization, supervisors are flexible regarding employees' needs.	3.6	0.8

Note: \* 1 – I don't agree at all; 5 – I completely agree.

Source: Author's work (2025)

Subscale scores showed similarly positive evaluations (Table 2). Respondents reported relatively high levels of SAW experiences, indicating confidence in their ability to adapt, maintain engagement, and utilize accumulated knowledge at work. The use of strategies for sustaining work ability was slightly lower but still above the scale midpoint, suggesting active engagement in selection, optimization, and compensation behaviors. Internal consistency for both subscales was strong ( $\alpha > .85$ ), and the overall SAW scale showed excellent reliability ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability for SAW Subscales (N = 98)

Subscale	M	SD	N	$\alpha$
<b>SAW Experiences (10 items)</b>	3.77	0.68	98	0.88
<b>SAW Strategies (10 items)</b>	3.55	0.71	98	0.85
<b>Overall SAW (20 items)</b>	3.66	0.67	98	0.91

Source: Author's work (2025)

### Leadership and SAW: Correlations

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics and correlations between leadership styles and SAW. All four leadership styles correlated positively with SAW. Transformational and age-differentiated leadership were the strongest correlates of both SAW experiences ( $r = .41$ ,  $r = .42$ ) and SAW strategies ( $r = .38$ ,  $r = .40$ ). Authentic and ethical leadership were moderately associated with SAW (ranging from .29 to .39). Intercorrelations among leadership styles were moderate to high, consistent with theoretical overlap.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Leadership Styles and SAW (N = 98)

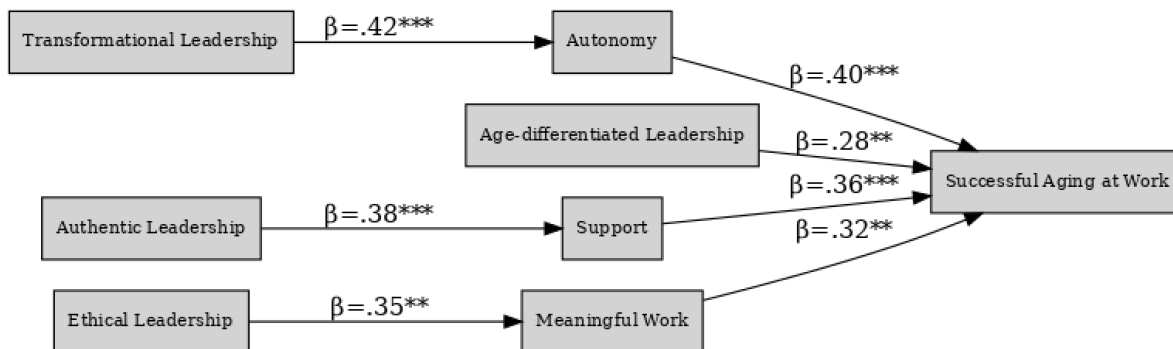
Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
SAW Experiences	3,77	0,68	–						
SAW Strategies	3,55	0,71	.62**	–					
Overall SAW	3,66	0,67	.89**	.85**	–				
Transformational leadership	3,72	0,65	.41**	.38**	.44**	–			
Authentic leadership	3,68	0,63	.36**	.33**	.39**	.62**	–		
Ethical leadership	3,74	0,66	.34**	.29*	.36**	.58**	.55**	–	
Age-differentiated leadership	3,61	0,7	.42**	.40**	.46**	.53**	.50**	.47**	–

Source: Author's work (2025)

### Regression and SEM Analysis

Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to test the incremental validity of age-differentiated leadership beyond transformational, authentic, and ethical leadership. In the first step, transformational, authentic, and ethical leadership jointly explained 27% of the variance in overall SAW ( $F(3,94) = 11.6$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Adding age-differentiated leadership in the second step increased explained variance to 34% ( $\Delta R^2 = .07$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The regression coefficient for age-differentiated leadership remained significant ( $\beta = .28$ ,  $p < .01$ ), suggesting that tailoring leadership to age-related needs contributes uniquely to SAW above and beyond general leadership styles.

Figure 2  
SEM model



Source: Author's work (2025)

To further test the proposed model, a structural equation model (SEM) was estimated with leadership styles predicting SAW via job resources (autonomy, support, meaningful work). The model showed acceptable fit ( $\chi^2/df = 1.9$ , CFI = .94, RMSEA = .07). Transformational, authentic, and ethical leadership predicted higher autonomy, support, and meaningful work, which in turn predicted higher SAW. Age-differentiated leadership had both direct and indirect effects on SAW, confirming its unique role. Moderation analyses indicated that the positive effect of leadership on SAW was stronger for older managers (50+) compared to younger ones, and more pronounced in larger municipalities where structural HR support was limited.

### Qualitative Themes

To complement the survey results, the research used a sequential explanatory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which the initial quantitative phase was followed by qualitative data collection with eight municipal managers to gain deeper insights into participants' experiences and interpretations. Interview data were analyzed thematically and provided context to the patterns observed in the quantitative results. Three main themes emerged from qualitative analysis (see Table 4).

Table 4  
Qualitative Themes on Leadership and SAW

Theme	Main Findings	Illustrative Quotes
<b>Recognition of experience</b>	Valuing accumulated knowledge and contributions increases motivation and engagement in later career stages.	"After so many years in municipal administration, what keeps me motivated is when my supervisor actually values my input and uses my experience in decision-making."
<b>Autonomy and flexibility</b>	Autonomy in daily work and flexibility in schedules help sustain productivity and work-life balance.	"I don't need someone checking on me every day. What I need is the freedom to organize my work, because that's what allows me to stay productive."
<b>Age-sensitive leadership</b>	Leaders who adapt expectations and provide support without stereotyping promote confidence and engagement.	"It is not about treating us as old, but about recognizing that we might need different support now than twenty years ago."

Source: Author's work (2025)

First, managers emphasized the importance of recognition of experience, describing how acknowledgment of their long-standing contributions fostered motivation and

strengthened their confidence in sustaining work ability. Secondly, autonomy and flexibility were identified as critical for maintaining productivity and motivation, with participants highlighting the need for discretion in organizing tasks and adaptable working arrangements. Finally, age-sensitive leadership was consistently mentioned as a unique enabler of SAW, with managers reporting that leaders who adjusted expectations, provided mentoring opportunities, and supported adaptation to change helped them sustain engagement despite age-related challenges. These themes reinforced the quantitative results, where transformational and age-differentiated leadership styles explained the greatest share of variance in SAW.

## Discussion

The results of this research demonstrate that leadership plays a decisive role in enabling SAW among public managers in Slovenian municipalities. Both quantitative and qualitative findings converge on the conclusion that supportive and adaptive leadership behaviors are essential for maintaining work ability, motivation, and engagement in later career stages.

First, the research found that transformational, authentic, and ethical leadership styles were positively associated with SAW. This confirms previous research emphasizing the motivational and relational functions of leadership (Ng & Feldman, 2015; Walumbwa et al., 2008). However, our findings extend this knowledge by showing that these leadership styles are especially salient in the public sector context, where managers face complex challenges and must sustain performance over long careers.

Secondly, the research highlighted that leadership supports SAW through job resources such as autonomy, social support, and meaningful work. This mediating role is consistent with the Job Demands–Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) and Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 2011), underlining that leadership strengthens resource gain spirals that buffer age-related challenges and foster motivation. The qualitative interviews provided further nuance, revealing that recognition of experience and flexibility in work arrangements were particularly valued resources that sustained older managers' engagement.

Most importantly, the results identified age-differentiated leadership as a unique and incremental predictor of SAW. Beyond general leadership styles, leaders who adjust expectations, encourage intergenerational knowledge transfer, and provide support without stereotyping were perceived as especially effective in enabling older managers to sustain confidence, adaptability, and engagement. This finding directly supports lifespan development perspectives, particularly Selection–Optimization–Compensation (Baltes & Baltes, 1990), by showing that leaders can actively enable employees' adaptive strategies when facing age-related changes. The qualitative evidence reinforced this, with participants explicitly describing how age-sensitive leadership practices allowed them to remain motivated and productive despite shifting capacities.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that leadership is both a general and an age-specific resource for SAW. By ranking the outcomes, it is clear that while transformational, authentic, and ethical leadership provide a strong foundation, it is age-differentiated leadership that emerges as the most significant contribution of this research. This highlights a critical implication for public administration: to sustain the work ability and motivation of an aging managerial workforce, leadership development must integrate not only general supportive practices but also age-sensitive approaches.

While this research offers valuable insights, some limitations should be noted. The relatively small sample (N = 98) constrains the power of the SEM and increases the risk

of Type II errors; future studies should replicate findings with larger samples and consider bootstrapping to test mediation effects. Moderate-to-high correlations among leadership styles also suggest potential multicollinearity, which could be addressed by reporting VIF statistics. Although internal consistency was strong, confirmatory factor analysis would further support construct validity in the Slovenian municipal context. The reliance on self-report data raises the possibility of common-method bias, and future research could include multi-source measures. Finally, the small qualitative sample (N = 8) may not capture the full diversity of managerial experiences; integrating joint displays of qualitative and quantitative results would strengthen meta-inferences.

## Conclusion

This research showed that leadership is a decisive factor in enabling SAW among public managers in Slovenian municipalities. Transformational, authentic, and ethical leadership were all positively associated with SAW through job resources such as autonomy, support, and meaningful work. Most importantly, age-differentiated leadership provided unique explanatory power beyond these general styles, demonstrating that adapting leadership practices to age-related needs is crucial for sustaining motivation, work ability, and engagement in later career stages. The central message is that age-differentiated leadership emerges as the most significant driver of SAW, offering both theoretical and practical pathways to sustain an aging public workforce.

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