

Integrating Age Management in Organizations: A Conceptual Framework and Empirical Insights

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Abstract

This manuscript aims to enhance understanding of age management practices at the organizational level by developing a conceptual model grounded in a qualitative research approach. Drawing on primary data from interviews, the study examines key performance indicators for the aging workforce within the organizational context. Workforce aging poses significant challenges for governments, employers, and individuals, requiring effective age-management strategies. The manuscript highlights employer drivers that call for action, the position of older workers in the labor market, and the role of age management. The study also addresses the distinct demographic landscape in Europe, particularly in Slovenia, where the elderly population is projected to constitute a significant portion of the total population by the end of the century. Based on the study's findings, a model of recommendations for managing older employees at the organizational level is introduced.

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Introduction

Over the span of 50,000 years, the global population reached one billion, with exponential growth observed since 1960 (Eurostat, 2020a). This growth has accelerated, with the population increasing by approximately one billion every decade or two. Alongside this rapid population growth, significant demographic shifts are evident in the population structure, particularly in age composition. Changes directly influence these shifts in fertility and mortality rates and vary considerably across different regions. Globally, the younger population continues to outnumber the elderly, a trend predominantly driven by less developed and developing countries. As of 2020, there were over 700 million individuals aged 65 and above worldwide, with projections indicating this number will rise by 1 billion over the next 3 to 4 decades (Bloom, 2020; Eurostat, 2023a; Eurostat, 2023b).

The age structure in Europe, and consequently in Slovenia, presents a distinct contrast to the global demographic landscape. Europe is the only region projected to experience population decline by 2050, primarily due to prolonged periods of extremely low fertility. Despite positive migration inflows (Eurostat, 2024), projections indicate a continuous population decline, with migration only moderating the pace of this trend. By the end of this century, the elderly population (aged 65 and over) is expected to constitute nearly one-third of the total population in the European Union (Eurostat, 2023a; Eurostat, 2023b). Similarly, in Slovenia, the elderly population will represent almost one-third of the total population by 2100. Additionally, the proportion of individuals in late old age (aged 80 and over) is increasing, with projections for Slovenia indicating a rise from 5.9% in 2025 to 15.4% by the end of the century (SURS, 2023; SURS, 2024a; SURS, 2024b).

Along with the population aging, the workforce also ages. To effectively leverage the aging population, age management initiatives should be implemented at multiple levels. The objective of our manuscript is to enhance the understanding of age management practices at the organizational level. This is achieved through the development of a conceptual model grounded in a qualitative research approach, incorporating insights from conducted interviews. Our study proposes a model of recommendations for managing older employees at the organizational level.

Our research offers recommendations for organizational-level managers on implementing age management practices effectively. Various concepts and strategies are beneficial for managers and decision-makers seeking to address the challenges of an aging workforce. These include the concept of active aging, which aims to ensure the health, social security, and inclusion of older individuals to enhance their quality of life. The success of active aging initiatives can be monitored using a range of relevant indicators. The combination of these indicators enables the implementation of measures that can improve the quality of life for older individuals, both privately and in the workplace.

Theoretical background

Workforce aging presents significant challenges for governments, employers, and individuals. The phenomenon of workforce aging is increasingly reshaping the labor market, necessitating that stakeholders devise strategic interventions to address attendant risks and capitalize on potential advantages (Takamura, 2002). In this manuscript, active aging is examined at the organizational level, with multiple implications for managers and leaders responsible for harnessing the potential of older workers. The World Health Organization defines active aging as the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation, and security in order to enhance the

quality of life as people age (Lak et al., 2020). Researchers have found that prioritizing active aging initiatives can yield several benefits for organizations, including improved employee well-being and increased productivity, as well as reduced healthcare costs (Lindsay-Smith et al., 2019; Estebansari et al., 2019; Cheung et al., 2017). By fostering an environment that supports the physical, mental, and social well-being of older workers, organizations can help mitigate the challenges associated with an aging workforce and ensure their employees can contribute effectively throughout their careers. This research focuses on the organizational level, highlighting employer drivers that necessitate action, the position of older workers in the labour market, and the role of age management within organizations (Dimovski et al., 2021).

The most pertinent indicators discussed in overarching theory of the integrated index of aging at the organizational level include the Active Ageing Index, the Aging Society Index, the Global AgeWatch Index, the John A. Hartford Foundation Aging Society Index, the Global Aging Preparedness Index, the Index of Well-Being - SCL/PRB Index, the Short Grit Scale, the AAI_locp Index, the Silver Work Index, the Later Life Work Index, and the Balanced Scorecard Model for managing the aging workforce (Dimovski et al., 2021).

The beforementioned overarching theory introduces the integrated index of aging at the organizational level as a conceptual framework for age management, encompassing eight principal fields of action: (1) Organizational culture, (2) Leadership – mental models, (3) Work design and ergonomics management, (4) Health management, (5) Knowledge management, (6) HRM-related to age management, (7) Age diversity – managing different generations, and (8) Age-related metrics (Dimovski et al., 2021).

The integrated index of aging at the organizational level serves as a conceptual framework for managing age management, encompassing eight principal fields of action: organizational culture, leadership mental models, work design and ergonomics management, health management, knowledge management, HRM related to age management, age diversity, and age-related metrics (Dimovski et al., 2021).

Propositions Development

Although our study is primarily exploratory, we recognize the importance of clearly articulating the underlying propositions that guide our model. Based on our findings, we propose the following propositions for future empirical testing:

- P1: A deep understanding of older employees' strengths and needs by management is positively associated with their organizational commitment.
- P2: Adjustments of working conditions tailored to older employees enhance their job satisfaction and retention.
- P3: An age-friendly organizational culture fosters a positive perception of older employees and organizational commitment.
- P4: Promotion of active aging practices contributes to improved physical and psychological well-being among older employees.
- P5: Motivational strategies specifically targeting older employees increase their engagement and willingness to extend their careers.

Methodology

The data for this qualitative study were collected over a period of six months from an organizational age management training program, during which ten interviews were conducted with team members at the Slovenian Dobrovita d.o.o. company, and the study was validated on August 7, 2024. In addition, an expert interview was conducted

with an expert in age management program development at Dobrovita d.o.o., as we opted to draw on multiple inductive qualitative sources to gain in-depth insights. To analyze the data, we used an inductive qualitative method, drawing from the content analysis (Stemler, 2000). Based on the analysis, the proposed model of recommendations for age management at the organizational level was developed.

Validity of the Research

To enhance the validity of our research, we employed a rigorous qualitative methodology grounded in content analysis. We triangulated data from ten semi-structured interviews with team members and an expert interview with a program developer at Dobrovita d.o.o., a company actively engaged in age management practices. This triangulation strengthens the credibility and dependability of our findings. Furthermore, we adhered to established qualitative research protocols, including coding and data saturation, to ensure that the conceptual model we developed is both empirically grounded and theoretically robust. Our approach aligns with recent best practices in qualitative organizational research (Gehman et al., 2018).

Results: Model of recommendations for age management at the organizational level

Our analysis revealed the need for a comprehensive, five-facet age-management practice model at the organizational level to implement successful aging at work proactively. Kooij et al. (2020) define successful aging at work as the proactive maintenance of, or adaptive recovery (after decline) to, high levels of ability and motivation to continue working among older workers. Figure 1 showcases the conceptual model of recommendations for age management practices at the organizational level, developed to support the proactive efforts to maintain successful aging at work as the adaptive efforts to recover and restore high ability and motivation to continue working result from a self-regulation process that involves goal engagement and disengagement strategies to maintain, adjust, and restore person-environment fit. The model, consisting of five facets of recommendations, assumes that all components function as a living organism, with recommendations used simultaneously rather than in sequence. The model includes recommendations for 1) a deep understanding of employees, 2) adjustment of working conditions, 3) promotion of active aging, 4) motivation of older employees, and 5) strengthening an age-friendly organizational culture.

Figure 1

Model of Recommendations for Managing Older Employees at the Organizational Level



Source: Authors' illustration

Deep Understanding of Employees - The recommendation for a deep understanding of employees primarily refers to the importance of knowing the specifics, strengths, and potential weaknesses of employees, particularly older ones, for effective leadership. If managers are aware of an employee's strong areas, they can direct their work to ensure maximum results in those areas. Similarly, by understanding employees' weaknesses, managers can guide them to work in other areas or provide the support they need to overcome challenges. Therefore, it is recommended that managers frequently monitor and engage in continuous conversations with employees about their work, well-being, and satisfaction, making it easier to identify their needs, specific concerns, and potential issues, and subsequently offer various programmatic solutions.

Adjustment of Working Conditions - The recommendation to adjust working conditions is closely linked to the previous recommendation of deeply understanding employees. The latter is a prerequisite for establishing and designing conditions that suit older employees. By understanding their specific needs, the work environment, tools, working hours, and work organization can be tailored accordingly.

Consequently, workspaces and tools should be adapted to the physical limitations of older individuals, including ergonomic solutions such as adjusted workstations, desks, and chairs; computer equipment; elevators; flat surfaces; bright spaces; and other relevant measures. Consideration should also be given to adjusted, flexible, or reduced working hours for older employees, as well as the introduction of various training and education programs to address potential work-related issues and necessary upgrades.

Promotion of Active Aging - The recommendation to promote active aging is considered valuable and relevant for implementation at the organizational level. The goal of this concept is to improve the quality of life in older age by strengthening physical, cognitive, social, and other human capabilities to ensure continued active social participation. The fundamental components of active aging relate to maintaining and improving health, inclusion, and social security, and managers are recommended to strengthen these areas. Managers should encourage their employees to lead healthy lifestyles and support them through various organizational activities. These can include regular physical exercise, health education, healthy eating, and the importance of self-care. The health of older employees is crucial to their ability to perform work physically and cognitively. Additionally, managers should pay special attention to employee inclusion, which can be achieved by incorporating their ideas and suggestions into organizational decisions and by ensuring they feel important and relevant through programs that pair older employees with younger colleagues as mentors and knowledge transmitters. Managers should also focus on the social security of older employees, as this group is often socially vulnerable due to their natural conditions. Managers must monitor the safety and well-being of their employees, as satisfying these spheres is a prerequisite for employees to fully dedicate their energy, time, and attention to performing their work successfully.

Motivating Older Employees - The recommendation to motivate older employees is crucial for their continued participation in the labor market, longer retention in companies, and preservation of specific knowledge within organizations. Managers are advised to implement motivational processes for older employees in a planned and structured manner, as this approach can achieve and measure desired results. Older employees can be motivated in various ways, including the previously mentioned adjustment of work tasks and the environment to their capabilities, rewards for work performance, incentives to extend their working life, and other similar measures. Measures that facilitate the meaningfulness of their work are of exceptional importance for increasing the work motivation of older employees. These include recognizing their contributions to the organization, considering their ideas and perspectives, and knowledge exchange programs in which older employees serve as mentors and share their experiences and skills with younger colleagues. It has been shown that this positively affects their self-perception and sense of meaningfulness of their work, increases their self-worth, and thus contributes to greater motivation to continue working even in later years.

Strengthening an Age-Friendly Organizational Culture - The recommendation to strengthen an age-friendly culture primarily calls for leadership that goes beyond merely delegating work tasks, creating a supportive, inclusive, and relaxed work environment grounded in clearly anchored core organizational values. Values that older employees can more easily identify with include inclusion, recognized contribution, trust, and equal opportunities, regardless of age. In this regard, the positive perception of older employees plays a crucial role. Managers are recommended to move away from viewing older employees as problematic or less capable, and instead focus on identifying their specific knowledge, skills, and

organizational contributions. If older employees feel appreciated, included, and relevant, they can more easily identify with organizational values, accept the organizational culture as their own, and strengthen their organizational commitment. This reduces the likelihood of their premature exit from the labor market, positively impacts their work engagement, and consequently increases the chances of organizational success.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings offer several contributions to research on active aging and age management at the organizational level, and provide implications for practice and future research. Recommendations for managers include a deep understanding of employees, adjustments to working conditions, the promotion of active aging, the motivation of older employees, and the strengthening of an age-friendly organizational culture. These recommendations are presented in a circular model, emphasizing their simultaneous application to effectively manage the aging workforce, in line with the overarching theory of Towards an Integrated Theory of Aging (Dimovski et al, 2021).

Theoretically, our manuscript contributes to the literature on age management by proposing a comprehensive five-facet model that integrates organizational culture, leadership, ergonomics, health, and motivation. This model extends the integrated theory of aging (Dimovski et al., 2021) by offering a practical framework for implementation at the organizational level. Our work also aligns with the process model of successful aging at work (Kooij et al., 2020), emphasizing proactive and adaptive strategies to maintain older employees' motivation and work ability.

Practically, the model provides actionable recommendations for managers seeking to support an aging workforce. These include regular employee assessments, ergonomic workplace adaptations, health promotion initiatives, structured mentoring programs, and inclusive leadership practices. By implementing these strategies, organizations can not only enhance employee well-being but also retain valuable institutional knowledge and improve organizational resilience.

Moreover, our findings are timely given the demographic shifts in Europe and the increasing proportion of older workers. The model serves as a strategic tool for human resource professionals and organizational leaders to design age-inclusive policies that align with broader societal goals of active aging and workforce sustainability.

Limitations of our study include its qualitative approach, which limits generalizability. Therefore, additional studies that incorporate both qualitative and quantitative research approaches are needed to further test and validate the proposed model. In addition, we also advise testing the model across different international approaches to age management.

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