

# Chapter 15

## Conclusion and Future Research

Dorien T.A.M. Kooij, Denise M. Rousseau, and P. Matthijs Bal

Employment relationships change as employees age. Scientists and policy makers are increasingly aware of the effects of aging on employees, and the challenges their employers face in providing appropriate work arrangements. Older workers think differently about the future and have different expectations and preferences than younger workers. They can perceive and experience their line manager, HR practices, job duties, and social activities quite differently than they did earlier in their lives, resulting in different (re)actions. Nonetheless, line managers and HR professionals are bombarded with popular articles and opinion pieces on managing older workers, often with little basis in scientific research. This book's aim has been to make research findings on aging and the employment relationship broadly available to scientists and practitioners. It integrates scientific findings regarding the age-related changes workers experience with applied research from Human Resource Management and Organizational Behavior. In doing so, chapter authors have provided scientific knowledge about the roles that leadership, psychological

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D.T.A.M. Kooij (✉)

Department of Human Resource Studies, University of Tilburg, Tilburg, The Netherlands  
e-mail: [T.A.M.Kooij@uvt.nl](mailto:T.A.M.Kooij@uvt.nl)

D.M. Rousseau

H. John Heinz III College, Carnegie Mellon University, Forbes Avenue 5000,  
Pittsburgh, PA 15213-3890, USA

Tepper School of Business, Carnegie Mellon University, Forbes Avenue 5000,  
Pittsburgh, PA 15213-3890, USA

e-mail: [denise@cmu.edu](mailto:denise@cmu.edu)

P.M. Bal

School of Management, University of Bath, Bath, UK

e-mail: [p.m.bal@bath.ac.uk](mailto:p.m.bal@bath.ac.uk)

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P.M. Bal et al. (eds.), *Aging Workers and the Employee-Employer Relationship*,  
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-08007-9\_15

contracts, and learning among others play in creating positive experiences for older workers and their employers. In this final chapter, we will highlight some key insights that arise from this integration and that cut across the different chapters.

## 15.1 Key Insights

### 15.1.1 *The Concept of Age*

A recurring theme has been the limited information value from knowing a person's calendar age. Age is merely a proxy for possible changes in the perception of time, health, abilities, motives, goals etc., that account for observed differences between younger and older workers (e.g., Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Sterns & Doverspike, 1989). Our chapter authors have emphasized the centrality of future time perspective in accounting for different reactions younger and older workers have to organizational rewards and HR practices. As Raemdonck and others demonstrate, for example, a person's future time perspective underlies the relationship between age and the importance of training and development goals. Older workers in general perceive fewer future opportunities at work and therefore pay less attention to training and development goals. Future time perspective also plays an important role in explaining age-related differences in the psychological contract and its effects and has a major influence on intention to continue working and decisions about and adjustment to bridge employment.

Nevertheless, other age-related changes are also important in explaining why younger and older workers may differ. We categorize these age-related changes according to the different conceptualizations of aging at work as distinguished by Sterns and Doverspike (1989). In addition to chronological or calendar age, Sterns and Doverspike distinguished functional or performance-based age. Chapter authors have demonstrated the importance of functional age, as indicated by health, changed cognitive abilities, and self-efficacy for example. Health influences intention to continue working and decisions about alternative forms of employment, changes in cognitive abilities influence leadership effectiveness, and self-efficacy has an influence on work-related learning and adjustment to bridge employment. Another conceptualization is psychosocial age (Sterns & Doverspike), which refers to the self and social perception of age. Future time perspective is an indicator of self-perceived age. Other indicators of self-perceived age referred to in this book are subjective age, subjective life expectancy, and meta-stereotypes. These self-perceptions of age influence work attitudes, intention to continue working, and decisions related to bridge employment. Social perceptions of age refer to age norms and age stereotypes, which influence line manager support of and behavior toward older workers and intention to continue working according to chapter authors. Relative age is also an important indicator of social age and refers to age compared to team members or the supervisor, for example. Relative age has important implications for leadership effectiveness among others. The fourth conceptualization of aging at work is

organizational age (Sterns & Doverspike), as indicated by work-related expertise or obsolescence, organization tenure, and career stage, which might explain age differences in reactions to HR practices.

These are all relevant age-related changes that might explain why older workers have different experiences with respect to the employment relationship than younger workers. On top of that, we should not forget that these age-related changes might also counterbalance each other (e.g., Bal, De Lange, Zacher, & Van der Heijden, 2013). As Zacher and others note, several countervailing age-related mechanisms may underlie relatively weak or even null relationships between age and work outcomes. Zacher and colleagues in this book argue, for example, that although older leaders are less extravert and less open to experience, they may be as effective as younger leaders, because their increased conscientiousness and emotional stability offsets age-related decreases in extraversion and openness to experience. In addition, Boehm and Kunze note that differences in calendar age in itself might be more important in early life stages of a team compared to later points in time, when age-related changes in values become more relevant. Hence, it seems that the importance of underlying mechanisms might also differ in different contexts and change over time. Thus, in line with Kooij and colleagues (2008), we propose that aging is a multi-faceted phenomenon, which manifests itself in the workplace through different mechanisms. However, there is much research needed to further disentangle the differential effects of aging in the workplace.

### ***15.1.2 Individualized Perspective on Older Workers***

Older workers are a very heterogeneous group of people. Although most younger workers typically have low organization tenure and no children, older workers can have low, moderate or high tenure, and no, multiple or even grand-children. As Bal and Jansen indicate in this book, increased heterogeneity among older workers is due to the fact that existing characteristics are reinforced as people become older, personalities are further shaped by the characteristics of their social class, and their phenotypic variability increases over the life course. In effect, although age-related changes do exist, not all older workers experience the same changes, and the older people get, the more different they become from their age peers.

As a result of this increased heterogeneity, multiple authors in this book propose to take a more individualized and action-oriented perspective on older workers. Older workers may play an active role in increasing their motivation, health, and performance by crafting their jobs, negotiating I-deals, and engaging in informal self-directed learning. Several chapters emphasize that older workers can be agents of their own adjustment as they approach retirement, for example by pursuing bridge employment when they find opportunities to facilitate a transition from full-time work are lacking (Ainsworth; Rudolph et al.; Zhan and Wang). Older workers have more alternative forms of employment and intrinsically valued activities available and increasingly tap this array of alternatives and activities. Together these

alternative arrangements provide opportunities for older workers to continue working beyond retirement on their own terms. Hence, it is no longer sufficient for organizations to provide employees standardized employment arrangements that should be beneficial for every employee. Provision of standardized training programs, for example, is effective to some extent, but to actually motivate older workers, ensure their productivity, and maintain their well-being, a more individualized approach stimulating older workers own initiative is necessary.

### ***15.1.3 Importance of HRM and the Role of Line Managers***

The organization and its managers too play an important role in the work lives of older people. As shown by Kooij and Van De Voorde (Chap. 4), different combinations or bundles of HR practices have an influence on older worker motivation and performance, and potentially on their health. Training opportunities adapted to the needs of older workers are a major motivator to continue working (see also Chap. 11 by Schalk and Desmette). When supportive practices are combined to target the needs of older workers (e.g., training coupled with an enriched job), HR practices can foster a positive inclusive climate where older workers are valued (see Boehm and Kunze in Chap. 3). HR practices for older workers signal to employees that older workers are important contributors, and hence are likely to elicit positive reactions among older workers. However, Schalk and Desmette (Chap. 11) also point towards the perverted effects that could arise from HR practices specifically targeted at older workers, because younger workers may feel treated unfairly in comparison with the older workers in the organization. Second, HR practices influence older workers outcomes by shaping the psychological contract (see Bal, Kooij, & De Jong, 2013; Vantilborgh and colleagues in Chap. 7). HR practices thus provide a basis for present and future expectations that promote positive attitudes and behaviors.

Finally, line managers facilitate (or impede) the effect of HR practices on older workers. As argued by Knies and colleagues (Chap. 5), line managers have an influence on the work experiences and outcomes of older workers both as policy enactors and through direct leadership behavior. Line managers are becoming more and more responsible for the implementation of HR practices, and can tailor HR practices to the needs of individual employees. Line managers also provide support to older workers through their leadership, the signals they send about the value of older workers and their willingness to show them consideration and respect. However, leadership effectiveness is influenced by the age of the leader and the age of the follower. Zacher and colleagues, for example, propose that older followers respond more positively to relational-oriented leader behaviors compared to task-oriented behaviors. In sum, line managers become increasingly responsible and accountable for the motivation, productivity and sustainable employability of aging workers, but more research is needed on effective leadership behavior for aging workers.

### ***15.1.4 Context Matters for Older Workers***

The importance of the context is emphasized throughout this book. Authors mention an array of contextual factors across levels from the individual to society. At the individual level, they mention the type of work for example, at the team and organizational level, they mention age diversity and organizational climate for example, and at the macro level, they mention national culture, institutional regulations on retirement age and social benefit systems, and macro-economic conditions for example. These context variables can be enablers or obstacles, acting as a source of resources or demands. Contextual enablers or resources might include specific HR practices, line manager or coworker support, or an age-friendly climate. Contextual obstacles or demands might include social pressure, age norms, and the limited time available for line managers to implement HR practices.

Contextual or situational variables determine to a large extent the effect of aging on the employment relationship. Boehm and Kunze (Chap. 3), for example, point at the specific role of age-diversity climate or climate for inclusion as an enabler for positive age-diversity effects. Vantilborgh and colleagues (Chap. 7) mention the role of the environment in which older employees work as an important context variable with respect to the psychological contract and argue that age dissimilarity determines whether employees will perceive their contract as replicable and malleable. Finally, Bal and Jansen (Chap. 8) and Kooij, Tims, and Ruth Kanfer (Chap. 9) mention task interdependence and coworker reactions as important contextual variables influencing the negotiation of I-deals and job crafting. Last, a key contextual factor noted by Finkelstein (Chap. 2) is age stereotyping, which generally has negative effects on the opportunities and experiences of older workers. Such stereotypes include unsubstantiated biases regarding the learning capabilities of older workers or their motivation to continue working. Age biases and stereotypes are prevalent at several levels, from the society to the organization and its work groups.

## **15.2 Future Research**

More research is needed regarding why outcomes related to the employment relationship change with age. Recently, more studies are starting to focus on underlying mechanisms, such as future time perspective and occupational expertise, explaining why work motives and the influence of psychological contract fulfillment for example change with age (e.g., Bal, De Lange, Zacher, & Van der Heijden, 2013; Kooij, De Lange, Jansen, & Dikkers, 2013). However, we need not only studies identifying underlying mechanisms such as cognitive changes and normative beliefs, but also research regarding measures that can counteract such effects. We know from the literature on lifespan development that future time perspective, for instance, can change (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999; Seijts, 1998), for example by improving working conditions or by offering a longer future outlook within the

organization. In addition, recalling that older workers are a heterogeneous group, future research should seek to establish whether there are subgroups of older workers that share perception of time, abilities, motives, etc. This would help policy makers in government and private organizations to develop appropriate measures.

Second, the theoretical toolkit used in studies of aging and its effects draws largely from lifespan theories, such as the Selection Optimization and Compensation model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990) and Socioemotional Selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1995). Other important theories are neglected, including theories related to resilience (Luthar, 2006) and positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Resilience refers to positive adaptation despite adversity, such as age-related declines. Staudinger, Marsiske, and Baltes (1995) argue that resilience is a major feature of psychological aging, which can be enhanced by interventions and age-friendly environments (see also Caza & Milton, 2011). Positive psychology is a science of positive subjective experience and positive individual traits, which might unfold over an entire lifespan (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Greater scholarly attention is needed on positive adaptation, positive individual traits, and institutional arrangements for improving the quality of (working) life.

The active role older workers play in the employment relationship is a third particularly fruitful avenue for future research. Research on concepts regarding “the active employee” such as job crafting, I-deals, self-directed learning, and career self-management among older workers, is relatively new. We don’t know to what extent or how older workers engage in these active behaviors. In addition, we don’t know the motives older workers might have for engaging in these types of behaviors. Older workers might craft their job to keep an interest in their job or to accommodate diminished physical abilities. They might engage in self- or bridge employment to increase work schedule flexibility or simply to make money. In other words, older workers might be forced to engage in these proactive behaviors or they might choose to do so themselves.

Finally, few studies focus on HR practices and line manager or leadership behavior with respect to older workers. Hence, we know too little about which specific HR practices for older workers actually have an effect on such important outcomes as worker performance, active behaviors and health. In addition, although some studies have demonstrated that the influence of mainstream HR practices on work attitudes changes with age, more research is needed on the influence of age and age-related factors on relations between mainstream HR practices and other outcomes. Moreover, future research should focus on understanding effective leadership behavior for older workers, because of the important role of leadership in shaping organizational climate, setting or enacting policy, and modeling age-friendly beliefs.

### 15.3 Practical Implications

From this book’s authors we can draw a number of valuable lessons for governments, employers, and older workers themselves. Governments can play an important role when it comes to the employment relationship of aging workers. They can

reconsider existing regulations regarding retirement. A compulsory retirement age forces older workers to retire at a given point in time, thereby limiting their future time perspective. Governments also can support older workers who desire to continue working through use of financial incentives and social benefit systems. They can also facilitate alternative forms of employment, such as bridge employment and self-employment among older workers, by adjustments to tax laws and pension systems.

The lessons for employers are numerous. Most importantly, organizations should strive for an age-friendly climate. Such a climate is fostered through appropriate age-specific HR practices and leadership behavior. On the one hand, practitioners can learn general lessons about appropriate HR practices and leadership roles from this book's discussion of lifespan theories and research findings. For example, leaders' role requirements could capitalize on age-related gains in characteristics such as crystallized intelligence and generativity. On the other hand, line managers can take advantage of opportunities for dialogue with their aging workers in order to tailor HR practices to their needs. Recalling one of this book's themes, employers should not blindly assume that the age-related changes observed in research apply to all older workers. Individual needs and situations must be taken in to account.

Finally, older workers play a role in keeping themselves motivated, productive and healthy. Since older workers know their own motives and abilities, they can take initiative to adapt their job so that it better fits their motives and abilities or they can negotiate special terms with their employer, for example about their work schedule or specific training programs. Older workers can even take their initiative a step further by exploring alternative forms of employment, consulting, volunteering, or start up opportunities. The combined efforts of governments, employers, and older workers are required in optimizing the employment relationship of aging workers.

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