Who could thrive in late career? Answers for both employees and employers

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The alarming statistics about the fast rates of population aging in the last 30 years and the possible negative economic and societal consequences of this process, have prompted many employers to consider their aging workforce more seriously. Yet, workers aged 55 years and over are not always utilized or valued as much as they could be in the workplace. Many of them realize the need to work for longer than anticipated, due to economic pressures and changes in official retirement ages. For some, this will require a change in perspective and strategies for managing self and career.

The emerging concept of 'successful aging at work' is one good way for explaining constructive changes in self-image and strategies in late career. For some researchers successful aging at work is a developmental process where growth is still possible. Others talk about 'thriving at work', which expresses the idea of people's simultaneous experiences of both a sense of vitality and learning/growth in the workplace. As common age stereotypes question older workers' ability to be pro-active and develop themselves, then is it possible to thrive in late career and if so, what does thriving look like?

In 2013 we decided to investigate how people age in the workplace and, more specifically, what personal and organizational strategies are most effective in helping late career workers to not just survive (i.e. focus mostly on meeting inevitable job demands), but also thrive (i.e. still aspire for and achieve personal and professional development) at work. In late 2013/ early 2014 we interviewed 37 employees aged 55 years and over from 10 large organizations in 2 sectors (healthcare and information and communication technologies) in 2 European countries (the United Kingdom and Bulgaria).

Overall, we found that late career employees across countries and sectors, were likely to recognize the occurrence of some age-related changes in their work values, needs, approaches, and capacity. Further, the process of aging at work was conceptualized in rather positive than negative terms (i.e. development instead of decline). These changes, in turn, shaped workers' views about the types of work environment and organizational support they wanted. Most importantly, older workers appeared to be more aware of

their own potential and needs, willing to take a pro-active approach in managing late careers, and desiring opportunities for personal and professional growth than they are traditionally portrayed in the aging workforce literature.

Most of our interviewees shared that they still felt energized and were learning/developing themselves (i.e. thriving), though perhaps in slightly different ways than earlier in their career. For instance, finding meaningful work and a positive social work environment was considered more important than achieving a promotion or cutting off work hours. However, the priority for some participants was to survive in the workplace, i.e. cope with high work demands by preserving and/or maintain their mental and physical resources.

We identified two sub-categories of surviving in late career: meeting job demands (i.e. updating job skills and using strategies to ensure adequate job performance) and preserving the status quo (i.e. unwillingness to learn or update skills, and desire to stay away from workplace change initiatives).

We also found that late career workers were likely to self-regulate their successful adaptation to age-related changes in the workplace by using three types of individual strategies: selection (reducing one's range of tasks to 1-2 priorities), compensation (demonstrating one's strengths in front of others), and optimization (improving one's skills through training and development). Our interviewees felt that when able to use these strategies (e.g. have more autonomy and control over their jobs), they were performing better and deriving more pleasure from their work.

Finally, we found associations between late career employees' experiences of thriving and surviving in the workplace and the types of desired organizational support. Work meaningfulness, knowledge transfer, and inclusion in organizational decision making appeared as the types of organizational support associated only with thriving at work. Contributing to one's own work design, socializing with colleagues, equal access to formal and informal learning, constructive feedback from line managers, access to flexible working options, and access to good benefits systems with bigger focus on healthcare and extra holiday seemed to be associated with feelings of surviving. However, only the last two were associated with surviving protecting the status quo.

These results are important, because they suggest some general patterns of workers' self-regulation in late career, as well as insights about what particular types of organizational practices can be efficient in supporting employees in terms of both thriving (i.e. development) and surviving (i.e. maintenance) in the workplace and potential paths to successful aging at work.

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