THE PRODUCTIVE WORK FORCE ISSUE CALLS FOR NEW COMBINED ACTIONS

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Abstract

Because of the prospective reduction in the availability of labour it is a wise policy to take good care of the present employees. The correct utilization and well-being of labour requires taking many simultaneous measures in the work organizations. Our latest experiences and knowledge indicate that the main point here is how to combine the work ability of employees with economic productivity in a new way. This way is based on the notion that the business goals of a company can be achieved most reliably by healthy, motivated and satisfied personnel. This is a very topical multidisciplinary task for which a new research, education and development institute was founded at the University of Tampere. Together with Finnish and foreign experts the institute creates three types of new products to promote people's work ability (and lifetime learning), knowledge management, and incentive activities, motivation and rewarding systems.

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Introduction

The utilization and sufficiency of work force constitute a multidisciplinary set of problems that is reflected on all levels of society. In Finland, for example, more work forces will exit the labour market in the next few years than enter it. Presently the average early retirement age in Finland is 59. Declining birth rates and longer life expectancies have distorted the population structure in most industrialized countries, but at the same time it has made active, skilled and productive work force highly wanted. For this reason some new kind of measures have been taken and interdisciplinary research has been conducted in connection with the FourFive project, pertaining to the maintenance and promotion of the work ability and performance of personnel in companies different sectors and types of work organizations in the Tampere region (Pirkanmaa) in Finland. The researches have been conducted and the procedures tested in companies representing the textile and clothing industry, the shoe and leather industry, the building sector, the building services sector, and public transportation. These are typical sectors under structural transition, which are currently undergoing rapid and radical changes.
Material and methods

Data were collected by postal inquiries from companies representing the above five sectors. The inquiries and interviews were addressed both to the management and to employees. A particular focus during company visits was on aging workers, that is, 40 years or older. The results were expressed in the form of distributions, cross-tabulations, averages and combined variables.

Results

Besides indicating certain demographic trends the results also reveal the urgency of a new kind of approach to this issue. From the point of view of the entire educational system it is particularly interesting that most of the personnel in the enterprises of these sectors wish to have in-house training at the workplace. This reveals a basic paradox of the information society: contrary to expectations, only 5 to 7 percent of the personnel in these workplaces find distance learning based on information networks, self-education, or training in educational institutions suitable for them.

Fig. 1. Effect of age structure on the operation of the workplace in the near future in enterprises of the textile and clothing industry in relation to the number of employees (n=250)
**Fig. 2.** Effect of age structure on the operation of the workplace in the near future in enterprises of the shoe and leather industry in relation to the number of employees (n=40)

**Fig. 3.** Effect of age structure on the operation of the workplace in the near future in enterprises of the building services sector in relation to the number of employees (n=90)
**Fig. 4.** Assessments of the age until which employees will be able to continue working and overall satisfaction with life in enterprises of the textile and clothing industry, shoe and leather industry, and the building services sector (n=498)

**Fig. 5.** Subjective experience of age and overall satisfaction with life in enterprises of the textile and clothing industry, shoe and leather industry and building services sector (n=549)
Fig. 6. Factors to be influenced in workplaces of the textile and clothing industry, shoe and leather industry and the building services sector (n=533)

The results also reveal an illusion concerning the waging policy: the meaningfulness of work is generally considered a central incentive related to
the willingness of older workers to keep on working. Only 3 to 7 percent of the respondents considered economic incentives more important than meaningful work.

**Satisfaction increases people's willingness to continue working**

Moreover, the results indicate that in all these sectors the present age structure in big enterprises (aging personnel) is expected to influence the operation of the workplace in the near future (Figures 1-3).

To provide background for an extensive training, research and development programme to be launched in the future, we wanted to find out the age until which people think they will be able to work full-time in their present job. We also wanted to shed some additional light on the factors that can motivate aging workers to keep on working. We have already noted that money and other economic incentives are of little importance in motivating aging employees to continue working. To define and concretize a suitable selection of means we asked the respondents to assess their satisfaction with, for example, their present life situation and various areas pertaining to it. The areas to be assessed included their health status, work situation, mental balance, family life, other human relations, financial situation, housing situation and life in general. The respondents assessed their satisfaction on a combined numeric-verbal scale, where the numbers 1-2 represented strong dissatisfaction and the numbers 9-10 strong satisfaction. The overall satisfaction of each respondent was characterized by a sum variable calculated as the arithmetic means of the ratings of individual areas.

As Figure 4 shows, the respondents' assessments of the age until which they would be able to continue working depends on their overall satisfaction with life. Only 54 % of the respondents who were dissatisfied with their life thought that they would be able to keep working until the age of 60 or even longer. The corresponding figure for the respondents with a neutral attitude towards their life was 58 %, while as many as 75 % of the respondents who were generally satisfied with their life intended to continue working until the age of 60 or longer.

**Subjective experience is important**

Age usually refers solely to people's chronological age measured in years. But we were also interested to find out how people's subjective age affects their views about their retirement age. Subjective age is generally regarded as a dose meter that reflects people's energy level and activity or their lack of energy and fatigue. So we asked the respondents how they felt their age: much younger than their age (about 10 years), somewhat younger than their age (about 5 years), as old as their age, somewhat older than their age (about 5 years) or much older than their age (about 10 years)?

As Figure 5 shows, out of all respondents satisfied with their life in the textile and clothing industry, shoe and leather industry and building services,
60% assessed their subjective age much or somewhat younger than their chronological age in years. Out of the satisfied respondents in the shoe and leather industry even 69% assessed their subjective age younger than their chronological age. Correspondingly, out of all respondents dissatisfied with their life in the three sectors, 37% assessed their subjective age younger than their chronological age. The differences are statistically significant.

**Concrete points calling for development**

As the results clearly indicate, the well-being of employees and the use of labour is a very complicated issue. To ensure that the development to be carried out in enterprises will be as useful and relevant to the present needs we also charted the factors that the respondents would like to affect in their own workplace. The respondents were asked to mark the three most important of a total of 22 factors.

The information we collected reveal that the development needs in companies of different sectors are amazingly similar. In almost one out of two enterprises the acute development needs were related to the mental and physical fitness for work, a more positive workplace atmosphere and increase of interaction and community nature of the workplace.

In general, mental fitness for work, waging, physical fitness for work, cooperation, a more positive workplace atmosphere, improved information flows, as well as human relations at the workplace were the most important factors that should be paid attention to in the workplaces (Figure 6).

Compared to other factors, the promotion of mental fitness for work is perhaps the most urgent point to be improved. About every second (47%) respondent in the shoe and leather industry, 54% of the respondents in building services and 41% of the respondents in the textile and clothing industry mentions mental fitness for work as a point that should be improved.

Fatigue and uneven loading cause a lot of symptoms in employees: 79.9 percent of workers and 75.8 percent of office workers reported having symptoms of the upper back region. 83.6 percent of the women under study reported having symptoms of the upper back region during the last year. Although exercise during breaks is known to increase job satisfaction and performance, in reality there are only a few companies that have put this notion into practice. In this respect there seems to be an actual lack of vision: despite the prevalence of symptoms, most companies in the sectors under study have failed to take any measures to promote and maintain the fitness for work of older workers. In particular small enterprises have usually failed to take any such measures. There are also differences in the working culture among small and big enterprises: employees of small and micro-enterprises usually want to retire 3 to 4 years earlier than their colleagues in bigger enterprises.
Discussion

In the light of the expected reduction in the availability of labour it is evident that there is every reason to keep present employees healthy, happy and motivated. However, maintaining the availability and well-being of the labour requires many simultaneous measures in work organizations: it requires good management, promotion of health, an open atmosphere, mutual respect and trust, assuming responsibility for oneself and one's working community, continuous learning and assessment of information, development of internal communications, a radical reform of the training culture, the restoration of joy and positive experiences in work, and rewarding and motivating the employees.

The work organization itself will assume a central role here. We are convinced that comprehensive and extensive development of work organizations offers a rapid and effective tool for improving the human resources and expertise of companies, which in turn will increase their competitiveness. As a whole, the information and experiences we have gathered over the course of many years suggests that in the future it will be of central importance to combine the work ability of the personnel of companies and work organizations with economic productivity.

This is a big issue in terms of national and business economy. No doubt, it will also pose great challenges to the research of complex combined effects. The situation calls for a more innovative approach but above all closer cooperation between the representatives of traditional health and economic sciences and also between different schools of thought. The willingness of companies to maximize the benefits drawn from the use of media depends essentially on the manager's favourable attitude towards the issue. Besides the promotion of people's readiness and preconditions to get information from external media, it is also of central importance that inside working communities and enterprises information, opinions and experiences can be exchanged and transmitted to other people without obstacles, distortion and delays. It is worthwhile underlining that there is a huge amount of knowledge at all levels of an organization. Especially, in this case it would be appropriate to use terms like knowledge-sharing or organizational learning.

Knowledge sharing is, first and foremost, about people. So we are looking at a human problem, not a technology problem. However, it is not about managing people. Nor it is about managing knowledge. As our results show, common information and discussion events arranged for all staff members are the most suitable means to this end. The ultimate goal of such collective staff meetings should be to create new values in a new way by improving the efficiency and effectiveness of individual and collaborative knowledge.

As we have already seen, money is a poor incentive for keeping aging employees active in the working life. A rise of a few tens of euros in the salary or retirement pension is not enough to induce people to continue working.
Accordingly, most respondents of our research think that the system of wages and rewards should be changed. In their opinion, this could be achieved by lighter income taxes, a change of the structure of wages, paid vacations and a number of different incentives. However, the most effective incentive is finding meaning and satisfaction in one's job. For this reason, we should give serious consideration to how the appreciation of work, incentive rewards, motivation through certain benefits and better working conditions could be used more effectively in various work organizations.

What we need to maintain people's work ability and postpone early retirement is an unprejudiced approach to creating and experimenting with radically different incentives as an integral part of a continuous and comprehensive development of the entire work organization and people's well-being at work. As far as I can see it, it appears that incentive activities should be developed with a view to the entire career of the employee from the moment he first entered the workplace to the moment he will leave it for the last time.

It goes without saying that appropriate distribution of information at the workplace and knowledge management within a company has a decisive impact on the success of incentive activities as well as the system of wages and rewards.

It is also essential that in this context work ability is understood in a broad sense that includes all stages and areas of life (work, life and ability). A good starting point for such innovations is provided by our finding that people are the more willing to continue working, the more energetic and satisfied with their own life they are and the more meaningful they find the work. And vice versa, overall stress and lack of balance between work and life is to be one of the issues dominating the human resource agenda tomorrow. To put it briefly, a wellbeing and able worker is a productive worker.

Conclusions

In other words, the parallel development of labour and business policies, and areas of family, social, health and education policy is the very means that could in the future prevent such panic situations that the western societies now face due to the population structure, inconsiderate use and decreasing supply of labour power.

It is particularly important to encourage the managers of small enterprises to see the general picture. In the training and development activities of enterprises the management should consider the work ability of the personnel (and lifetime learning, which helps maintain and promote it), incentive activities, motivation and knowledge management.
This, together with the productification of services suited for different work organizations, is also the main objective of the newly established Institute for High Ability of Work Organizations of the University of Tampere. Right from the outset, the operational guidelines of the institute included the idea that none of these areas can be separate and independent of others, but the entire operation must be interactive to produce synergy and added value (Figure 7).

Although the newly established Institute for High Ability of Work Organizations is an academic unit, the productification of all training and coaching services related to business and working life and the multidisciplinary operations try to ensure that the training and coaching are as practice-oriented as possible and are based on the real needs of companies and work organizations. But knowing the needs of companies and work organizations requires continuous feedback and reliable collection of information. To ensure the desired results, it is also useful to consider the special characteristics of both the work organization and the sector in designing the contents of development measures this is necessary because the age structures and also the ages of the oldest employees vary between sectors.

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