Useful simultaneous actions in work organizations to retain ageing workers motivated, healthy and productive

Olavi Manninen

Institute for High Ability of Work Organizations, Business Research Centre, The School of Business Administration, FIN-33014 University of Tampere, Finland

Abstract - Due to the on-going decrease in available labour force, it is essential to take good care of those currently employed. A few means to this end proposed by people working in enterprises of the Tampere-Pirkannaa region representing sectors under structural transition are face-to-face training at the workplace, more information on both ageing and physical fitness and ageing and mental fitness, personnel meetings, more positive workplace atmosphere and improved leadership, supporting the mental and physical endurance of workers, meaningful work, changes in the wage system, and active recovery breaks during working hours. Maintaining the well-being of employed people thus requires besides simultaneous actions taken by individuals also and above all a new kind of interdisciplinary qualitative development of work organisations. The main point is in combining the fitness for work of employees and profitability of companies: the best way to ensure attainment of the business goals of a company is to take care that the personnel is motivated, skilled, healthy and satisfied with their work and their life. The above results were derived from the extensive multidisciplinary FourFive research and training project. The project is estimated to have reached a total of ten thousand persons in a total of 1212 enterprises and work organisations of the Tampere-Pirkannaa region in Finland. The project was realised during 1999-2002.

Keywords: Work organisations, Ageing labour force, Worksite actions, Motivating, Rewarding, Well-being, Productivity

INTRODUCTION

The utilisation 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 force will exit the labour market in the next few years than enter it. 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.

A particularly topical subject today is how to support the overall fitness for work of ageing people and encourage them to keep on working.

Frankly, both the competitiveness of companies and the general well-being will in near future depend largely on the work ability of ageing workers. Another issue with impacts on the national economy is also how fit and healthy the baby boomer generation will retire and enjoy their retirement. Young people should - considering their own interests - be aware of this issue and try to develop work and working communities with a view to keeping ageing workers happy, motivated and willing to keep on working. The growing share of people enjoying social benefits means an accumulating economic burden to be borne by young adults actively involved in working life.

Correct investments on ageing workers are proven profitable. Keeping the oldest workers of a workplace active and working a few years longer may produce annual savings of tens of thousands of euros per worker.

EXPERIMENTAL

Working and acting under conditions of transition and change requires special endurance. For this reason the development and support offered by the research and training activities of this project (the FourFive project) was specially addressed to sectors under structural transition, such as the textile and clothing sector, the shoe and leather sector, the building sector, the building services sector and public transportation. In other words, the target group of the project was mainly Pirkannaa county -based enterprises representing these sectors and their personnel. For reference purposes, the target group also included the expert services sector, which is known to be a predominantly white-collar sector.

The project was divided into three operational phases: sector chartings (n=263, n=322), company-specific (n=31) and personal (n=646) chartings of human resources and work organisations of the Tampere-Pirkannaa region in Finland. The project was realised during 1999-2002.

The results showed that the age of the oldest workers varied between small enterprises more than between bigger enterprises, in other words, in bigger enterprises the oldest workers were of about the same age. On the
other hand, age structure also reflected the age of the company: the older the company, the older the staff.

The oldest senior workers were found in the public transportation sector (mean age 58.3 years) and the youngest senior workers in the building sector (mean age 51.8 years). In the shoe and leather sector the oldest workers were on average 57.4 years of age, in the expert services sector 56.7 years, in the textile and clothing sector 5.6 years and in the building services sector 54.7 years.

In all sectors the age structure of the personnel (ageing of employees) was thought to affect the operation of the enterprise in near future more often in bigger enterprises of more than 20 employees than in smaller enterprises of 1-19 employees (Fig. 1). In the textile and clothing sector as many as 82 % of the managers and 72 % of the employees of bigger enterprises believed the age structure to affect the operation of the workplace.

Despite the recognized adverse effects of the age structure, most enterprises in these sectors had not taken any special measures to maintain and promote the work ability of the ageing workers (Fig. 2). This was particularly true of small enterprises.

A finding of special interest with a view to finding a quick remedy to the situation is that the willingness of the seniors to keep working depends on whether special measures to promote the work ability of ageing workers have been taken at the workplace or not. For instance, in the textile and clothing sector in small enterprises of 1-19 employees 77 % and in bigger enterprises of more than 20 employees 65 % of the oldest workers at the workplace were willing to continue working until the official retirement age of 65 if the enterprise had taken special measures to promote the work ability of ageing workers (see also [8]).

Money proved a poor incentive for keeping ageing 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. The meaningfulness of work, on the other hand, was perceived an important incentive in getting ageing workers to continue working. Economic incentives were rated more important than meaningful work only by 3-7 % of the respondents (Fig. 3).

Most respondents thought that the system of wages and rewards should be changed. In their opinion, this could be achieved by lighter income taxes, increasing the accumulation of pension in later working years, bonus systems and a number of other similar incentives and free vacations.

The main reason for keeping ageing workers motivated was generally stated to be keeping their know-how available in the company and thus ensuring the continuity of the operation. It was also believed that the quality of products and productivity would improve this way. Other benefits were seen in a more positive workplace atmosphere, less absenteeism and improved working conditions. Only a few respondents stated that they did not find any benefit in the utilization of the know-how of ageing workers and it had no effect on the workplace (Fig. 4).

In all sectors mental endurance, workplace atmosphere and management were the three most acute desirable areas to be
Fig. 5. Things to be influenced on at the workplace, by sectors

- Mental endurance
- Waging
- More positive attitudes
- Information flow availability
- Physical endurance
- Cooperation
- Human relations at workplace
- Leadership
- Fact-oriented management
- Pleasant environment
- Facing changes

![Chart showing distribution of factors influenced across sectors.]

Fig. 6. Present satisfaction with life and estimate on continuing work (all sectors)

- Dissatisfied (n=196)
- Neutral (n=157)
- Satisfied (n=315)

![Bar chart showing satisfaction levels across sectors.]

Fig. 7. Most desirable ways to provide information and training related to ageing

- Face-to-face training at workplace
- Provided by a training producer
- By modern media, demonstrations and individual guidance at workplaces
- Self education at home
- Self education at workplaces
- In an educational institution with the training producer
- Distance learning, based on information networks etc.

![Bar chart showing preferred training methods across sectors.]

Fig. 8. Suitability of different means to create cooperation by sectors (means considered most suitable by respondents)

- Personnel meeting
- Quality team
- Cell meeting
- Personnel inquiry
- Management inspection
- Initiative box
- Bulletin board

![Bar chart showing cooperation methods across sectors.]

Fig. 9. Benefit of recovery breaks to own work endurance among workers who do recovery exercises (n=62)

- Thought to promote endurance
- Not thought to promote endurance

![Bar chart showing benefits of recovery breaks across sectors.]

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developed in the workplace. Wage system was also considered important.

About every second respondent found the most acute development needs in companies to be related to promoting the mental endurance of the personnel (Fig. 5).

In particular those respondents who deemed it necessary to pay more attention to mental endurance of personnel also wanted to draw attention to physical endurance.

Those ageing workers who did not find it necessary to pay more attention to mental endurance, nevertheless called for the development of management-related issues (facing changes, vision of future, fact-oriented management, leadership and wage system) as well as factors affecting the workplace atmosphere (human relations at the workplace, more positive attitudes, availability and free flow of information, cooperation).

Besides the meaningfulness of the work and endurance promoting measures carried out in enterprises, peoples own estimates on their retirement age were affected by the general satisfaction with life. Among those satisfied with their life as many as 77 % believed that they would continue working full-time in their occupation at least till the age of 60 and beyond (Fig. 6). One half of those not satisfied with their life thought to be able to continue in their present occupation till the age of 60 or beyond.

The respondents were unanimous that the most important areas of information and topics to be covered by training were, on one hand, age and mental endurance, and, on the other hand, age and physical endurance as well as ergonomics.

In all sectors, in-house learning at the very workplace was regarded as the most effective and suitable form of face-to-face training and information dissemination. The respondents wished that school would come to the workplace. The significance of communication and demonstrations was also emphasised and preferred to private studies, distance learning based on information networks (including internet) and training arranged in educational institutions (Fig. 7).

Our findings further revealed that in general the personnel of small productive enterprises were particularly interested in such training events that involved outdoor activities in natural surroundings and with adventuring activities. By contrast, training events arranged outside the company during working hours were not found interesting even if they had well-known lecturers and topical subjects.

Regarding in-house communication, in all of the five sectors, personnel meetings were considered the most suitable communication method for preparing development measures at the workplace. In the work organisations of the expert services sector both personnel meetings and personnel inquiries were estimated to be equally suitable methods of communication (Fig. 8).

On the other hand, the bulletin board was rated the least suitable means of internal communication in the companies representing the shoe and leather sector, textile and clothing sector, the building sector and the expert services sector. In public transportation cell meetings and quality teams were seen as the least suitable means of communication, while management inspection was found to be the least suitable in the building services sector.

The respondents generally found conventional media such as newspapers, radio and television most suitable external media in the development of everyday work and production environments. Less suitable media, in turn, included applications representing the so-called new ICT such as multimedia, information networks (internet) and video.

A majority (90 %) of the ageing female workers who did exercise during breaks at the workplace reported that such active recovery breaks helped them to keep working (Fig. 9).

The experienced relief provided by exercise during breaks was equally significant during both production and office workers. Especially older persons (over 45 year-old) reported active recovery breaks to help them keep working more often than younger workers (under 45 year-old).

The most popular forms of exercise during breaks in which the respondents were interested in participating or carrying out independently at the workplace were stretching and relaxation mainly aimed at reducing muscular tension. The third most popular form was gymnastic exercises with or without equipment.

Half of the respondents wished daily exercise during breaks. Half preferred recreational and exercise events during working hours. A majority of the respondents also wished to receive training related to this issue during working hours.

CONCLUSIONS

In general, coping with various work tasks depends not only on individual factors but also on many organisational and concrete work-related and work environment related factors: by performing the work wrong under poor circumstances, we can accelerate and by performing the work right under good circumstances we can slow down the weakening of our work ability to work and overall performance.

Regarding training and optimal utilization of new knowledge the situation poses many interesting challenges. First of all, arranging training at the workplace instead of educational institutions requires developing relevant training materials and methods for the people at workplaces of various sizes. In the future the development of training methods should indeed proceed with in-house training at the workplace as a starting point.

To maintain people's endurance and postpone their retirement, incentive activities differing radically from present monetary incentives should also be tested in the future. They could become a part of the constant improvement of work organisations. Incentive activities
could be customised to reflect the different needs, demands and values that people are known to have at different phases of life and work career. The starting point for this innovation is our finding that people are the more willing to continue working, the more young and energetic they subjectively feel, the more satisfied they are with their life and the more meaningful they find their work. Willingness to continue working may increase even more if people at work organisations learn how to launch recovery activities during breaks that will inspire and bring joy to the employees.

To meet the various challenges posed by ageing in the future, we need, besides interdisciplinary research and in-house training, genuine interest in the operation of (especially small) enterprises, wide-ranging knowledge of work life, long-term life-cycle and career thinking, innovation of procedures in work organisations, new kind of cooperation across traditional boundaries between people at workplaces, authorities and experts, more holistic visions, more high-quality information, as well as openness, mutual trust, interaction, appreciation, respect and consideration to each other.

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