AGEING SOCIETY

Olavi Manninen

Business Research Centre (BRC)
The University of Tampere, Finland

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Reflections of Demographic Implosion

One well-known fact is that we have gained 26 years of average life expectancy in less than a century (during the past century), which is just about equal to what had been attained in the preceding, 5000 years. Recent polls have shown that, for example, 45% of Americans would like to live in excess of 100 years. Extending the life span of the average person has been a dream that mankind has held for a long time. Eighty percent of all deaths already now occur after 60.

At the same time, Western Europe and other developed countries have said goodbye to babies and the population implosion will cost us billions and billions every year.

We have seen nothing like this in human history.

As a result in most industrialized nations more than 10% of the population are over 65 years of age. In Japan this figure will go over 20% by the year 2020. Similar trends are predicted for Germany and Sweden. As a result the number of ageing employees is higher than ever before. At around that time, about 40% of the workforce in OECD countries will be between 45 and 65 years.

These changes are expected to decrease drastically the ratio of people working to those retired, from 5.2 to 2.5 (between 1990 and 2030) in Finland and from 6.2 to 3.1 in Japan. A large change is also predicted for Britain, from a ratio of 4.4 in 1990 to 3.2 in 2030.

In regard to the population implosion maintaining and improving economic productivity is becoming rapidly a crucial issue of great importance. From the point of view of human resources it means, in the first place, need to map out clearly the so called pulling and drawing factors inside companies and work organizations regarding motivation, satisfaction and willingness to continue working: we know very well that in a great number of cases high job stress is the leading cause to premature retirement. Furthermore, today’s and tomorrow’s generations have other job demands and job stresses than those entering the labour market 10 to 20 years ago or earlier.

It goes without saying that we have to respond rapidly to cope with such large shifts in roles, challenges and needs within our societies.

Aspects of Ageing

None of us can escape growing older, but it is a very personal and emotional experience. Ageing is not the sudden change.
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Very often we talk about biological, social and psychological aspects of ageing. As often we do forget the economical aspect of ageing.

Ageing itself is a continuing process that starts as early as the teenage years for some physical skills whereas deterioration in other skills may not be noticeable until the seventies. Time of onset and progress of age changes are very different for the various physical and mental abilities, and cannot be predicted for any individual.

However, it is worth while remembering that differences exist between population ageing and individual ageing.

The maturation of societies and the maturation of individuals is not an insignificant consequence of what one could call the longevity revolution- this remarkable increase in average life expectancy.

Impacts on Updating Services

As said earlier, the ageing of society affects many developed countries and the rapid demographic changes that are taking place will have considerable social, policy, professional and economic consequences.

Frankly, issues related to ageing are increasingly driving the domestic policy agenda. We need to consider these issues when planning for social provisions, medical services as well as industrial and economic needs. Consequently, recent national public debates have focused on how to restructure social security and medicare, how to meet current and anticipated needs for long-term care services, and the impact that the ageing of the baby boom generation is likely to have on age-based entitlements.

Business life too is seriously starting paying attention to ageing, looking at how to manage an increasingly older workforce and how benefits packages may need updating, to include healthcare, eldercare, incentive practice, for instance. Since the older worker will constitute an increasingly large portion of the working population, he or she should be considered a valuable resource that, if not used effectively, can adversely effect economic competetiveness of a nation.

At the same time, industry will be able to recruit fewer young workers; many companies have already recognized that a labour shortage is looming unless new sectors of the population are attracted into the workforce.

Obviously these workers must come largely from two groups: women who previously have stayed at home and older people, even those beyond the current retirement age.
Antecedents of Disease

A key issue that must be addressed is environmentally related single and combined effects or effects of combinations of factors on body functions and especially on the central nervous system, which is the key pacemaker in old age. It is the way you survive; it is the way you adjust.

Therefore, we have to consider not only occupational medicine and work ergonomics, that is, for the people in the workplaces, but let us call it residential medicine or residential ergonomics, for the people who are at home. The kitchen and the bathroom have a huge number of toxic agents. We have to deal, for instance, with the sick building syndrome, which came about as a result of energy conservation and weatherproofing. It is our urgent task to utilize those various benefits of work ergonomics inside our homes, in consumer products, in outdoor activities, in driving and moving and in everyday life, in general.

There are three great antecedents to disease and disability: age, genetics and environment. These antecedents are all interconnected, interactive and constantly changing. The wholistic environment is broadly defined to mean not only the kinds of environment we talk about normally, but lifestyle as well. Of course, in order to understand the reality right, we have to look at all three of those great antecedents of disease and disability in the same time.

However, many questions remain. For instance, how are we going to deal with the diffuse, complex, multiple alterations and dysregulations that occur in the human organism with the passage of time? Nevertheless, with the increase of chemicals in the water and in the air, life expectancy continues to increase.

Does that simply mean that if we did not have all those chemicals and carcinogens in the atmosphere, we would enjoy even greater average life expectancy? Does it mean that, in fact, that some people have selective genetic, specific vulnerabilities to toxic substances and physical hazards in the environment?

Life-Span Perspective

The positive effects of ergonomics in improving worker productivity, safety and comfort are well recognized. On the contrary, neglect of ergonomic principles brings inefficiency and pain to the workplace.

In this context, the key question is how know-how concerning overall ability to work and the application of new equipments and information can be improved at workplaces and how training can help people at workplaces to make their work more
sensible and inspiring, to make the workplace a place where they like to work and that does not injure ageing workers or accelerate the deterioration of their fitness for work.

The costs for occupationally-induced musculoskeletal disorders are impressive. For example, scientists have estimated that the total compensable costs merely for occupationally-induced low back pain are over US$ 11 billion in a year in the States of America. If the direct costs of the problems noted earlier (i.e. changes in standard of living, occupation etc.) as well as the costs for the other occupationally-induced musculoskeletal problems are considered, this figure probably would rise by several orders of magnitude.

If we are to be successful in reducing both the incidence and costs of musculoskeletal disorders in older workers then we must take a life-span perspective and target our interventions and prevention strategies at the beginning of a career and not at the end just before retirement (ie. dynamic-proactive, rather than a static-reactive, strategy).

Initiating a dynamic-proactive approach for ergonomic interventions will reduce the incidence of cumulative trauma disorders, reduce the incidence of disability retirement, and increase productivity, as well as improve the quality of life across the life-span.

**High Ability As An Ultimate Aim**

Safe and sound workplace cannot be a burden, it is an advantage to all parties. Promoting worksite health and wellness should be a sound investment for nation’s well-being, vitality and health care cost containment.

For example, according to the World Health Organization there are two ways to postpone retirement. One involves the employees and the other the employers. Employers should change the work tasks to reduce the loading factors involved in the work. Employees, in turn, should maintain their fitness for work by health-promoting activity such as regular fitness exercise. Obviously most fruitful results in the field could be obtained if we were able to combine such activities in the following way: when motivating individual employees to do physical exercises added and surplus value is gained through developing simultaneously knowledge management and incentive management in companies.

In other words, investing in employees older than 45 years is profitable. If employees stayed fit and were more satisfied with their work, they would not need to retire early. In Finland we have estimated that if the average retirement age could be increased by
three years, the savings in retirement pensions would equal the wages of 30000 new employees every year.

The results of our recent studies in various branches of industry also provide some convincing evidence that the effects of factors leading to earlier retirement may be considerably alleviated by ensuring that the work tasks assigned to ageing employees are sensible.

This is an important consideration, since the results of the studies also indicate that both the managers and employees find the sensibility of their work an equally important incentive as economic incentives when considering how long they want to keep working: three respondents out of four (75 %) find economic incentives equally important as the sensibility of work.

Measures to Promote The Older Workers’ Ability

It is well-known fact that a competitive company is the best guarantee of the livelihood of the employees and their families. By taking care of their skilled and experienced employees a company ultimately secures the continuity of its own operation.

As a matter of fact, keeping senior workers employed and appreciating and utilising their experience and expertise should be in everyone’s interests and is reflected in the maintenance of know-how in enterprises, continuity of operation and better quality of products. To maximise the benefits involved workplaces should actively look for suitable measures for promoting the fitness for work of ageing workers.

However, as our current findings show roughly only every tenth small company (exactly 8 %) has taken measures to promote the older workers’ ability. The main point here is that that the willingness of older workers to keep working seems to depend essentially on whether the measures to promote the fitness for work of older workers have been carried out at the workplaces.

Because the major part of enterprises all over the world are like these Finnish micro- and small- sized companies it is perfectly clear that there is still much to be done.

Renewing Research Agendas

The contemporary age of old age, requires us an incredible transformation in our thinking. It is really the first time ever that a newborn could be expected to live out a full life in an environment that is also dramatically changing, and with a genetic system that is always under some flux.
To cope with the general challenges posed by ageing in the near future, we need not only multidisciplinary research that takes complex working and living conditions into account but also a genuine interest in the operation of (especially small- and medium-sized) workplaces and enterprises, a real understanding of the working life, a reform of the procedures of working organisations, a new kind of cooperation between enterprises, authorities and experts and comprehensive vision, high-quality information, openness, confidence, interaction, mutual respect and appreciation.

As a whole the realization of the objectives requires some completely new procedures that can be used simultaneously and in parallel. Ultimately the learning and adopting of new things requires that the people involved understand each other, appreciate each other, find joy in their work and learn a new kind of interaction. The point here is that gladness and optimism induces commitment, promotes favourable attitudes and has in every respect a more favourable effect that forced and strictly matter-of-fact toiling.

Workplaces and work organizations are usually communities comprising people of highly different backgrounds and ages with different skills and experiences. They are never segmented kindergartens, pre-schools or old-age homes. For this reason we need a totally new approach and have to acknowledge the fact that older workers may differ from each other very much.

In addition to older workers contemporary research has also neglected middle-aged adults, despite the fact that this is the age when many changes start to be noticed. If we are to meet their needs and take full advantage of their skills at work we should be studying these adults now.

We also need to dramatically shift our educational and training system, not only in medicine, but throughout our educational institutions to better appreciate what it means to have an ageing society. Because of this demographic revolution or longevity revolution, we need massive support for many disciplines. We have to dramatically shift the health research agenda. We have to shift our social institutions and our work and business life and retirement practices so that older people remain a more vital part of the workforce and become what they really can become - continuing contributors to our societies.

All in all, growing awareness of ageing society leads to positive changes in our attitudes and to a reinterpretation of the life course with consequent changes in lifestyle and activity.