

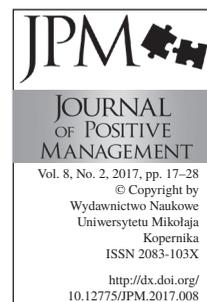
THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF EMPLOYEES 50+ IN TERMS OF MANAGING INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this paper is to point out the challenges in the performance management of older workers. The awareness of the necessity to develop and implement HRM policy raises questions about the application of relevant practices.

Methodology: Literature review, viewpoint.

Findings: Both the cognitive and physical capabilities of employees aged 50 and above can pose some challenges for their employer. The specificity of workers aged 50 and above and the conditions for their effectiveness is the subject of many studies within the frontiers of medical psychology and management sciences. Organizations that make a conscious effort to shape human resource management in the direction of managing their performance must take account of their strengths and weaknesses, especially if they are a significant part of the workforce.

Implications for practice: The social and demographic changes that have occurred in Western as well as Polish societies have forced employers to take into account the characteristics of the work of people aged 50+. An employer employing older staff should shape working conditions conducive to stimulating their performance and utilizing their strengths.

Originality/value: The article includes recommendations for practical application drawn from theoretical reflections, which can be an inspiration to break stereotypes and contribute to the increase old workers' performance.

Keywords: human resources management, older workers, performance

Paper type: Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

The process of demographic ageing of the society will force human resources managers to learn to use the potential of older workers. The specificity of employing older people makes it necessary to implement ergonomic guidelines,

particularly regarding shaping working conditions for older people as well as facilitating the creation of relevant strategy of personnel management (Rembiasz and Górny, 2015).

Ageing of labour resources is irreversible consequence of the progress of civilization, the model of life obligatory on the European continent and core values (longevity and low birth rate). The most adverse changes occur in highly developed countries, including countries of North America and Europe (also in Poland). Since 1960 a significant increase has been noted in the ratio of people of post-working age to the whole population. In 2013 in Poland, people of pre-working and post-working age constituted slightly over 18% of population. The remaining 63% were people of working age. The forecast for 2050 indicates that the pre-working and post-working group will increase to 56% (the share of people of post-working age will be twice as big as that of people of pre-working age (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2014). The number of middle-aged and senior workers, growing globally in organizations, indicates the need to take into account the specificity of psychophysical functioning of people over 50 (Trempała and Harwas-Napierała, 2014).

2. Contextual factors referring to older Polish workers

Employee performance management is a comprehensive approach within human resource management and comes down to the three stages of planning, supporting and evaluating performance (Armstrong, 2009; Dubois and Rothwell, 2008). As such it should take into account the social and demographic context of human resources on the labor market.

Due to political and economic changes in Poland as well as increasing globalization, people over fifty years of age experience now completely different working conditions than at the moment when they commenced their professional activity (Ratajczak, 2007). They belong with the population whose members started their professional careers in the conditions of labour market of the centrally planned economy, where the processes of entering the labour market ran gently (work was guaranteed and usually in line with education). Professional careers did not start with shorter or longer sequence of unemployment or with sense of marginalization and frustration (Bohdziewicz, 2008). The beginning of the period of systemic transformation (1989/1990) fell on the early stage of the development of professional career of present middle-aged workers, and in case of more senior years – on the middle stage. Many people's careers' trajectory was then broken for the first time with all due consequences (Kryńska et al., 2013).

Presently, enterprises increasingly feel the effects of the inconvenience of premature deactivation of their workers. Older workers cost more than the younger but at the same time they have experience and some skill that is extremely valuable. Demotivating for older workers can be awareness that regardless of their

contribution and commitment to the company they will be asked to “voluntarily” retire as soon as they reach the retirement age.

The age itself and the predicted poorer health condition can reduce the chances of people over 50 years of age on the labour market. Research conducted by Ipsos, commissioned by Academy for Development of Philanthropy in Poland, indicate that over half (52%) of surveyed employers opt for younger candidates and usually reject those over fifty. The greatest concern about employing older workers is their health condition (Rożnowski, 2010). Other employers’ fears connected to hiring mature people include adverse habits in the performance of work, predicted poorer cooperation with younger colleagues, lack of flexibility, lower physical efficiency and the necessity to guarantee the retirement protection (Bujacz and Macko, 2010).

Employers are not often aware of the fact that the Polish state can also help them to retain older workers. An employer who hires an unemployed person aged 50+ is for one year exempted from the payment of contributions to the Labour Fund and the Guaranteed Employee Benefits Fund (Ustawa o promocji zatrudnienia i instytucjach rynku pracy). At the time of employment of the person who is at least 55 years (for women) or 60 years (for men) this exemption is perpetual and is available both for current employees, as well as new recruits. In addition, employers pay lower insurance contributions in case of sick leave of a worker aged 50+.

Common stereotypes about age both positive (older workers are much more dependable) and negative (older workers underperform) can also be seen and may affect decision-making in the workplace. The general picture about the real difference between the well-known generational groupings of Millennials and Baby Boomers may be mistaken to some extent as there is no strong evidence about how they really differ (Beck and Williams, 2016). We have to bear in mind that older workers are not all the same. Stereotypical perception of Polish workers of mature age attributes to them such traits as: patience, loyalty, reliability and experience. Research indicates that Polish employers consider older workers to be loyal and devoted but also less flexible, unable to learn and develop competences – particularly in terms of modern technologies. Workers, on the other hand, think that they perfectly adapt and are willing and able to learn. Like employers, older workers consider themselves to be loyal members of the organization and expect to be appreciated and fairly treated (Zientara, 2009). There is a problem with the latter as, in the opinion of people aged 50+ who seek employment, human resources policy in Polish enterprises regarding older candidates and workers is characterised by fewer chances in terms of trainings and promotions with the simultaneous availability of positions that require mostly simple competences. Older people often feel work fatigue whose cause is not their age but lack of relevant age management policy in companies, routine and lack of prospects for

change or broadening competences. As a result they are assessed as incompetent, tired, without potential and with little physical abilities (Bujacz and Macko, 2010).

There are good practices in the field of age management which have been defined as “those measures that combat age barriers and/or promote age diversity” (Naegele and Walker, 2006). According to the Polish Labour Law (art. 39) older employees are protected from dismissal in the period of the last 4 years of their occupational activity before retiring. Conscious, deliberate implementations of age management programs take place mainly in companies located in large industrial centres, industry clusters and academic centres. This is mainly due to direct access to the latest reports on programs implemented in western branches of concerns (most often companies with offices in Warsaw, Cracow and Wrocław). Companies operating in small towns, devoid of information about the latest initiatives, are usually not interested in implementation of special rules under the age management programs either (Bujacz and Macko, 2010). Implementing the concept of age management in Polish conditions is incidental and experimental (Bombiak, 2014). In Poland there are few companies that deal with complex age management services, and among them there are many large corporations such as IKEA. In Poland, IKEA has been operating since 1991 offering a wide range of home, office and garden items. The company employs almost 3.000 employees including about 4% of people over 50. IKEA deliberately creates and implements a human-managed strategy that addresses the needs of different situations and stages of life – now focusing on the need for older workers. Examples of such activities can be the 50+ Program, which includes, among other things, flexible working arrangements or providing all employees with equal access to training and development opportunities. IKEA works comprehensively from providing job vacancies in the company’s “OFFER FOR 50+” program and by placing online the history of 50+ employees in the company, by organizing the work itself and shaping a culture that takes into account diversity (including age) and ending with the system of benefits and severance pay for retired employees (Litwiński, 2010).

3. Mental and physical characteristics of older workers

Establishing the age that would indicate the beginning of ageing of the organism and the decreasing of the ability to work is difficult. Living conditions cause that increasingly with the length of human life grows the period of his effective functioning as well. Thus, people of the same age may have very different biological age and, as a result, different capability of functioning in the society. Therefore, trying to determine the ability to perform work we should first determine the so-called functional age which is measured not only by the number of years lived but by parameters describing activity and physical and mental agility (Nyce and Schieber, 2012). The CIPD survey, however, finds that UK older workers report better mental and physical health than their younger colleagues (Woods, 2011).

The process of ageing of the organism takes a very individual course, hence it is difficult to unequivocally determine the age of an older worker. In literature, to describe an “older worker” the term 50+ is used which means a worker aged 50 or more (Rembiesz and Górny, 2015).

Changes which affect people over 50 have an impact on their functioning at work (Table 1). As a result of decreasing efficiency and physical fitness as well as some psychophysical abilities over the years the man’s ability to do work changes too. Awareness of these limitations and the knowledge of these changes may serve such an organization of the place and conditions of work as to effectively exploit the capabilities of older workers.

Locomotive system disorders, degenerative changes of the spine may result in reduction of mobility while performing physical work. Decline in physical performance may translate into inability to perform heavy physical work or its slowing down and reduction of precision. Elderly people move more slowly and perform physical work at a lower pace. It is particularly significant when doing work that require considerable physical effort. In old age this kind of work puts under load the cardiovascular and muscular-skeletal systems. Thus, it is risky to undertake by elderly people such works as: moving heavy loads, pulling, operating heavy tools. Compared to younger workers, the older workers more often complain about back pain and muscle pain, general fatigue, sleeping problems, irritability, breathing difficulties, heart diseases. Preventive measures taken in the context of performance management for workers performing physical work should therefore focus on adapting the type and severity of work to the capacity of older workers and enabling them to change their work position to less strenuous work. This is particularly important for physical workers, hot and cold microclimate workers and shift workers. Moving an employee to another job, less burdensome or less demanding, will allow him or her to maintain a good health status and also prevent any exclusion from the working group. The employer may also initiate programs promoting healthy lifestyles and increasing the functional capacity of employees or by offering preventive health assessments specific for all the workers (Bugajska et al., 2010).

Cognitive changes turn out to be of key importance (in context of the management of mature workers and their professional functioning). Elderly people quite well function in everyday reality. Physical fitness and intellectual ability vary greatly in the late period of life among individuals, that is why it is difficult to unequivocally assess the consequences of intellectual changes connected with the age. Majority of elderly people function satisfactorily despite the worsening of memory, slowing down of reactions and difficulty in abstract thinking (Olejnik, 2014). Certainly, physical sphere affects the ability to process information – decline in functioning of senses restricts the scope and precision of information delivered to brain from the external environment. Transfer of data is more time-

Area	Nature of changes
Internal systems	<p>Nervous system:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction of the force of conduction of nervous impulses – longer time of reaction to environmental stimuli, particularly complex stimuli • Dying of synaptic connections – less ability to process information, lower concentration and attention divisibility
	<p>Muscular and skeletal system:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of mass and strength of muscles and bones • Progressive decalcification of bones • Increase of the risk of degenerative changes of the spine or abnormalities in vertebral stabilization
	<p>Cardiovascular system:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tendency of diseases of the heart muscle, heart valves and coronary arteries to reveal themselves • Reduction in flexibility of the stiffening myocardial tissue • Changes in the blood vessels (e.g. atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries) causing the deterioration of blood flow
	<p>Respiratory system:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased elasticity of the lungs • Changes in the built and structure of the respiratory tract – level of performance of respiratory system is directly proportional to the activity of human
	<p>Urogenital system:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The decrease in the production of sex hormones • Reduction of mass of the kidneys and their filter surface
Senses	<p>Sight:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrowing of visual field and deterioration of peripheral vision • Worse tolerance of light intensity changes (decreased ability to recover vision after glare, difficulty of vision in low light, at dusk) • Slower adaptation of the eye to perceive objects located at different distances, far-sightedness • Changes in colour perception • Longer duration of visual stimuli processing
	<p>Hearing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impaired hearing • Problems with the isolation and differentiation of words • Deterioration of the ability to locate sound sources • Tinnitus, „ringing in the ears” obscuring other signals • Difficulty in receiving signals in the presence of competing sounds
	<p>Smell and taste:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progressive loss of smell • Abnormalities in receiving some tastes (bitter and salty)
Changes in appearance	<p>Touch:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher threshold of sensation of touch – increase the pain threshold • Reduced sensitivity to temperature of objects and the environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change in proportions of the body shape, progressing with systematic increase in the amount of fatty substance and loss of muscle mass • Flabbiness of skin that begins to wrinkle and sag • The skin is more susceptible to injury and heals more slowly. Spots and unevenness in the colour of the skin may occur • Changes in the functioning of the sebaceous glands and sweat glands (skin dryness, cracking) • Greying hair (gradual loss of melanin in hair follicles) and their gradual thinning

Table 1.
Some changes occurring in mid and late adulthood

Source: Own research based on: (Strelau and Doliński, 2008; Stuart-Hamilton, 2006; Olejnik, 2014).

consuming. Proficiency in merging sensory information, conducted by different nerves, into one unit declines – older people need more time to understand and process auditory and visual signals. With age worsens the *concentration* which is one of the components of *attention* – the filter allowing the individual to separate what is important from what is irrelevant at the given moment. Elderly people sooner show signs of tiredness and start making mistakes due to among others the weakening of the capacity of the nervous system, which in turn makes the transfer of attention from one object to the other slower in elderly people. The performance of the nervous system slows down – the elderly need more time for differentiation of signals and establishing their meanings, more and more difficult is keeping up with the rhythm and pace imposed by the others (Cavanaugh, 1997).

Short-term and working memory (that is memory of small capacity, containing data used in currently occurring mental processes) undergo slight changes – their effectiveness declines. Secondary memory, called long-term memory, allowing for gathering theoretically limitless resources of information, shows farther-reaching changes progressing with age. Especially affected is here the recollecting function while the function of distinguishing signs, symbols, objects and situations is still quite well preserved. Elderly people find it difficult to remember sequences of nonsensical signs and highly abstract material, whereas in case of “meaningful” material, which they can associate with specific meanings, their memory operates to an extent comparable with abilities of young people, the only change occurs in the strategies of retrieving the information, in this specific “access code”. Older workers better cope with locating problems and objects in the known context and prefer other methods of remembering, e.g. by referring to own experience (Cavanaugh, 1997). They cope worse with abstract logical tasks, whose content is not connected with everyday experience (Trempała, 2014).

Next to the natural deficiencies, there occur progressive changes: in the late adulthood, for example, appear qualitatively new way of thinking, presently associated with wisdom, new strategies of memorizing, learning and the like, which we do not find in earlier periods of development, and which ensure successful functioning of elderly people (Trempała, 2014). Experience and a rich collection of obtained information help other people to compensate for deficiencies. When solving problems, a mature person can use his knowledge and experience and compare the results with the norms known to him. Man is able to hyper-compensate for his limited capabilities – being aware of decline in energy and agility, he takes up exercising, changes his diet, resigns from harmful stimulants in order to improve his physical and, connected with it in unbreakable bond, mental well-being (Bromley, 1989).

In general, there is much in favour of hiring elderly people (Table 2). However, in terms of cognitive functioning older workers (Trempała and Harwas-Napieręła, 2014; Berensson et al., 2007; Hatta et al., 2005):

- cope worse with abstract tasks, which passes off when the content of tasks refers to their everyday experience,
- cope worse with tasks whose content activates stereotypes about the old age (e.g. less able, less effective),
- however they solve neutral tasks as fast as the younger people; they cope well with emotional meaning of stimuli,
- the level of execution of memory tasks increases as a result of even short-lasting cognitive training and this effect is relatively durable,
- their ability to organize information and solve problems increases,
- contextuality and intuitiveness of thinking increases.

For an employer, this means that people aged 50+ can effectively perform their professional duties while maintaining proper work organization whilst taking into account their needs and opportunities. First and foremost, older workers' participation in pro-development programs is important, which not only increases knowledge and skills but also contributes to high self-esteem, reduced uncertainty, and reduced feelings of worker inadequacy (Maurer, 2001). In the meantime Poland is one of the countries where the oldest workers are reluctant to undertake educational efforts – only 12% of people over 55 have participated in any form of professional development (Czapiński and Panek, 2015). For many years in Poland there has been a strong educational barrier which assumes that people at this age can not learn and adapt to new situations (Urbaniak, 2008). The stereotype of an older employee, reluctant to train, and the belief that it is not worth investing in someone who will soon retire makes employers less willing to invest in their development. The workers themselves are beginning to believe that they are no longer suitable for training, and that any “posting for training” is considered a type of compulsory test that will give a negative result – because they are too old to learn; They do not see the opportunity to develop themselves in training (Urbaniak, 2007). Only by intentionally shaping the training and information policy in this area will break the stereotype of a worker who is “not worth investing in” because of age. Such efforts are made by Filter Service from Zgierz, which deals with laboratory research and production of filter materials and individual respiratory protection measures. As many as 41% of the company's employees are over 46 and form a significant part of the organization's culture. Since the company started certain HR techniques which could have discriminated against anyone on the grounds of age have been abandoned, especially in terms of recruitment or training policies. Filter Service provides all employees with cyclical training that gives them the opportunity to acquire new skills and to help them find themselves in ever-changing production conditions, in the face of ever-increasing technological improvements. An interesting solution is to employ whole families with parents who have worked in the company over time to be joined by their adult children. This practice strengthens and stabilizes the team and supports the

emergence of “spontaneous support groups” where family members share their knowledge and experience (Litwinski, 2010).

Research conducted among Polish employees aged 50+ in medium and large enterprises indicates that they are well-versed in skills and competences in the labor market, such as the ability to organize their own working hours, work with people of all ages, deal with stress and to learn (Mendryk, 2016). The ZEMAT Technology Group is a manufacturer and supplier of high frequency technology in

Strengths	Chances
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • big professional and life experience • stable family situation • empathy • contacts and approach to clients • precision at work • absence of hurry • loyalty and commitment • ability to cope with crisis situations • reluctance to compete 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • passing the knowledge and experience to younger workers • lower costs of work of people aged 50+ (subsidies for employment)
Weaknesses	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lower mobility • poorer knowledge of modern technological solutions • difficulty to do work requiring considerable physical effort • lower efficiency of work and longer adaptation • lower creativity and entrepreneurship • relatively short time to retirement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • health problems and related absences • preference for stabilization and routine at work • reluctance to changes and to improve qualifications • incompatibility of skills with the needs of the company • the costs of allowances • imitative approach to work • lack of interest in continuing employment after the acquisition of pension rights

Table 2.
SWOT analyses
of the potential of
workers 50+

Source:
(Bombiak, 2014).

polymer welding, packaging production, cold plasma generation, industrial drying and wood processing. The company processes personalized customer orders with specific needs, which require a high level of human resources and customer service experience. This factor points to employees with years of experience in a company whose knowledge and professionalism has proven to be a guarantee of quality and credibility. The company has decided to invest in keeping these employees in their ranks for as long as possible and to use them as mentors and to pass on their experience to newcomers. For example, people who have reached retirement age are encouraged to continue working flexible hours (Litwinski, 2010).

4. Conclusions

The performance management of employees 50+, as an key organizational system to support its business strategy and to achieve its goals, must take into account

the specificity of the employed population in terms of age. The employer's business assignment is to learn how to manage older worker's performance. As such it all boils down to creating safe working conditions, changes in work arrangements in terms of working flexible hours, adaptation of the work shift system to the workforces needs, providing staff with equipment and technology to make 50+ work more effective, and last but not least to transfer them to less burdensome posts. These activities should be supported by shaping a culture of health promotion and acceptance of the differences resulting from the generational diversity of staff.

In accordance with the recommendations of the International Labor Organization, older workers require measures that (International Labor Organization, 1980; Rembiasz, 2017):

- remedy those conditions of work and of the working environment that are likely to hasten the ageing process,
- modify the forms of work organization and working time which lead to stress or to an excessive pace of work,
- adapt the job and its content to the worker by recourse to all available technical means and, in particular, to ergonomic principles, so as to preserve health, prevent accidents and maintain working capacity,
- provide for a more systematic supervision of the workers' state of health.

The authors of the Golden Age Index report add three key issues to the aforementioned measures that are also of a supra-organizational nature, which, they consider, should be taken into account in the context of the work efficiency of people aged 50+, namely:

- financial incentives for late retirement, which will motivate employees to continue working,
- appropriate regulations to prevent discrimination of this age group in the labor market,
- promoting lifelong learning and organizational training to improve the skills of older workers.

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