Perception As A Contributor to Older Workers' Low Participation in Training

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Abstract

The literature on the aging workforce has addressed why people are working longer, the practicalities of an extend work life, effective strategies for training older workers as well as what are the views of these people who continue working past traditional retirement ages. Despite this, there is little comprehensive data on the factors that influence whether or not mature-aged employees undertake training. Using the Cognitive Aging Theory, this author proposed older workers would be perceived negatively. Additionally, using Liu, Courtenay and Valentine's (2011) theoretical model for predicting older workers' participation in training as a foundation, the author further hypothesized that these negative perceptions bar mature-aged employees from training. This review finds there are indeed persistent negative beliefs about older employees, and some findings even suggest these negative beliefs contribute to company actions including decisions regarding training.

Introduction

Both the population of the United States and the global are ageing; meaning the average age of the given population is steadily rising. Researchers attribute this to a combination of low birth rates and longer life spans (Wrighton, 2016). In the United States, one main concern regarding the aging population is the stress it is predicted to place on health care and social safety net systems such as Social Security (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2015). However, while these concerns have been long voiced, another area of aging that has only relatively recently been considered is the impact of this change on the workforce. Whether by circumstance or choice, people are working longer (Desilver, 2016), increasingly well past what would be considered a normal retirement age. Surely this does have some effect on work and organizational functioning.

Work, by definition, is considered an endeavor of the energized. A century ago, the concept of work would have conjured up images of various types of manual labor ranging from farming to construction to manufacturing. All of these required the worker to be in peak physical condition in order to demonstrate competent performance. However, in the United States at least, work has gradually shifted from predominantly labor intensive endeavors to service- and information-based tasks (Forman, King & Lyytien, 2014), that rely more heavily on cognitive processes. With this change, people have been able to work well past what is believed to be their physical peak. So much so, that a standard retirement age is generally between 65 and 67 years of age (Social Security Administraion [SSA], n.d). Even with the increasingly low physical burden of work, there is still the perception that older workers are much less capable than their younger colleagues (Findsen, 2015).

It is possible that this perception is fuel by research results on aging and cognitive processing. Early research that became the groundwork for Cognitive Aging Theory presented findings that our mental abilities begin to fail as early as 30 years of age. In giving a history of Cognitive Aging Theory, Anderson and Craik (2017, p. 1) write,

Empirical proof of cognitive aging appeared in the 1930s, when Miles evaluated the perceptual, motor, and cognitive abilities of 1600 people aged 6 to 95 years old, and reported declines after age 30 in these skills, including learning ability (e.g., Miles, 1933).

While not necessarily beginning in our 30's, the idea of mental decline as we age is somewhat supported by subsequent research. Though the degree of the decline and the decline in which specific mental capabilities are still up for debate, some of the major findings over the years, as pulled from Anderson and Craik's (2017) paper and summarized below, seem to reinforce this conclusion:

1. As people age, they underperform on tasks that require fluid intelligence when compared to younger adults, but their crystalized intelligence (of which institutional knowledge is one) shows no such deterioration.

2. Others argue that these supposed declines in mental ability, defined as intelligence in some cases, are not a decline in intelligence as such. Instead, mature-aged people are only less able than the young at managing divided attention, especially when either or all tasks are complicated. The outcome still manifests in a difference in performance between the two demographics nonetheless.

3. Older individuals' comparative mental gaps can be decreased by being selective in the tasks they choose in order to interact with their changing environment. Said differently, older individuals are able to compensate for most if not all the difference in performance between themselves and their younger co-worker by employing adaptive strategies.

Ultimately, regarding mental effort, the field of Cognitive Aging Theory appears to be settled on the idea that yes, mature-aged persons are at a distinct disadvantage when executive processes must be consciously applied to effortful endeavors. To sum, Anderson and Craik (2017) write, "[t]he notion that…cognitive control…becomes less efficient with age is now generally accepted" (p. 4).

Given Cognitive Aging Theory's overall view that there is some mental deterioration associated with aging, what are some considerations when workers extend their participation in the labor force? Do we discard the old once they reach a certain milestone because they can no longer exhibit peak performance? Alternatively, do we encourage life-long learning to establish and maintain peak performance? I posit the latter. The idea of employees securing all needed education early in their career then relying on this base knowledge for the rest of their working lives is rooted in a time gone by. Lifelong learning—in more specific terms *life-long training*—is one way workers can maintain high job performance and, in turn, high institutional performance (Crick, Haigney, Huang, Coburn & Goldspink, 2011). This should be no different for older workers. Yet, the consensus is that older worker are underrepresented in training initiatives when compared to their younger workers (Lui, Courtenay & Valentine, 2011). Why is this so?

Theoretical Framework

Liu et al (2011) proposed a conceptual framework that seeks to present the combination of factors that influence whether or not individual workers will participate in training. Their proposed model is below in Figure 1.
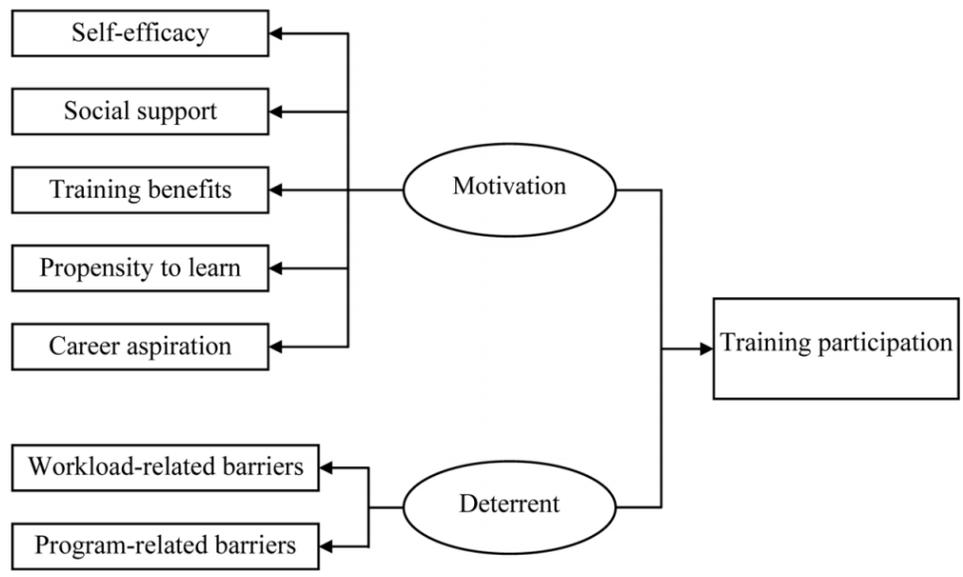

Figure 1. Lui et al (2011) proposed model for predicting older worker training participation.

Their model is divided into two broad areas: training motivators and training deterrents. Motivators consist of five sub elements that promote worker participation in training: (1) Self-efficacy—which is one's belief in his ability to succeed in training; (2) social support—which refers to the encouragement to engage in training that workers receive and from whom (peers, supervisor, top management, etc) this support originates; (3) whether or not employees believe training will benefit them; (4) their propensity to learn—which "captures not only the views of older learners about learning, but it also connotes their inclination to participation in learning activities" (p. 1050); and (5) career aspiration which makes training more important if it is tied to a possible future self.

The authors narrowed the deterrents to "only two concepts identified as institutional barriers…[.] These were workload-related deterrents and training program-related deterrents." But explanation of these factors were less clearly expressed than those that motivate. A definition of each deterrent, however, can be inferred from the results presented by the authors:

> According to Long (1983), Botsman's study shows that the barriers to participation in an adult education program are different for younger, middle-aged, and older workers. The five most frequently perceived barriers to participation in educational activities revealed in the study were (a) no transportation, (b) too much red tape in getting enrolled, (c) cost of learning materials, (d) cost of tuition, and (e) past schooling difficulty. In Botsman's study, ''afraid I'm too old to begin'' was clearly a major barrier for older workers (49.7%) than younger workers (3.7%). ''Cost of tuition'' was cited as a barrier more frequently by younger workers (64.7%) than by older workers (31.1%) (Long, 1983). Although different age groups face different barriers—as indicated by Botsman's study" pg 1053 -1054.

Most of the factors indicated in the paragraph can certainly be placed in either of the two institutional deterrents: work load-related—which would include intuitive things such as not having time to find and attend training sessions—and program-related—which include responses that highlight cost,

red-tape, and transportation. But not all factors can be so neatly placed. The paragraph's main point is that people face different barriers to training at different points in their lives. The "too old" factor is a much more significant training disincentive for mature-aged employees than the young. However, it cannot be grouped into the model's two deterrents.

The current paper uses some concepts espoused in this framework to investigate the "too old" factor of training and how it may influence whether or not older workers participate in learning initiatives.

Research Questions

For the purposes of this review, older workers are considered those 50 years of age and older. This group does not have equal access to training as their younger counterparts (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2012; Kluge & Krings, 2008); a fact that manifests in older workers' comparative underrepresentation in training (Lui et al, 2011). This writer notes that the first step toward getting the over 50 segment of the workforce on equal footing with their younger colleagues is to address the factors that hinder employees' participation in training. This literature review seeks to investigate:

1. What are the perceptions of older workers?

2. Do these perceptions impact older workers' training participation?

Findings

Rothwell, Sterns, Spokus and Reaser (as cited in Findsen, 2015) identified several persistent beliefs about older employees. The list includes they are (1) untrainable, (2) less productive than their younger counterparts, (3) not creative, (4) stubborn and do not adapt to change easily, if at all and (5) more expensive in terms of salary, benefits and the increased rates of accidents attributed to this demographic.

Axelrad, Luski and Miki (2013) administered the questionnaire in Figure 2 to 312 management-level officials from various sectors of the Israeli economy, in part to measure the impact of supervisors' age on beliefs about older workers. While older managers had more negative ideas about older workers'

reliability, younger hiring personnel held sharply more stereotypically negative views about older

employees' productivity.

Productivity
Older workers are less capable of doing physically taxing work than younger workers
Older workers are less creative than younger workers
Older workers are just as enterprising as younger workers
Older workers keep up just as well as younger workers
Absenteeism is higher among older workers than among younger workers
The productivity of older workers is the same as younger workers
Older workers are tired and worn out, so it is hard for them to find a job
Older workers have no energy, so it is hard for them to find a job
Adaptability
Older workers are less interested in participating in training programs than younger workers
Older workers are more deterred by technological change than younger workers
Older workers adjust less well to technological change than younger workers
Older workers prefer not to be assigned tasks by younger workers
Older workers adapt to technological change more slowly than younger workers
Reliability
Older workers are more loyal than younger workers
Older workers are more reliable than younger workers
Older workers have greater social skills than younger workers
Older workers are more careful than younger workers
Older workers give better service than young workers
Older workers are more meticulous than younger workers

Note: $n = 312$

Figure 2. Axelrad et al's (2013) questionnaire for measuring hiring mangers perception of older workers.

These findings have been replicated over the last 5 years. Principi, Fabbietti and Lamura (2015),

building on another Italian study (Bertolino, Truxillo & Fraccaroli, 2013), theorized that in-group bias plays

a role in worker perception, therefore, managers, whether young or old, will hold more favorable

opinions of workers closer to their own ages. After sampling 516 employees across various sectors of the

Italian economy, the researchers found their hypothesis somewhat supported. Specifically, older

managers judged older workers' qualities more favorably, and younger managers judged younger

workers' qualities more favorably. More interestingly, as the age of supervisors increased, they viewed

younger workers' qualities less favorably.

North and Fiske's (2016) American study that aimed to measure both older and younger workers'

perceptions of older workers further reinforced this notion. They found younger managers were more

likely to attribute an older employee's performance gap to factors that were unchangeable within said

employee and therefore were significantly less like to allocate scarce training funds to older workers, seeing it as a poor investment to spend money on individuals who are unlikely to improve.

Across the four studies that showed negative perception of older workers, a subtle, subconscious "us and them" divide along the aspect of age appears to not only have taken hold in the respondents minds, but colors the way they view others in the two groups. In short, the age of person(s) working with and/or perceiving older workers carries some significance as to whether collective attitudes toward this paper's focus population will be positive or negative.

In contrast, one European study conducted by Kluge and Krings (2008)—who used the *Beliefs About Older Workers Questionnaire* to assess the perceptions of older employees in two organizations: a hospital and insurance company—showed that attitudes toward older employees were generally positive. However, the authors themselves allude to the idea that in Swiss culture "older employees are well integrated into the labour market"–possibly a reflection of older individuals being well integrated in Swiss society in general—and thus their findings may not be typical of other countries (p.63). But, even in this study, the research noted that as a group, these organizations thought workers over 50 years of age were more difficult to train and lazier compared to those under 50. Therefore, even in the Swiss study where findings showed generally positive beliefs about older employees, some negative stereotypes still lay in the undercurrent.

Yet, recent evidence suggests that all other things being equal, there is no reason these negative stereotypes of older workers should persist. Older employees are associated with lower turnover and greater organizational commitment (Carse, Griffin & Lyons 2017); are central to intergenerational transfer of institutional knowledge (Znidarsic, 2012); are more adaptable since they are better able to place new processes in the context of their work experiences (Smith, Smith & Smith, 2010); with the exception of those 80 years or more, show no discernible distinction between their mental abilities and those of younger personnel and "were often quicker to learn at work and in training situations than

younger workers" according to Smith et al (2010, p. 287). Nevertheless, these positive contributions

remain overshadowed.

Attitudes toward mature-aged employees are an important metric because they influence actions

in organization. One group of German researchers (Bilinska, Weege & Kliegel, 2017), found that

organizational age climate—how an organization generally views its workers of a certain age—"uniquely

contributes to explaining variance in nurses' turnover intention" (p. 95). This means whether or not older

employees committed to and stayed with an organization was in part related to the company's

perception of these same employees. Therefore, it is possible organizations lose good workers, not

because these individuals are actually poor performers, but because they are perceived as such based on

something unrelated to performance—like age.

Discussion & Implications

Older workers bring many positive attributes to their organizations, even though negative

stereotypes of this group being drags and drains on organizations endures. The research suggests the

more negatively an organization perceives older workers, the less likely those employees will be able to

access training opportunities. Or even remain long enough for training to be relevant. This has multiple

implications.

Mature workers who seek out training do not necessarily see it as a means for promotion, but

instead a way to stay relevant and productive. This thought is expressed by Jim Dunn, Executive Learning

Officer at the Cleveland Clinic (as cited in Lisican, 2013). If employee X knows the powers that be view

her as over-the-hill irrespective of how hard she tries, then she has no incentive to improve herself for

the purpose of remaining in that company/position. Even if she does, if she is not aware of learning

opportunities because they were shared with younger co-workers only, then here too, she is shut out of a

learning opportunity. In this case, the organization's attitude function to screen an older worker out of

continued education; making the group perception one facet that contributes to the "too old" mentality

and the resulting underrepresentation of mature-age people in job training. This is cause for concern as it suggests employers may be getting exactly what they expect: mature employees who are less current than their younger counterparts are, but because of the employers' own actions (impeding the older workers' training), not because of any innate aspect of being an older worker. In sum, perception, both individual and institutionalized, can operate to prevent older employees from being trained.

These findings also have implications for Liu et al.'s (2011) proposed model for determining the likelihood workers will engaging in training. As is, the model does not truly account for perception. Self-efficacy assumes the idea of being able to succeed at something, but it cannot explain why older workers, especially, would already believe they are "too old" for training. It could be lumped into the social support—or lack thereof—factor, where peers and supervisors see mature workers as less trainable and less likely a return on investment; a perspective that becomes internalize by the older employees themselves. This would making group perception a deterrent. But again, there is nothing that accounts for it in the list of barriers to training. Possibly, the model could be revised to accommodate the addition of this deterrent as exemplified in Figure 3.
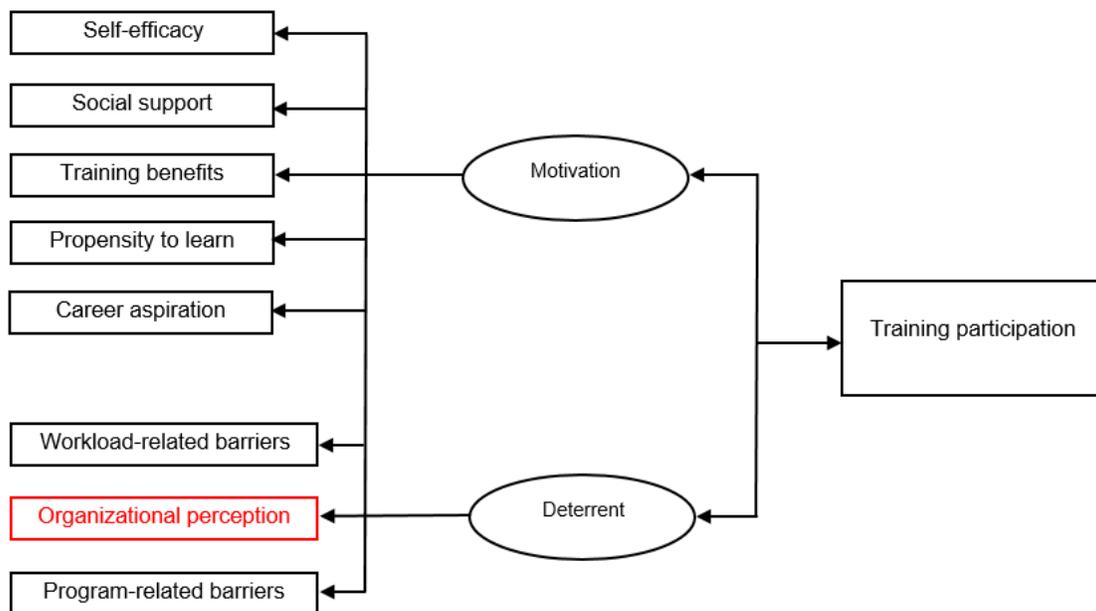

Figure 3. Proposed update to Lui et al (2011) model for predicting older worker training participation.

Limitations

While the studies cited were pulled from multiple nations, together they could not be defined a comprehensive. All major studies were within the last seven years. None was longitudinal in nature making it difficult to determine if these perceptions definitively change with time and age, or are simply a reflection of a generational divide. Several were conducted on one- or two-source, small, homogenous samples. However, typical American workplaces are more diverse than many of the samples used in the studies reviewed. Simply put, research on worker perceptions, and ultimately how these may affect training participation, needs to center on diverse workforces with large samples over a specified period.

Older workers were conceptualized as 50 years and older for this review. For the papers reviewed, this old-young demarcation was not consistent. Some even focused on the "oldest old" generally considered to be people 80 years of age or more. There is a considerable difference in physical abilities and traditional retirement expectations for a 50-year old and an 80-year old. Therefore, finding studies that shift the old versus young line may have had some underlying effect on the overall findings. Even if the focused age range were narrower, the review still could not shine an all-revealing light on an inherently heterogeneous group. It can be expected that the perception of a 50-year-old man in a labor-intensive field like construction would be different from the perception of a 50-year-old man in higher education. Namely, it makes sense that the type of work being untaken influences the perception of mature-aged workers. Though none of the studies reviewed addressed this possibility.

Conclusion

Research based on Cognitive Aging Theory has consistently shown that older individuals do have lower executive functions than persons their junior. But some of the theory's consistent findings leaves room to contend that this deterioration may not necessarily translate to lowered performance when compared to young workers since the older workers find ways to compensate for the cognitive decline. In

fact, as already mentioned, several studies have found older workers are associated with many positive organizational metrics including adaptability and on-the-job education.

If the dominant perception of older workers remains unchanged, they will continue to be underrepresented in training by either opting out due to a socialized belief training is not for them or simply being kept at bay by executives who do not think training these employees is wise. With people working longer, as is, organizations run the risk of having large segments of the workforce systematically marginalized; a segment, which in the end, does not contribute the most it could to business performance.

Using the proposed model, the author puts forward that along with not overworking employees so they have time to engage in training activities and providing assistance with training-related barriers such as cost and transportation, finding ways to change organizational climate, attitudes and perceptions is a mean of increasing mature-aged employees' participation in training activities.

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