

Age Diversity and Human Resources Practices

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Overview

An organization's success depends upon the attraction, selection, evaluation, and retention of the best and the brightest employees. This is especially important given shrinkage in labor market entrants and concominant growth in proportion of retirement age baby boomer workers (Pitt-Catsouphes &Smyer, 2005). Organizations that capitalize on effective attraction, identification, evaluation and retention of the best employees regardless of their age, gender or racial demographics are optimally positioned to address the workforce challenges facing the global workforce. Human Resource practices historically have focused on the assessment of employee ability and prediction of employee performance. Research on older workers indicates a modest decline in some cognitive abilities over age (Griffiths, 1997), but these age decrements in abilities do not appear to translate into significant work performance declines. Rather, there is evidence that age-performance relationships vary with the content and the type of performance measure (Cleveland & Shore, 1992; Murphy, 1989).

The most critical issue in adapting human resource practices is the need to think more broadly about the definition of success or performance and about the factors that are most likely to contribute to the success of older workers. In particular, the success of more seasoned workers is more likely to depend on motivation than on individual differences in ability.

Research and practical implications

Research on task performance makes it clear that older workers CAN (are capable of doing) perform successfully on the job and within the workforce over the lifespan. The key issue for organizations, given the shrinking availability of skilled employees is how to design or construct the workplace to attract, retain and motivate older employees so the best employees want or are motivated to continue to work.

There appear to be few age-related differences across jobs in terms of task performance. However, less is known about the links between age and citizenship behaviors, counterproductive behaviors, adaptive behaviors or other facets of success not currently assessed systematically by organizations (e.g., health, well-being, stress related issues, family balance, etc.). Existing research (e.g. Park,1994) has treated performance as unidimensional, but it is increasingly clear in recent years that the construct of performance is multi-dimensional in nature (Campbell et al., 1993; Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). It may be that older workers perform some components of job performance better than younger workers while they perform other components less well than younger workers.

Research on the role of age in other more broadly defined indicators of success, such as physical and mental health, work-life balance, and satisfaction with work has barely begun. Organizations are often in the dark about why older workers succeed or fail, or even what success or failure means for this population. The critical challenge for organizations in the future will be to adapt what were once youth-oriented systems for selection and assessment to the unique needs and contributions of older workers.

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