

As the population ages and governments revise policies to encourage longer working lives, the workforce in organizations is becoming older. At the same time, due to increasing global competition and the accelerated rate of innovation, the workplace is becoming more and more dynamic. But how does the aging workforce fit into the picture of a dynamic business environment? Common stereotypes often doubt the ability of older employees to learn and to adapt to changes. This questions older employees' employability, their competence to continuously fulfill and acquire work for themselves. We took a learning perspective to investigate the relationship between chronological age and employability. We proposed a model that explains the relationship between chronological age and employability via two groups of mediators: motivation and learning activities. We argued that relating chronological age directly to employability, which is common to workplace stereotypes, underestimates the complexity of the relationship.

Learning activities matter

We found evidence for the hypothesized positive relationship between learning activities and employability. We examined the effects of chronological age and formal and informal learning activities on employability. In our sample of 780 employees of three Dutch and Austrian organizations, we found that both formal and informal learning increase employees' employability. However, each type of learning contributes to different components of employability. This study contributed further evidence for the relationships of chronological age and formal and informal learning on employability. It extended previous literature by suggesting that the different forms of learning – formal learning, information seeking, feedback seeking, and help seeking – have different effects on the dimensions of employability. Therefore, a variety of learning activities is helpful to develop all the competences needed to remain employable. In another study among 167 Austrian consultants, we found positive relationships between informal learning from others and four dimensions of employability. This is in line with our propositions and earlier research that has found positive relationships between learning activities and employability. By asking for feedback, help, and information, employees connect to important sources for learning and for shaping their expertise and flexibility.

In yet another study we used social network analysis to investigate the nuances of informal learning from others of the workplace. Specifically, we tested whether homophily, the tendency of employees to connect to similar others, impacts the feedback seeking network at work. In this analysis across 1,948 feedback seeking relationships of 107 employees in Austria, India, and the Netherlands, we found that in some organizations, people seek more feedback from colleagues that are similar in terms of function, tenure, chronological age, or gender. This is in line with previous research that has argued that homophily structures network ties. At the same time, however, this structuring has negative effects on employability if homophily leads to a rather homogeneous feedback seeking network at work. This can be explained by the limited scope of knowledge and information that circulates in rather homogeneous networks. Having ties also to other groups of people does potentially enrich the point of views that can be accessed. The findings of the social network analyses suggest that the formation of ties between dissimilar employees may need support.

For instance, this may include assigning tasks to pairs of previously unrelated colleagues with different backgrounds or awareness training about one's social network in the workplace.

Motivation matters

Having found positive effects of activities of formal learning and informal learning from others, the question remained what triggers these learning activities. Why do some employees actively pursue learning activities while others do not? We took a motivational perspective to study age-related antecedents of employability to better understand the relation between chronological age and employability. Specifically, we investigated the relationships of future time perspective and goal orientation with employability. We conducted quantitative, cross-sectional survey research among 282 employees of three Dutch and Austrian organizations. Using structural equation modeling, we found that future time perspective and goal orientation strongly relate to employability. Additionally, chronological age affects employability indirectly via perceived remaining opportunities. These effects of opportunity focus and mastery and performance goal orientation are in line with our hypotheses. Specifically, we argued that having an opportunity focus increases the value of undertaking learning activities. This study expands previous knowledge by offering a mechanism by which chronological age affects employability indirectly.

We have found evidence that an opportunity focus indeed stimulates informal learning from others among 167 Austrian consultants. We extend the body of knowledge by finding a positive indirect relationship between opportunity focus and employability via informal learning from others. This finding means that employees with an opportunity focus are more likely to proactively seek for feedback and help from others in the workplace. This, in turn, helps them to develop the necessary competences to stay employable.

Chronological age affects employability indirectly

The results of the studies did not show consistent effects of chronological age on the dimensions of employability. However, the mediation analyses showed indirect effects of chronological age on employability via formal learning and via opportunity focus. This is because chronological age relates negatively to formal learning and opportunity focus, which would in turn have positive effects on employability. The negative link between chronological age and formal learning and opportunity focus are in line with findings of earlier research. One reason for this is that the employer is more likely to invest resources in those employees that are more likely to remain longer in the workforce instead of those that may retire soon. We did not find such an indirect effect via informal learning from others. This can be explained by the employees' relative independence of employer's resources when engaging in social learning activities. Activities such as asking for information, feedback, and help usually do not require the formal allocation of the company's resources. Therefore, the employees have more freedom in taking such developmental actions. These findings increase our understanding of how chronological age and employability are linked.