

Strategies to Enhance the Learning Results of Older versus Younger Workers

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ABSTRACT The aim of the paper is to identify the means of assuring a supportive learning environment to gain the highest learning results aligning strategies with the needs of the workers of different age groups. The paper uses a structural equation modeling approach. The survey questionnaire was sent to three different organizations and total of 156 younger workers and 103 older workers filled up the questionnaire. The research results indicate that managers can enhance learning results of older workers through human resource strategy that focuses on strengthening intrinsic learning motivation and strengthening organizational support for learning while managers can enhance learning results of younger workers through human resource strategy that focuses on strengthening the intrinsic and extrinsic learning motivation drivers.

INTRODUCTION

An organization's success increasingly depends on knowledge, knowledge management, and workers' human capital (Loretto and White 2006; Gill 2009). Cognitive skills are increasingly important due to rapid technological change while physically demanding jobs are decreasing (Spitz-Oener 2006; Skirbekk 2008). In times of turbulence, managers need to enable workers to remain adaptable and consequently, enable them to work efficiently and effectively (Billett 2010; Froehlich et al. 2014; Hashim and Wok 2014; Karpinska et al. 2015). However, when it comes to deciding who among the workers should be additionally educated or trained, the majority of employers still prioritize younger workers. Therefore, employers are losing the potential of their mature workforce, which is often the "victim" of negative stereotypes (Smith et al. 2010).

On the other hand, younger workers should not be neglected. They also frequently face some age-related stereotyping. Overall, perceived age discrimination leads to lower affective commitment (Snape and Redman 2003). Therefore, there is a need for ascertaining ways of establishing supporting learning strategies that uniquely boost

drivers that impact the learning results of older and younger workers.

Although a vast amount of literature that supports age management exists, and although two decades ago Allen and Hart (1998) called for further research on the professional development of older versus younger workers, research regarding older workers' learning is still limited (Picchio and van Ours 2013).

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no study exists that would identify the importance of strengthening specific motivational and supportive drivers according to the needs of different age groups of workers. Therefore, the purpose of the paper is to identify the most effective strategies framed to pursue the best learning results of younger versus older workers by identifying the drivers that help younger or older workers maintain flexibility, a positive self-concept, and ultimately enable their employability.

Objectives

The objective of the paper is to investigate the predicting power of intrinsic learning motivation, extrinsic learning motivation and organizational support for learning results and furthermore on identifying an adequate approach to building strategies which enhance learning results of both age groups of workers.

Intrinsic motivation is a self-determined form of motivation that streams from the inherent feelings of enjoyment while learning because learn-

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ing itself fosters a sense of autonomy and competence (Noels et al. 2001). Adults are independent individuals who mostly enjoy learning, most of them being internally motivated learners (Cole 2012). Managers can enhance emotions of intrinsic motivation through learning opportunities within a climate of mutual respect and appreciation (Žnidaršic 2010). Even for older workers, it holds that when they are offered open options to participating in learning programs, age itself is no longer a factor impeding learning motivation (Major et al. 2006). However, intrinsically motivated learning positively correlates with learning results (Thieme et al. 2015). Therefore, the first hypothesis is:

H₁: Intrinsic learning motivation significantly positively impacts learning results.

Extrinsic learning motives are related to action in response to external gains received from a different source than learning itself (Osterloh and Frey 2000). Training motivation can be enhanced through offers of career development from training in the coming years (Bertolino et al. 2011), and through recognition (Griffin 2011). Workers need credible information about the development paths that management fosters through learning (Maurer and Lippstreu 2008). Managers can enhance extrinsic learning motivation through the assurance that by learning, workers would be able to keep their current job (Minbaeva 2008). Chun and Wang (1995) ascertain that older workers have stronger learning motivation than their younger colleagues because higher investment in human capital correlates to lower probability of being unemployed while other researchers (Chun and Ho 2001) add that they accept learning programs as a survival strategy. Buble (2000) argues that extrinsic motivation just prevent dissatisfaction, and as such do not increase the commitment of an individual. Therefore, McGraw (1978) further warns that extrinsic motivation might lead to poorer learning results. However, the selected specific features of measuring items should have the positive predictive power of learning results. Thieme et al. (2015) came up to the same conclusion. Therefore, the second hypothesis is as follows,

H₂: Extrinsic learning motivation significantly positively impacts learning results.

Managers need to maintain a positive culture of mutual support (Eraut 2007; Maurer and Lippstreu 2008) within a culture that values knowledge highly (McCracken et al. 2012; Ravichandran et al. 2015). Besides other factors, organizational support for learning from superiors is need-

ed (James et al. 2013; Martin et al. 2014; Stone and Tetrick 2013; Beck 2014; Jeske and Stamov Roßnagel 2015; Ravichandran et al. 2015). Superiors' support impacts knowledge transfer (Grossman and Salas 2011; Salas et al. 2012) and contributes to the optimization of human capital accumulation. Not only the superiors' support but also the colleagues' trust is of great significance (Colquitt et al. 2000; Gegenfurtner and Vauras 2012). Therefore, a positive relationship between organizational support and learning results is expected, and the third hypothesis is,

H₃: Organizational support for learning significantly positively impacts learning results.

Finally, the paper conceptualizes the learning results as enhanced adaptability, responsibility, and employability of an individual. Human resource departments provide learning opportunities that help workers to be ready for competition within a global economy. The workers who acquire a wider range of skills become valuable assets for organizations because they can maintain productivity under any conditions (Abrams and Berge 2010; Beck 2014). Development activities upgrade human capital, enable skill obsolescence, and strengthen employability (Picchio and van Ours 2013; Froehlich et al. 2014).

METHODOLOGY

The researchers conducted the empirical analysis of the impact of learning motivation and organizational support for learning results in the seven steps. The first four stages pertain to the establishment of a research framework to the literature review, questionnaire design, and established hypotheses followed by data collection, quantitative data analysis, which ends with an interpretation of the results, the identified human resource management implications, and finally proposals for future research.

The unit of analysis was thus an individual employed by one of the three different organizations. The sample included 259 workers (156 individuals were up to 45 years old, and 103 were 45 years old or older) working in three different local profit organizations. There are different threshold age categories, but frequently the researchers conceptualize individuals aged 45 or older as mature because this is the age when individuals start to face age discrimination (Steinberg et al. 1996). The respondents (155 males, 104 females) participated in different in-house general or specific learning programs. They completed different levels of education. There were

39 individuals completed vocational training or another three-year educational program, 78 individuals completed secondary education, 31 individuals completed an upper-secondary education program; 45 individuals completed 1st Bologna cycle, 61 individuals completed 2nd Bologna cycle.

All of the respondents received a questionnaire welcoming their participation in the research after they had completed their training programs. Some participants were required to attend a particular course while others attended education programs on their initiative. In the information, the researchers gave a statement that ensured privacy when filling in the questionnaire. Thus, the researchers created a supportive atmosphere that encouraged them to share freely and honestly their feelings and experiences, thus improv-

ing reliability and credibility. The data collection took place from November 2014 to May 2015.

The researchers tested the structural model using LISREL 8.80, and SPSS package 14.0 for the assessment of the measurement model. Structural equation modeling is a technique that is widely used in social sciences because it identifies linear structural relationships (Hooper et al. 2008) and as such it is one of the most sophisticated statistical tools.

RESULTS

In the first part of the analysis, the researchers ascertained validity, internal consistency and assured that the data fit the research models that reflect the sound basis for statistical analysis (which is evident from Tables 1 and 2). The sec-

Table 1: Summary of measurement scales for older workers and younger workers

<i>The older workers model</i>				
<i>Construct</i>	<i>Measure</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Loading</i>
Intrinsic motivation (Cronbach's alpha = 0.545)				
	I attended the education program because of my desire for knowledge	4.08	0.825	0.675
	I attended the education program to strengthen my self-confidence	3.31	1.120	0.818
	I attended the education program to adapt more easily to changes at work	3.75	0.805	0.670
Extrinsic motivation (Cronbach's alpha = 0.784)				
	I attended the education program to earn respect from the organization	2.65	1.096	0.830
	I attended the education program to get an opportunity for a salary raise	2.18	1.161	0.836
	I attended the education program to keep my current job	2.72	1.300	0.847
Organizational support (Cronbach's alpha = 0.765)				
	My supervisor clearly acknowledges my transfer of the newly acquired knowledge to the workplace	3.41	1.037	0.816
	My colleagues encourage me to learn	2.86	0.990	0.805
	In my organization, workers appreciate colleagues who transfer newly acquired knowledge to the workplace	3.34	0.990	0.855
Learning results (Cronbach's alpha = 0.659)				
	The education program enabled me to adapt more easily to change	3.76	0.823	0.806
	After the education program, I have become more responsible and prudent	3.37	0.964	0.838
	The education program contributed to the enhanced employability of workers	3.04	1.009	0.676
<i>The younger workers model</i>				
Intrinsic motivation (Cronbach's alpha = 0.748)				
	I attended the education program because of my desire for knowledge	4.17	0.893	0.819
	I attended the education program to strengthen my self-confidence	3.37	1.088	0.848
	I attended the education program to adapt more easily to changes at work	3.76	0.986	0.784
Extrinsic motivation (Cronbach's alpha = 0.753)				
	I attended the education program to earn respect from the organization	2.96	1.109	0.799
	I attended the education program to get an opportunity for a salary raise	2.44	1.230	0.841
	I attended the education program to keep my current job	2.72	1.232	0.816
Organizational support (Cronbach's alpha = 0.822)				
	My supervisor clearly acknowledges my transfer of the newly acquired knowledge to the workplace	3.51	1.092	0.857
	My colleagues at work encourage me to learn	3.14	1.019	0.876
	In my organization, workers appreciate colleagues who transfer newly acquired knowledge to the workplace	3.51	0.969	0.846
Learning results (Cronbach's alpha = 0.638)				
	The education program enabled me to adapt more easily to change	3.53	0.933	0.744
	After the education program, I have become more responsible and prudent	3.14	1.019	0.763
	The education program contributed to the enhanced employability of workers	2.92	1.145	0.780

ond part of this section is the empirical analysis of the impact of different drivers on learning results of both age groups of workers (which is evident from Tables 3 and 4).

Where available, constructs were measured using tested items from prior studies or were modified to enhance the content validity of the scale used. Table 1 summarizes the formal definitions of these constructs and presents the loading of the items that are 0.60 or more, which means that the constructs represent the true value of the measurement scale (Chin and Newsted 1999). Further, to assure the internal consistency of the composite scales, the Cronbach alphas were computed. Table 1 presents the Cronbach alphas that came to 0.545, 0.784, 0.765, and 0.659 for the intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, organizational support, and learning results regarding the older workers. The Cronbach alphas are 0.748, 0.753, 0.822, and 0.638 for the same constructs regarding the younger workers.

The acceptable overall fit ascertains the quality of the research models. Table 2 presents various fit statistics that show a good fit to the data of both models on a variety of criteria. Although the chi-square statistics is not significant when examining “the older workers model”, but is significant when examining “the younger workers model”, the chi-square statistics on degrees of freedom (χ^2/df) is within the range limit of $\chi^2/df < 5$ for both models. Also, RMSEA is within the range limit that is up to 0.10 for both models. All the other fit indices (GFI, AGFI, NNFI, CFI) show values close to 1. Therefore, the fit indices are acceptable as proposed by Diamantopolous and Siguaw (2000). The data shows that the measuring scales are adequate and that the data fit the models. Therefore, the required starting point for conduction of the empirical analysis is assured.

Table 2: Overall fit statistics for the older workers model and the younger workers model

<i>Fit measure</i>	<i>The older workers</i>	<i>The younger workers</i>
χ^2	60.55	119.29
χ^2/df	1.26	2.48
RMSEA – Root Mean Square Error of Approximation	0.052	0.100
GFI – Goodness of Fit Index	0.904	0.882
AGFI – Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index	0.844	0.809
NNFI – Non-Normed Fit Index	0.953	0.928
CFI – Comparative Fit Index	0.966	0.947

Table 3 presents the empirical results of the impacts of learning motivation factors and organizational support for learning results of older workers. Intrinsic learning motivation have strong positive ($\beta = 0.66, t = 2.24$) impact on learning results of older workers ($p < 0.05$) and also drivers of organizational support for learning have moderate positive ($\beta = 0.33, t = 2.58$) impact on learning results of older workers ($p < 0.05$). But there is no statistically significant impact on extrinsic learning motivation ($\beta = -0.02$, non-significant) on learning results of older workers. The results of the statistical analysis give the implications for ascertaining adequate unique human resource strategies that lead to enhanced learning results of older workers through strengthening the intrinsic learning motivation and through strengthening organizational support for learning. While strengthening extrinsic learning motivation by offering career development or salary raise is not the recommended strategy for older workers because it would have no (or negative) impact on learning results of older workers.

Table 3: The structural model estimates for older workers

<i>Predictors</i>	<i>Older workers' learning results</i>		
	<i>Unstandardized β</i>	<i>Standardized β</i>	<i>t-value</i>
Intrinsic learning motivation	1.40	0.66	2.33
Extrinsic learning motivation	-0.02	-0.02	-0.13
Organizational support	0.33	0.36	2.58

Table 4 presents the empirical results of the impacts of learning motivation factors and organizational support for learning results of younger workers. Intrinsic learning motivation relatively have relatively strong positive ($\beta = 0.51, t = 3.56$)

Table 4: The structural model estimates for younger workers

<i>Predictors</i>	<i>Younger workers' learning results</i>		
	<i>Unstandardized β</i>	<i>Standardized β</i>	<i>t-value</i>
Intrinsic learning motivation	0.51	0.62	3.56
Extrinsic learning motivation	0.33	0.35	2.22
Organizational support	0.06	0.07	0.49

impact on learning results of younger workers ($p < 0.05$) and extrinsic learning motivation have moderate positive ($\beta = 0.33$, $t = 2.58$) impact on learning results of younger workers ($p < 0.05$). But there is no statistically significant impact of organizational support for learning ($\beta = -0.02$, non-significant) on learning results of younger workers. The results of the statistical analysis give the implications for ascertaining adequate unique human resource strategies that lead to enhanced learning results of younger workers through strengthening the intrinsic and extrinsic learning motivation. While strengthening organizational support for learning, focused on younger workers, would have no impact on learning results of younger workers. Therefore, this is not the recommended strategy.

DISCUSSION

The modern working environment demands continuous learning. Therefore human resource managers need to encourage all their workers to participate in training and development regardless of age (Beaver and Hutchings 2005). However, employers frequently underestimate their older workers' value. Therefore, many researchers (Skirbekk 2008; De Guzman et al. 2014) propose the establishment of adequate organizational policies that create positive attitudes towards older workers. The researchers at the same time call for active participation of the older workers themselves in learning programs that enhance their employability (Billett et al. 2011; Žnidaršič and Dimovski 2009; Picchio and van Ours 2013; Van Dalen et al. 2014).

On many occasions, managers assume that human resource strategies affect different age groups of workers equally. But recently, Armstrong-Stassen and Lee (2009) stressed the importance of acknowledging different values and attitudes of different age groups of workers. From the angle of ascertaining adequate approaches, while examining the differences regarding adequate strategies that might enhance the learning results of both age groups of workers, the paper focuses on identifying the specific drivers that might impact learning results of older versus younger workers. The results are line with the conclusion of Setti et al. (2015) and Bal and Dorenbosch (2015) who concluded that while aging the emotions of intrinsic motivation strengthen but extrinsic motivation factors are not that im-

portant anymore. Moreover, Gegenfurtner and Vauras (2012) claim that learning motivation while aging does not decline but on the contrary, it even strengthens although some researchers (Bertolino et al. 2011) claim the opposite. However, previous research did not go further into the identifying the importance of strengthening specific motivational and supportive drivers according to the needs of different age groups of workers. As Buss and Kuhlmann (2013) indicated that human resource managers do not effectively utilize the aging workers in a way that they would contribute significantly to the organizations' success. It might be because human resource managers do not establish unique practices that suit the needs of both age groups of workers. The present paper thus goes further in building the theory of learning of workers at work by identifying the suitable approach to framing unique strategies that boost learning results of older versus younger workers. The results offer a starting point for explaining the dispositional influences on workers' motivation for learning that have the great influence on learning results. Foss (2007) has ascertained that by applying specific human resource practices, the managers can strengthen the intrinsic motivation or the extrinsic motivation of the workers. The research results indicate that managers might enhance the learning results of older workers through the human resource strategy that strengthens intrinsic motivation factors and organizational support for learning. Older workers' learning motivators are neither promotion nor gaining respect. However, they do need stronger support for learning from their superiors as well as from their colleagues. On the other hand, younger workers' learning results can be enhanced by strengthening intrinsic and also extrinsic motivation.

CONCLUSION

The paper recommends human resource managers to overcome the roughly rooted age stereotypes and draw attention to dealing with different age groups of workers uniquely. Older workers are highly intrinsically motivated learners. Therefore, the managers are encouraged to strengthen the intrinsic motivation while the superiors' and colleagues' support for learning is also of great importance. These are predictors that could have significant positive impact on their learning results whereas the extrinsic learn-

ing motivation does not have the impact on learning results of older workers. However, for the younger workers, besides strengthening the intrinsic motivation, the recognition, career development and salary raise might be the right stimulation strategy that could consequently increase their learning results whereas strengthening the drivers of organizational support for learning would not impact the learning results of younger workers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper contributes to the literature on training and development, learning motivation, and organizational support from the angle of different age groups of workers. The findings also have several practical implications for managers facing an increasingly aging workforce. Firstly, strengthening organizational support for learning seems to be particularly effective for older workers because it enables them to maintain a relatively strong focus on learning opportunities and the consequent learning benefits, thus enabling them to use, share, and develop their knowledge and skills. The results show that when managing older workers, strengthening organizational support and strengthening drivers of intrinsic motivation for learning are the proposed strategies because they have a positive impact on their learning results. Strengthening extrinsic learning motivation of older workers would not lead to positive learning results. However, when managing younger workers strengthening the intrinsic as well as extrinsic motivation is the right stimulation strategy that consequently increases their learning results. When managing younger workers strengthening organizational support is not recommended because it would not bring positive impact on their learning results.

There are also some implications for the policy makers due to the aging population phenomenon that puts pressure on health and pension systems. The researchers recommend to policy makers to frame the adequate national policies that support learning activities of older workers to retain them within the labor market.

LIMITATIONS

This paper has made several contributions. However, it is important to note some potential

limitations, which are two-fold in nature. The first set of limitations concerns the size and structure of the sample (the sample includes three enterprises, which is relatively small). On the other hand, the second set of limitations refers to the scope and subject of the research. For example, the number of learning programs (different topics) which workers attended and which were the subject of this research, is small. Perhaps the investigation into the learning results/outcomes of different age groups of workers may also depend on the topic (learning program) that participants would attend. Therefore, additional constructs may help shed light on the examined relationships, be they possible boundary conditions or explanatory mechanisms, as proposed in the propositions for future research below. Finally, the paper used cross-sectional data because the aim was to examine the role of age in correlation with learning-related variables, but nevertheless, it could lead to inflated relationships between the variables. The researchers kept the most representative and meaningful items of the learning motivation scale. Future studies might add other items of learning motivation, organizational support and learning results to the model.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The research findings themselves already suggest many interesting applications (directions) for future research. First, a larger sample of more companies should be included in the future research, while simultaneously a richer set of learning programs should be included in the investigation. The researchers strongly suggest also involving not-for-profit organizations, where the average educational level of the workers is higher than in the profit sector, and the researchers can assume that continuous education and workplace learning can play an even more important role in maintaining workers' employability.

Particularly promising research opportunities exist in further developing the framework for a more sophisticated conceptual model of workplace learning – which would take into account the variety of learning needs of workers of all ages, and at the same time validating it (this model) in empirical studies. Besides, the perception and awareness among workers about the importance of continuous learning and educating workers regardless of their age would be very welcome.

NOTE

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