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Promoting Successful Aging at Work: Voice and Human Capital as Drivers of Age-related HR Practices

Matt Piszczek

Wayne State University, piszczek@wayne.edu

Peter Berg

Michigan State University, bergp@msu.edu

Daniella Hochfellner

New York University, daniella.hochfellner@nyu.edu

Marissa Eckrote

New York University, meckrote@uwflax.edu

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Promoting Successful Aging at Work: Voice and Human Capital as Drivers of Age-related HR Practices

The global population is rapidly aging due to longer lifespans and decreased fertility rates (EU-OSHA et al., 2017). This demographic trend has important implications for workers and society, as older workers are a vulnerable population (Gatta, 2019) and workforce aging puts public pension benefits at risk (Chen & Turner, 2007). However, existing workforce aging research is largely focused on the needs and preferences of older workers without explicitly considering the interests of organizations, despite organizations being key actors in the proliferation of practices and policies that might help older workers age more successfully and productively (Kooij & van de Voorde, 2015). A greater understanding is needed of what drives organizations to adopt age-related policies and practices as there seems to exist a disconnect between older employee needs and practice offerings. Such an understanding might help bridge this gap and improve job quality for older workers and help promote productive aging of older workers.

Using establishment survey and administrative data from a nationally representative panel including 16,431 observations of 8,996 establishments in Germany, the present paper draws on a framework of institutional logics (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013) to examine the relationship between organizational characteristics (proportion of older workers in the establishment and employee voice mechanisms) and six age-related HR practices (partial retirement, mixed-age teams, inclusion in advanced training, targeted training, special equipment, and lower performance requirements). We argue that proportion of older workers and employee voice mechanisms in an establishment represent two different rationales for the adoption of age-related practices, and will be positively related to the presence of age-related

practices in the following year. Our theorization regarding these rationales draws on two perspectives. We use human capital theory to explain why organizations may choose to adopt age-related practices when they have a higher proportion of older workers and lifespan development theories to explain why employee voice mechanisms may also result in the adoption of age-related practices.

Preliminary results suggest that employee voice mechanisms are much more strongly and consistently related to age-related practice adoption than simple age demographics. The presence of works councils and collective agreements were each individually positively related to the presence of all six age-related practices in the following year. On the other hand, the proportion of workers over age 50 in an establishment was only positively related to partial retirement practices and was negatively related to mixed-age teams and lower performance requirements in the following year.

This suggests that, contrary to suggestions of existing research, organizations with a high proportion of older workers may actually be less likely to adopt some types of age-related HR practices, and the most viable pathway to such practices may be through worker representation rather than relying on organizations to adopt them for business or strategic purposes. A common argument is that as establishments are comprised of an increasingly higher proportion of older workers due to workforce aging, they will adopt more age-related practices to attract and retain older workers. Our results suggest that this may not be the case, and that organizations may be hesitant to respond to workforce aging with formal practices unless compelled to through collective employee voice mechanisms. In terms of the institutional logics perspective, this is consistent with a compliance logic rather than a strategic logic as fundamentally driving age-related practice adoption.

The study makes several contributions to research on older workers and age-related practices and has important implications for the well-being of older workers and management of age diversity. Our findings highlight the importance of considering organizational interests and logics in the proliferation of age-related practices, as organizations' human capital management interests may not always be aligned with those of older workers' as posited by lifespan development theories. In order to improve the experience of older workers via formal age-related practices, worker representation may be necessary particularly for policy and practice options that organizational leaders may find expensive or disruptive to efficiency (e.g., lower performance requirements or mixed-age teams). Our results also highlight the challenges that older workers may face in achieving the recommendations of much individual-level aging research focused on reorganizing work to assist with productive and successful aging; if establishments do not see the value in adopting practices that effectively extend working lives of older workers, then in order to access such practices alternative mechanisms such as employee voice mechanisms may be necessary.

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