

## Article

# Workability: A Metric to Inform Policy for an Aging Workforce

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## Introduction

The workforce is aging, and with these changes come policy decisions about how to effectively manage the challenges and opportunities associated with this workforce trend. Extending work lives can have societal and organizational benefits, such as sustaining retirement systems. Plus, older workers provide some workforce benefits, such as higher levels of job satisfaction and performance in certain domains (e.g., safety and citizenship behaviors; Ng & Feldman, 2008, 2010).

The concept of *workability*—a person's ability to meet the requirements of their job—provides a valuable lens to help policy-makers and employers address issues related to extending careers and fostering greater workforce participation. The following sections outline the age-related changes experienced by individuals that may affect their workability, why workability is important, and an organization's role in promoting and hindering workability. We conclude by outlining a future research agenda and providing policy recommendations to promote workability.

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## How Do People Change as They Age?

There is a well-established literature on aging that identifies the losses and gains people experience as they age. As might be expected, there are losses in terms of physical strength and stamina, and there are increases in physical ailments and pain. Similarly, there can be some cognitive losses. Starting at about age 25, fluid cognitive ability, which includes working memory and the ability to quickly process information, begins to decline (Fisher, Chacon, & Chaffee, 2019). Although people differ in terms of how quickly these physical and mental changes happen, these age-related changes can produce challenges for people who want to or must continue working, as well as for their employers and for society.

However, there are also some gains that develop with aging. For instance, people tend to show gains in crystallized cognitive ability: that is, accumulated job skills and wisdom (Fisher et al., 2019). People also have positive changes in personality. They tend to become more conscientious and have increased emotional stability as they age, which are both important traits for contributing to the workforce (Nye & Roberts, 2019). Moreover, older people tend to be more intrinsically motivated (wanting to do the work for the work itself), exhibit increased generativity (the desire to help or mentor others), and often develop good social skills (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Kooij & Kanfer, 2019). Overall, many job performance dimensions slightly improve with age or at least remain steady (Ng & Feldman, 2008). There are many reasons

for this finding; one is that many of the improvements that come with age, such as increased conscientiousness, crystallized knowledge, and job satisfaction, can compensate for the declines, like losses in physical and fluid cognitive ability. In addition, many of the most serious age-related declines occur much later in life: that is, after the standard retirement age.

Although the aforementioned losses and gains apply to people on average, there is considerable variability in people's performance at work across their lifespans. This is due not only to differences with how a person ages, but how their age-related changes are applicable to the specific work they are performing. That is, the combination of the changes in the person and their job requirements is key. As a simple example, losses in physical strength would be a significant hindrance to an airline baggage handler, but irrelevant to many types of office work. Similarly, even small losses in fluid cognitive ability (i.e., information processing speed) might be a serious problem for the performance of an air traffic controller, but less of an issue for most other jobs.

### Workability: The Alignment of the Person and Their Job

The concept of workability developed over 30 years ago in the occupational medicine literature in Finland, with a general focus on disability and predicting how long people could be expected to continue working. It focused on specific illnesses, diseases, and disabilities a person might have accumulated, as well their own perceptions of how these affected their ability to work. The early workability literature showed that workability declined with age, was lowest among workers in physically demanding occupations, and was significantly related to outcomes such as employment disability and workers' compensation claims (Ilmarinen et al., 1991). Although earlier workability research included medical diagnoses by a physician, more recent research, including our own, has shown that a person's own assessment of their workability, as measured by a few survey items, is reasonably accurate (Brady et al., 2020). In recent years, the workability concept has been adopted by researchers in the organizational sciences to better understand the aging process and what organizations can do to support workers across the lifespan. As we will describe below, an individual's workability can be very important for a range of individual, organization, and societal outcomes.

At this point, it is important to make a distinction between the workability concept and other metrics typically used in hiring and employment. Organizations have traditionally used assessments of knowledge, skills, and ability, such as cognitive/mental ability and physical tests, during the hiring processes. In contrast, workability is often measured based on the person's belief that they can perform

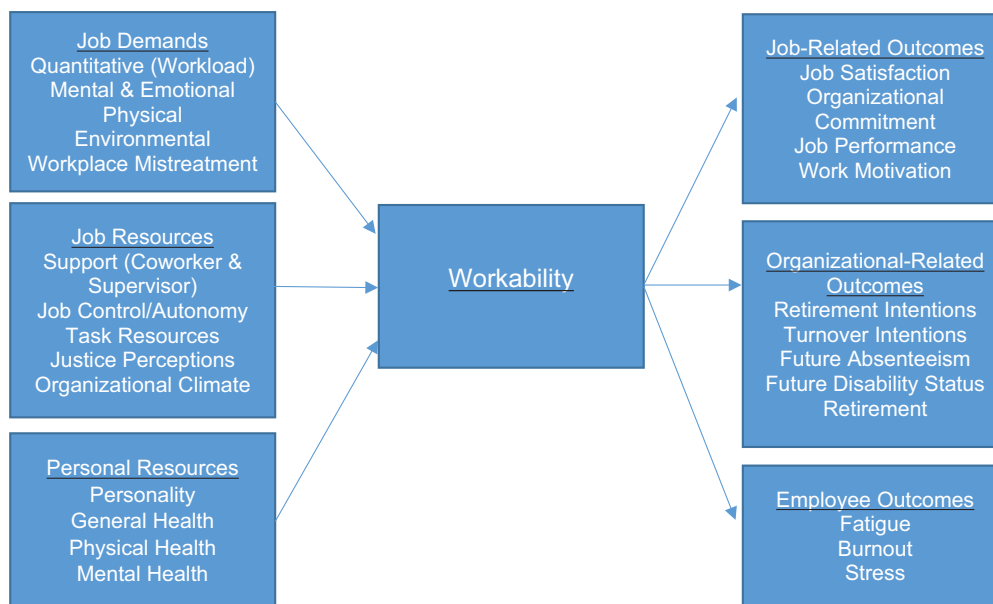
their work (e.g., "I can meet the physical requirements of my work") or as a combination of a person's perceptions of their workability and their health (i.e., medical diagnoses by a physician). For legal reasons, such as health information privacy and disability and age discrimination laws, organizations would not be advised to use workability in a hiring or promotion context, but could use workability for assessing the changing needs of their workforce.

## The Research

### Why Workability Matters

Three recent papers show that workability influences important outcomes, and provide much of the current state of our knowledge about workability (see Figure 1). First, over a series of studies, McGonagle and colleagues (2015) found that a four-item measure of workability was related to employees' absenteeism and whether the person went on disability or retired. Second, we reviewed the research across medicine, business, and psychology (Cadiz, Brady, Rineer, & Truxillo, 2019). We found that workability was related to exit from the workforce and to well-being indicators, such as quality of life and a fulfilling retirement experience. Third, we followed up our literature review with a meta-analysis. This involved a statistical summary of hundreds of studies and tens of thousands of people that examined which factors influence workability and its outcomes (Brady et al., 2020). We found that workability was related not only to whether people stayed in their jobs (quit or retired), but also to their stress, work motivation, job satisfaction, engagement, and even their job performance. Taken together, these studies show that there are compelling reasons that organizations and societies should care about workability, because it relates to workers' well-being and performance and whether they choose to keep working or to retire.

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**Figure 1.** Predictors and outcomes of workability (based on Brady et al., 2020).

### What Are the Factors that Help or Hinder Workability?

Research has also shown that there are a number of factors that can generally affect workability regardless of age, and many of these factors can be modified by organizations. We see these as possible “levers” that an employer can use to provide a work environment that allows a person to thrive at work, even as they age. What are they?

We found the number of demands placed on the employee, including both physical and emotional demands, can hurt a person’s workability no matter their age; so does being treated unfairly at work or experiencing abusive supervision (see Table 1). Alternatively, regardless of age, many work factors seem to improve a person’s workability. These include social support from supervisors and coworkers, being given sufficient resources to do their work, having a positive organizational climate, and being given control over their work. Relatedly, employee health was found to be a substantial determinant of workability, and employers can play a substantial role in promoting worker health through health promotion and creating a healthy work environment, which can have a positive impact on workability.

### Implications for Workplace Policy

Overall, research shows that workability affects outcomes—attitudes, motivation, well-being, and behavior—that matter to employers and to society. And while several

**Table 1.** Workplace and Employee Factors that Influence Workability

Workplace demands that can hinder workability
Quantitative demands
Mental/emotional demands
Physical demands
Environmental conditions
Workplace mistreatment
Workplace resources that can enhance workability
Coworker support
Supervisor support
Job control
Task resources
Justice perceptions
Organizational climate
Psychosocial personal resources that can enhance workability
Core self-evaluations
Emotional stability
Health-related factors that enhance workability
General health
Sleep
Physical health
Low BMI
Lack of pain-related symptoms
Mental health
Physical activity
Health-related factors that hinder workability
Smoking (tobacco)
Depressive symptoms

*Note.* Adapted from Brady et al., 2020. BMI = body mass index.

of the factors that reduce workability (e.g., age) are out of the employer's control, the current research on age in the workplace provides several ideas for policies that can support people's workability. These policy ideas fall into two categories: addressing job demands and providing workers with job resources.

### Addressing Job Demands to Maintain and Enhance Workability

- *Ergonomics and the physical work environment.* Employers can redesign the physical demands of work to address the needs of aging workers. For example, L.L. Bean redesigned its warehouse work to reduce back strain on its older workers, finding that this was appreciated by younger employees as well (Chang & Roy, 2016).
- *Facilitate job crafting.* Research on using a bottom-up approach and allowing employees to “craft” their jobs suggests that workers may be able to think about how they do things at work to optimize their performance (Müller, Heiden, Herbig, Poppe, & Angerer, 2016). Older employees and those with longer job tenure are particularly well suited to craft their jobs to fit their current needs and abilities, because they may have deeper knowledge of both their own abilities and the nuances of the position. For example, research in Germany found that training older nurses on goal setting, action planning, and goal prioritization to optimize their work led to greater well-being (Müller et al., 2016). Utilization of these adaptive strategies was positively related to workability (Müller et al., 2013). Similarly, research suggests that older workers see benefits in crafting jobs towards their strengths, which leads to them perceiving a better fit with their job (Kooij, van Woerkom, Wilkenloh, Dorenbosch, & Denissen, 2017).

### Providing Job Resources to Promote Workability

- *Promoting fair workplaces.* Employee perceptions of fairness and justice matter; that is, whether people feel that they got a fair outcome, fair processes were used in decision-making, and how well one is treated by their supervisor, team, or organization (Schneider, González-Romá, Ostroff, & West, 2017). Research supports that justice perceptions in general discrimination and in age discrimination specifically affect perceptions of workability (Brady et al., 2020; Cadiz, Brady, Truxillo, & Zaniboni, 2019). The key is to not single out any one age group, but to treat all people fairly regardless of age. For example, a large study of 93 German companies found that age-friendly human resource practices, where people of all ages are given

the same opportunities, led to an age-friendly work climate; this, in turn, led to increased firm performance and reduced turnover (Boehm, Kunze, & Bruch, 2014) among workers of all ages.

- *Creating supportive work conditions.* Building support from managers and coworkers is important for workability and its outcomes (Ahlstrom, Hagberg, & Dellve, 2013). These supportive conditions should be fostered from top management on down. For example, research suggests that high-involvement work practices (i.e., a group of practices aimed at increasing employee motivation and skills, such as involving employees in decisions) have a positive impact on company-level workability (von Bonsdorff et al., 2018). Although some organizations are utilizing age-friendly practices like workload adjustments, job redesigns, and enhanced safety protections (accommodation practices; van Dalen, Henkens, & Wang, 2015), these are still not the norm. However, creating these supportive conditions not only affects workability and its outcomes, but it is the right thing to do.
- *Offering career development opportunities.* Offering development opportunities increases a worker's available resources and, thus, could foster high levels of workability. For example, in a randomized controlled field trial of over 700 people, participants in a 7-month career management training had greater career management preparedness, improved workability (labeled “mental resources” in the study), and reduced intentions to retire, compared to the control group (Vuori, Toppinen-Tanner, & Mutanen, 2012).
- *Developing health promotion resources.* Health promotion activities enhance employee health and workability. For instance, offering stress management training has shown promise in maintaining workability (McGonagle et al., 2014). Additionally, research has shown that workplace health interventions focused on healthy eating and increasing physical activity had positive influences on workability (Flannery, Resnick, & McMullen, 2012; von Thiele Schwartz, Lindfors, & Lundberg, 2008).

### Where Should We Go from Here?

#### Future Research Agenda

While the workability literature has made promising progress, we believe that answering the following questions would further inform workforce policy.

- What job designs and job characteristics enhance older worker workability?
- How do we design jobs that leverage the gains that are made as people age and limit the impact of age-related losses?
- How can supervisors be trained to effectively support and enhance older worker workability?

- What is the influence of societal/national policy (e.g., forced retirement policies) on the workability of older employees?
- Are there particular shared underlying beliefs, assumptions, and values (i.e., organizational cultures) that positively or negatively affect the workability of older workers?
- What factors limit organizations and supervisors from implementing practices to enhance workability?

### Policy Recommendations to Promote Workability Among Aging Workforces

To promote workability among aging workforces, there are a number of important policies to consider.

- Strengthen age discrimination laws. Perceptions of age discrimination among workers have been found to reduce their workability (Cadiz, Brady, Truxillo, & Zaniboni, 2019). Therefore, laws like the Age Discrimination and Employment Act and policies focused on reducing age bias and discrimination among decision-makers can positively affect workability.
- Funding for national centers that promote research on workability among aging workforces (e.g., National Center for Productive Aging and Work) should be increased. Support for these centers would increase our capacity to systematically study workability interventions and the development, maintenance, and decline of workability over the career. It would also allow us to tie changes in workability to social policies (e.g., retraining, retirement, disability, and vocational rehabilitation programs).
- Policies should incentivize organizations to adopt best practices for promoting and supporting the workability of older workers. For example, early workability research was most heavily adopted in Scandinavian countries (e.g., Finland), and this is likely due to organizational incentives and social safety nets that make supporting workability more fiscally acceptable.
- Policy-makers should consider how organizations promote workability over people's work lifespans. For example, among nurses, installing lift systems that alleviate the need to lift patients can reduce that physical demand. This not only allows older nurses to continue working, it also reduces the likelihood that younger nurses develop injuries, thereby extending their potential working careers. Thus, both proactive steps (managing early career experiences to positively affect a person's later workability) and reactive steps (enhancing workability in older workers) serve as sustainable solutions for workforce planning. As such, taking a lifespan view of workability could help nations remain competitive from a workforce development and human capital perspective.
- Policy-makers should implement and evaluate the extent to which job training—and, more specifically, job retraining to a new occupation—can be made most

effective. Because workability is a function not only of the person but the particular job, policy should consider how to transition workers into different jobs at different points in their careers, especially as employees get later into their careers. This might also involve retraining for such transitions.

In short, the workability concept has been around for decades, and sufficient research has accumulated to demonstrate its value in understanding how to support people's continuing to work. The next steps should focus on how to apply what we know already to inform policy to support workability.

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### Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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