# REVIEW PAPER: DEVELOPMENT OF SUPPORTIVE WORK CLIMATE FOR OLDER WORKFORCE

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## ABSTRACT

*Today workforce ageing, labor and skill shortages have become a major concern, emphasizing the need for retaining and sustaining competent older workers. To do so organizations need to focus on designing a supportive work climate for older employees. This will require making the workplace more attractive and appealing so that older workers will want to continue working in the organizations. In reality, the existence of an age-supportive climate in organizations is not that evident. Many organizations don't consider developing age-supportive policies and practices that would contribute to positive work culture. Lack of opportunities and support provided to older workers might be rooted in the belief that with increasing age role of people in work and society is significantly reduced. These stereotypes might transform into daily practices and procedures of the organization, and lead to a workplace climate that is less responsive to the older workers contributions. Thus, leading to creation of a weak work climate which affects older workers contribution towards organizational growth and success. Designing Strategies to strengthen their work climate is therefore necessary in fostering older workers commitment and intention to remain in the organization.*

*KEYWORDS: Older Workforce, Work Climate, Ageing, Age-supportive Climate*

## INTRODUCTION

Today dependence on older workers has increased due to the changes in demographic trends in population and changing workforce requirements. It has become very difficult to obtain and retain the best talent. Organizations have to face the unpleasant consequences of employee separation and retirement costs. Thus, organizations will have to become more dependent on older employees in order to withstand the increasing competitive pressure. The skills, knowledge, and experience possessed by older workforce can help in the refurbishment of younger employees. To retain and motivate older workers it is necessary to provide them with support and development opportunities. But unfortunately, focus on age-supportive climate lacks in many organizations which affect their motivation and commitment levels (Lahey, 2005; Rabl, 2010; Billet et al., 2011). Managers usually evaluate older workers performance as negative regardless of how they actually perform (Rosen and Jerdee, 1988). As employees age, their needs and preferences also tend to change over time. The significance of certain work aspects is felt more over others (Babcock, 2005). Organizations with little age-supportive climate result in obstructing older workers employability. Jobs with no challenges and learning potential affect the levels of motivation and commitment among

them. If work is perceived as meaningless, lacking recognition and having no growth potential, workers would more likely feel dissatisfied and lack commitment, affecting their employability in the organization. Negative age stereotypes against older workers are prevalent among workplaces which are wrong and out of date (McEvoy&Blahna, 2001; Posthuma& Campion, 2009). Combating and overcoming those stereotypes by showing respect for the experience and contributions of older workers is necessary in order to encourage older workers to delay retirement or even return to the workforce after retirement (Shea, 1991). Presence of opportunities and support may show that the organization values the efforts and contribution of the older workforce. Managers who value the efforts and contributions of the older workforce would be able to gain their trust and commitment towards the promotion of organizational goals. Most certainly the organizations cannot resolve all issues at once but can definitely take steps towards reducing them. If an organization does not take appropriate steps on time they would have to lose some of their best employees who could have proved to be an asset for the organization. In this study, I have analyzed the various HR practices that can improve the work climate of the older workforce. The aim of this research is to make an addition to the literature on the older workforce, age supportive strategies, and ageism.

## REVIEW METHODOLOGY

This study reviewed the literature related to the older workforce that includes employer strategies to enhance work climate. Search engines such as google scholar were used to obtain research papers. The keywords older workforce, employer strategies, ageism, age supportive environment, etc. were used to search related articles and papers. High-quality research papers and research reports were used to frame this paper. As there is a dearth of research on older workforce a substantial amount of papers could not be collected. The collected research papers were carefully studied to extract the required information related to the research.

## REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

During research, several factors have been found to create a positive work climate for the older workforce in an organization which is discussed in the following sections.

**Investment in Training and Development**

Training and Developmental opportunities presented by the employer for the older worker may satisfy their needs for personal growth and career advancement (Bal et al., 2012). Organizations are required to provide training and education to the older workforce to combat skill obsolescence. Such efforts might even lead to lifelong learning (Peterson & Wendt, 1995). Skill Training could be essential for the older workforce to increase their role performance (Thomas Ng, 2010). Traditional training setting may not work well with the older workforce and might even induce resistance and fear of failure (Thomas Ng, 2012). There is a need for designing training programs that focus on matching the skills and knowledge of older worker with that of the younger workforce (Tishman et al., 2012). Armstrong Stassen and Templer (2005) have identified

some focus areas for organizations while developing training programs for the older workforce: providing access to training, application of training methods, materials, and environments suitable for the aging workforce, and training managers on how to effectively utilize the skills and talents of the older workforce. For the development of the workforce, it is important that the managers and employers consider the training and professional development needs and interests of the older workforce. This implies the customization of training offered to ensure that it is appropriate for the older workforce and identifying ways in which the older workforce can assist in training and knowledge transfer within the organization. Discussions on training and professional development opportunities between employers or managers and older workforce should be carried out to assure their availability for the older workforce. Review of training policies in the organization is essential to ensure that training is being offered to all employees and not just the younger workforce and to access support towards organizations age management and retention strategies (L.Burgmann, 2013). There is a need for the development of continuous education and training provisions by the organizations to meet the needs and requirements of the older workforce and provide opportunities for them to demonstrate their competence and achieve recognition or certifications beyond their workplace setting (Griffin, & F. Beddie, 2011).

**Flexible Work Options**

Flexibility is one of the most common factors that has emerged consistently in the literature. Changes in work motivations may emerge among older worker due to age-related changes in their abilities and needs. Older worker is rich in knowledge but may lack the time and cognitive abilities (Kanfer& Ackerman 2004). Older workers require time outside of work for their family and health (stork, 2008).Workers working in a challenging and flexible environment where they have control over the work environment perceive more growth opportunities over others working in a restricted work environment (Zacher, 2009). It is crucial for the organization to introduce effective HR strategies such as flexible work options, flexible work schedules, and imaginative retirement agreements to retain key talent. The adoption of flexible work options can provide a marketplace advantage to the organization (hedge, 2008). Older workers would like to perform their regular work from home. Flexibility in work options in order to provide time to leisure activities may lower levels of early retirement (Van dam et al., 2009).

According to Eyster et al., (2008),"An important benefit of flexible work arrangements is that it enables employees to extend their careers with the same employer or in the same occupation or industry instead of moving to self-employment or to different occupations or sectors where part-time work schedules are more common, i.e., retail." Therefore, employers and managers need to recognize the significance of flexible work systems for many older workers. They need to invest in flexible work arrangements along with reduced working hours, teleworking and adapting job roles to assist in older workers engagement and retention. The changing needs of an aging workforce can be anticipated through job analysis to target specific work functions or activities that may be altered to accommodate physical or cognitive demands of the work activity (Hursh et al., 2006).To assist the older workers to achieve the desired balance between work and non-work interests and responsibilities, employers may establish, support and monitor the effectiveness of flexible work arrangements. They should

consider establishing policies such as part-time work or flexible work hours and offering flexible leave options for older workers, such as lifestyle leave and career breaks. Standard retirement practices should be replaced with phased retirement options on the preference of older workers. Programs should be developed to hire former retired employees by setting up talent pools for projects or part-time work. Strategies should be developed that prevent career stagnation amongst older workers. Job roles should be reviewed and tasks should be adjusted if necessary to ensure that the organization offers meaningful work which matches older workers capacities (L.Burgmann, 2013).

**Positive Workplace Attitudes and Practices**

The challenge of retaining older worker competence cannot be achieved just by the development of their capacities. It is also required that there is a change in the perceptions of those involved, especially in decision making relating to employment and development opportunities (Billett et al., 2011). Intentional discrimination by an employer against older workers may lead to loss of commitment and participation from all other workers (James et al., 2013). Studies suggest that older employees highly value the support from their supervisors and coworkers rather than by younger employees (Maurer and Tarulli, 1994). Studies by Howell et al., (2006) concluded that the support by senior management for diversity and effective utilization of older workers as part of the retail workforce resulted in the creation of age positive practices by those managers who supervise older workers. Suitable practices by the employer may motivate older works to stay with the organization (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008). Strategies such as exit interviews, focus groups, opinion surveys, and pattern analysis of workers grievances should be adopted to evaluate the presence of any age-discrimination in the organization (Ensher et al., 2001). Awareness regarding the issues faced by the aging workforce should be raised so as to lower age discriminatory climate (Armstrong-Stassen and Templer, 2005). Diversity training should be given to executives so they are more sensitive to older workforce issues and requirements (Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005). Jorgensen (2004) suggests that employers should try to eliminate negative attitudes towards older workers and also the policies that deal with agism should be carefully formulated so they do not harm workers of the organization. Regular evaluation and supervision of management and subordinates attitudes and behavior towards the older workforce should be made. Such practice may lead to affective commitment and job satisfaction (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Older workers should be appraised for their contributions to the organization and the results should be shared with employers for reducing negative perspectives regarding them. This would aid in reducing the bias against older workers (Billet et al, 2011). Development of positive work policies is important for older workers as well as the organization. Policies and practices that discriminate older workers should be identified and modified or removed (Rabl, 2010). Posthuma and Campion (2009) propose that age should not be a component of layoff decision and diversity training should be provided to all employees to reduce age bias. Organizations are required to cultivate positive work attitudes among older workforce for the successful completion of work activities in all areas (Thomas Ng, 2010). Employers need to design selection and promotion procedures that are free from age bias or do not indulge in age discrimination (Weiss & Maurer, 2004). Greenwald and Banaji (1995) have identified three approaches to combat stereotypes: blinding (withholding candidates' age from decision maker), affirmative action and creation of awareness regarding age stereotyping. Creation of

work environments where young workers can work together with older workers and encouraging information flow can be beneficial for reducing negative stereotypes (Falkenberg, 1990). Investments need to me made on the quality of work as they have a positive influence on older workers health and wellbeing, and also reduce absence from work (Siegrist et al., 2007). Employers should develop policies and strategies that consider the pay, benefits and health issues of an older workforce (American Association of Retired Persons, 2004).
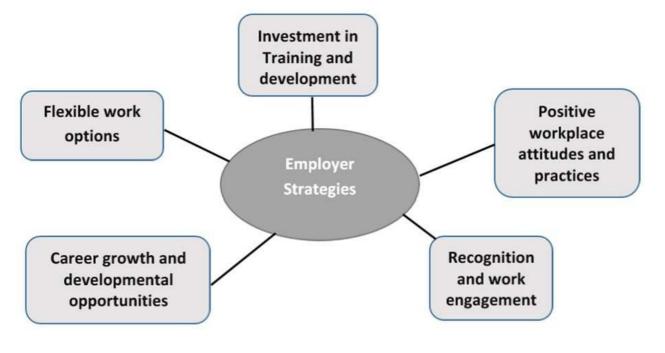
**Career Growth and Developmental Opportunities**

A belief of older workers that they have few opportunities for promotion in the careers may lower satisfaction among them (Chao, 1990). Organizations need to modify career development opportunities keeping in view the requirements of the older workforce (Thomas Ng, 2012). Older workers looking for job and career enrichment at the workplace (Bond et al., 2005; Spherion, 2005). Employers should develop new and innovate career planning strategies that would motivate the older worker to stay with the organization (Templer, 2010). Development opportunities for employees are connected with low intentions to retire early (Van dam et al., 2009). Findings by Karen van dam, (2017) suggest that a developmental, and challenging work environment can be an effective strategy to retain employees in the workforce so that they are capable and motivated.

Many older workers explore ways to rejuvenate their careers or start a new one and wish to augment variety to their present work by utilizing their untapped potential (Advisory Panel on the Economic Potential of Senior Australians, 2011). Flexible careers should be conceptualized by employers for older workers. Before older workers retire they may be unable to achieve a particular career peak, they may be escalating or de-escalating the pace of their work, elevating up or down their workload to reflect changes in their needs, lifecycle, and aspirations. They may be interested in contributing in new ways for the organization and even be willing to moving to new locations (Diversity Council of Australia, 2012). Employers need to foster development orientation for older workers and ensure that their job tasks involve opportunities for them to learn new knowledge and skills to create a supportive development climate and retain older workers. (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008).Employers may allow employees to switch jobs within the organizations as a way to promote shifts to part-time work. Such work options pave way for new opportunities for older employees who possess lower motivation levels in their existing job position and are looking for new challenges or positions that accord with their changing preferences or capabilities (Tishman et al., 2012). Employers and managers need to prevent career stagnation amongst older workers by developing strategies such as subsidized study, secondments, and new projects. Programs need to be established that facilitate in the hiring of former employees that have retired, by setting up talent pools for a project or part-time work (L.Burgmann, 2013). Attitudes of older workers towards retirement could be modified by including their spouses in the career counseling process. Career counseling practices should focus on challenging work environment to induce lifelong learning among all employees (van dam et al., 2009).

**Recognition and Work Engagement**

Workers who feel that they are not respected or valued have an inclination towards possessing lower levels of engagement. A study has found that older workers find being respected and getting recognition for their contributions as the most essential human resource practices influencing their decision to remain with the organization (Armstrong-Stassen, 2006). Older workers want to be respected by their co-workers and also be valued by their managers and supervisors(Piktialis, 2007). Older workers want to work where they are treated fairly and provided with rewards for efficient performance (stork, 2008). Appreciation from employers or managers is essential for older to workers to postpone retirement (Van dam et al., 2009).

The manager should reward older workers for their positive work contribution to the organization (Thomas Ng, 2010). There needs to a balance between efforts and rewards received at work for older workers (Siegrist et al., 2006). Rewarding older workers for their contributions may result in a capable and motivated older workforce (Karen van dam, et al., 2017). Older workers may want to work even after retirement as there is a significantly higher level of engagement and job satisfaction among them and are committed towards the organization (Galinsky, 2007). Older worker cares more about task control, task variety, and challenge (Stork, 2008). Older workers employability can be sustained by analyzing opportunities often available in the workplaces which include engaging employees in novel activities that assist them in further developing their capacities and eventually achieve higher competence. High levels of work engagement among older workers depict that their ability to respond to new activities will be enriched. It is important to note that if older workers are provided sufficient opportunities for them to engage in new tasks and support related to these activities, May likely result in further development of their employability (Griffin, & F. Beddie, 2011).



**Figure 1:**

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

There are no fixed practices of an organization that is conductive in the creation of a positive work climate for older workers because organizations differ on the basis different variables such as the nature of their work, policies, and practices. But there are some common and effective practices and strategies that have been identified for enhancing work climate that is essential for retention, development, and growth of older employees.

Based on the findings of this research following points are a list of suggestions recommended for enhancing the work climate of the older workforce:-

- Stereotyping against older workforce should be minimized by inculcating and reinforcing positive attitudes regarding old age workers among managers and employees. Daily managerial functions should be performed without the inclusion of any discrimination.

- Creation of flexible work conditions for older workforce should be emphasized, such as enabling variations in work schedules, retirement options, work benefits, and work design.

- Training programs should involve the use of techniques, methods, and materials that aid in the learning process of the older workforce.

- Opportunities for growth and development should be provided to the older workforce to increase their motivation and personal interests.

- Efforts and contributions of older workers towards the organization should be recognized and rewarded to increase their engagement and commitment towards the organization.

- Continuous analysis of workforce and workplace is essential to figure appropriate strategies for dealing with older workforce issues.

## CONCLUSIONS

For any organizations to flourish in today's ever-increasing competition demands retention of competent and experienced employees so that it can make use of their experience, knowledge, and skills. Thus, it is imperative to design strategies in such a way that would help in the retention of talented and competent older workforce and keep them committed towards the organization. Developing a positive work climate would not only benefit older workers but all the workers working in the organization. The organization can uphold a reputation in the marketplace and would be able to attract a more capable workforce. Through this research, various trends and factors were identified that have an effect on the work climate of the older workforce. Employers can use these factors to design a positive work climate for the older workforce and keep in view the factors that may hinder older workers employability.

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