

Commentary on Education and Occupational Health

Active aging in the workplace: Challenges and strategies in EU countries

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Abstract

Active aging, defined by WHO, aims to optimize health and participation for older individuals, improving their quality of life. The aging workforce challenges organizations but offers benefits such as increased productivity and diverse experience. Europe's aging population calls for strategies to accommodate older workers. Active aging fosters physical and mental well-being, social inclusion, and reduced disease risk. Employers must implement a comprehensive approach, addressing psychosocial risks, providing continuous training, and considering reasonable accommodations. Promoting active aging benefits individuals, organizations, and society. In this commentary, we present the challenges and issues that the topic poses in Italy and in European countries.

Keywords: active aging; universal design; ergonomics; prevention; accommodation.

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The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined active aging as a "*process of optimizing health, participation, and security opportunities to improve the quality of life of older people*" [1]. The increase in average lifespan has led to challenges related to chronic illnesses, often resulting in dependence. The aging process affects both individuals and their work lives. With advancing age, organizations and workers undergo significant changes that can lead to existential disruptions and challenges that they are often unprepared for, lacking adequate training.

Organizations will increasingly need to address the growing aging workforce, just as workers must learn to manage their aging process creatively. Employers, especially in the public sector, will face the challenge of fewer young workers and an aging existing workforce.

As a continent, Europe is experiencing an aging population due to increased life expectancy and continuous demographic decline. According to Eurostat projections, by 2030, workers aged between 55 and 64 years will constitute 30% or more of the workforce in most European countries. With the rising retirement age in member states, many workers will likely have longer careers, making it essential to ensure safe and healthy working conditions throughout their working lives [2]. The gradual and predictable nature of the aging population allows for appropriate measures to mitigate its impact on the labor market [3].

It is crucial to provide continuous training for aging workers and make it attractive for them to learn new skills. The misconception that older workers cannot understand and pass on their skills and experiences to younger colleagues is fading away, especially in countries with solid economic systems and labor protections. Organizations have to adapt to a universal design by planning workstations and production cycles to suit every worker. In the case of specific and more disabling pathological conditions, it may also be necessary to implement "reasonable adjustments," as already provided for by current regulations (Directive 2000/78/EC followed by the enactment of D.Lgs. n. 216 of 2003, later amended by D. Legge n. 76/2013, converted by Law n. 98/2013) in Italy.

These adjustments should not impose excessive organizational burdens on the employer. They have to be "reasonable," meaning they do not unreasonably affect the interests of other workers involved or the company's overall structure. Work-related impairments (resulting from accidents or occupational (work-related diseases) can be carried out with funding from the public insurance institute (INAIL) under Italian Law no. 190/2014.

Active aging opportunities

The concept of active aging, as defined by the WHO, aims to value the contributions of older workers by providing them with training while also helping younger workers learn from their experiences. In addition to the benefits for the workplace, active aging also has physical and mental benefits for the aging workforce. Multiple studies have highlighted the psychosomatic advantages of active aging, which promote health and social inclusion, and reduce the risk of diseases and comorbidities [4].

Measures to manage aging

Active aging benefits all stakeholders and the community, making it a "win-win" concept requiring individual, organizational, and societal effort [5]. A comprehensive strategy is necessary to manage aging effectively, moving beyond a purely biomedical approach. Preventive interventions should consider various factors, including the work content, the organizational context, the work environment, and the need for continuous training and skill development for workers. Additionally, if necessary, evaluating the worker's suitability for specific tasks may require reasonable accommodations to adapt the workplace to their capabilities [2,6,7].

To assess the risks related to aging workers, the Work Ability Index (WAI) and the Age Risk Assessment Index (ARAI) are valuable tools [8]. The WAI uses a standardized questionnaire, considering the job's physical and mental demands and the worker's health status and resources. The ARAI, on the other hand, considers various variables, including the results of risk assessments and the worker's exposure level to specific risks.

Conclusions

To conclude, effectively utilizing the energy and expertise of aging workers while managing occupational risks to their health requires interventions in the work environment and organization. Modulating work demands based on age and improving worker health to mitigate declining work capacity are crucial to promoting active aging in the workforce [9].

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