

Aging at Work: The Importance of Understanding Accommodation in Social Work Practice

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Abstract

Background: With the aging of many Americans, society will face many challenges particularly in the workforce. With an increase of older workers in the U.S. workplace, there comes an increase in disability and chronic health conditions. Therefore, it is essential for employers to develop and deploy proactive retention policies and practices for older workers.

Objective: The primary purpose of this study is to investigate whether or not age influences the accommodation process using data from the Job Accommodation Network (JAN).

METHODS: Open and closed-ended data are collected using a 20-minute structured telephone interview of JAN customers (N= 1,721) from July 2009 through August 2016. Multivariate logistic regression models were conducted to examine age effect on job accommodation decisions, and additional analysis was used to explore experiences with accommodation process.

Results: After adjusting for gender, education, race and length of time with company, age has marginally significant effect on accommodation decisions. Also many respondents stated a need for education, not only on the part of employees but also employers.

Conclusions: Given that the workforce is aging and expected to continue to do so, this finding raises more questions and merit further inquiry. Implications for social work practice are discussed.

Keywords: Accommodations, Disabilities, Age, Older Adults, Employment, Social Work Practice

1. Introduction

The significance of the aging of the global population cannot be overstated. This trend will have impact on all facets of our society for decades (Lee, Kaneda, & Pollard, 2011). The U.S. Census Bureau reports that in the United States, people 65 and over accounted for 9.8 percent of the population in 1970. In 2010, this number rose to 13%. The U.S. Census Bureau projects the number of people over 65 will grow to over 20 percent of the population by 2030 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). This phenomena of a ballooning aging population will result in a very large group of older workers in our workplaces, many of whom may have a disability or chronic health condition. This coupled with the fact of an impending shortage of skilled workers worldwide, creates the possibility of significant workforce disruption (Conference Board, 2014). Thus, retention of older workers and attempts to redeploy retired workers back into our workplaces may be key to mitigate the anticipated disruption (Dobbs, Madgavkar, Barton, Labaye, Manyika, Roxburgh, Lund, & Madhav, 2012). The ability to retain or employ older workers may be dependent on the ability to accommodate people with disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations for any qualified individual with a disability. Yet, at the same time, little is known about how age may influence the accommodation process.

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This study seeks to fill in this gap in the area on workplace accommodations for individuals with disabilities by investigating whether older workers are more or less likely than younger workers to experience positive accommodation outcomes.

2. Background

With the aging of so many Americans, society will face many challenges. This is particularly true in the workforce (Ezrati, 2014). Primary among these challenges is a higher number of older workers remaining in the workplace rather than retiring at the usual age of 65 (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). With increased numbers of older workers in the U.S. workplace, there comes an increase in disability and chronic health conditions (Czaja & Moen, 2004) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Therefore, it is essential for employers to develop and deploy proactive retention policies and practices for older workers (Manpower Group, 2011).

Starting on January 1st, 2011 approximately 10,000 baby boomers will reach age 65 each day (Pew Research Center, 2010). This trend will continue for 19 years. As Baby Boomers make up 26 percent of the U.S. population, this trend results in a dramatic increase of the aging population. With 65 being the typical age of retirement, it would seem that this increase in older Americans would lead to a major decrease in the U.S. workforce. However, many people need to work beyond their retirement. The significant decrease in retirement account funds and loss of health care have forced many people to reconsider plans to leave their job and remain employed beyond the age of 65 (Rogers, Marshall, Garth, Mopkins, Remington, Siemering, & Spivey, 2011). Many retirees and workers approaching retirement have limited financial resources. Half of households with head of family being 55 years or older do neither have a 401(k) plan nor IRA (United States Government Accountability Office, 2015). These factors, in combination with the substantive increase in life expectancy, suggest more people will be working beyond the traditional retirement age (Rogers et al., 2011). Between 1977 and 2007, there was a 101 % increase in the amount of workers 65 years old and over who are employed in the American workforce, while the total U.S. workforce age 16 and over only increased by 59 percent (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). The U.S. work force is also seeing an increase in workers 75 years old and over; even though this population only consisted of 0.8 percent of the total U.S. workforce in 2007, it was still a 172 % increase since 1977 (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). In the 1980's and early 1990's, it was very unlikely that someone over the age of 65 would be a part of the U.S. labor force (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). As the chronological age of the workforce rises, it is estimated that those over 55 will account for 41.4 million or 25.2 % of the workplace by 2020 (Toossi, 2012). Some of these older U.S. workforce workers have retired but continue to work in retirement. In a 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce consisting of 1,382 participants aged 50 and over, one fifth (20%) of those 50+ are working in retirement, while the remaining four fifths (80%) of workers aged 50 and older have never retired (Families and Work Institute, 2010).

2.1. Benefits to retaining workers

There are benefits and costs related to the increase in older workers in the U.S. labor force. One benefit is the retention of valued senior employees with their talents and institutional knowledge (McKinsey Global Institute, 2010). Older workers bring a variety of attributes to the American workforce. Many people believe that burnout is more common in older workers and in turn causes them to be less productive compared to workers who are new to the workforce. However, this is a myth. In reality, a 2009 report from the Sloan Center found that older employees, received high ratings from managers in categories of loyalty, reliability, and productivity. It has been shown that older workers also score high in categories such as leadership, detail-oriented tasks, organization, listening, writing skills and problem solving (Reade, 2015).

A North Carolina State University study also found several attributes that older workers, specifically, possess (Reade, 2015). One attribute the study found was with programmers; older programmers seemed to be more proficient with newer technology and more knowledgeable about a wider array of topics compared to younger programmers (Reade, 2015). Peter Cappelli, reports that older workers have a better sense of motivation. Also, younger workers' motivation has turned to a focus of self-benefit while older workers are still more likely to be motivated by making the world a better place. Lastly, the study talks about older workers bringing workplace wisdom in aspects of problem solving, asking for help, and relations with others (in Reade, 2015). Another attribute older workers have is their low incident rates of injury. Workers 65 years old and over had incident rates of 89 cases per 10,000 full-time workers in 2012, suggesting that this population had the lowest incident rate for that year. Cappelli reports that as one ages in workforce their job performance improves (in Reade, 2015, pg 1).

Organizations may want older workers in their workforce, not just because of the many attributes offered above but also because other qualities they bring to the workplace. Older workers instill company values, mentor, and transfer institutional knowledge to new and younger employees (Reade, 2015). As older workers possess the critical skills and institutional knowledge, these workers need to be retained in order to continue in their roles while supporting younger employees (Manpower, 2011).

2.2. Costs of retaining older workers

While there are numerous benefits to retaining older workers, one should also be aware of the cost. Older workers experience an increase in disability and chronic health conditions. Disability in the workplace increases sharply with age and it is predicted that between 2009 and 2018 the number of employed adults working with a disability will rise by 15% (Fogg, N.P., Harrington, P.E., & McMahon, B.T., 2012). By 2020, it is estimated that 50% of the U.S. population will be living with at least one chronic health condition and one-quarter will be living with multiple chronic health conditions (Georgetown Health Policy Institute, 2004). Reported rates of disability double from 19.4 percent for ages 45 to 54 to 38.4 percent for ages 65 to 69 (United States Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration, 2008). As workers age, they may begin to experience age-related health issues, including disabilities or physical limitations that may pose challenges to their employment status. In turn, retaining older workers with chronic health conditions or a disability pose challenges for both employees who struggle with age-related health conditions and employers who must aim to provide older employees with workplace adjustments or accommodations.

Because older workers typically suffer from chronic health conditions and have multiple health risks, they often require more care, are more disabling, and are more difficult and costly to treat than workers in younger age groups (Hymel, Loepkke, Baase, Burton, Hartenbaum, Hudson, & Larson, 2011). However, appropriate medical care aimed at increasing workers' ability to physically function, paired with workplace accommodations in the workplace will allow for many workers to continue performing productive services and may not need to access Social Security, disability, or Medicare benefits prior to their retirement (Young, 2006).

According to Hill, Maestas, and Mullen (2014), the disability insurance system in the United States is currently in a crisis. Only a quarter of newly disabled workers are being accommodated by their employers following the onset of their disability. In addition, if employers would increase the rates of accommodations for workers with disabilities, those workers could remain in the labor force for two additional years.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports that in the next 30 years as the baby boomers retire, the growth of federal programs such as Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, will be significant. Further, "The challenges facing the retirement and disability programs in this country are long-term, severe, and structural in nature" (United States Government Accountability Office, 2005). In a statement to the Congressional Budget Office then Executive Director of the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Barry S. Eisenberg, reports of the societal imperative to address the well-being of the workforce, particularly older workers, so that workers need not rely on government program such as the Social Security/Medicare system" (ACOEM, 2009).

2.3. Challenges with retention of older workers

The costs associated with older workers with disabilities or chronic health conditions at times results in unnecessary employment terminations and discrimination. AARP, Inc reports that American seniors face ageism in the workforce. They report that one-third of employees surveyed reported that they or someone they know has been discriminated against in the last four years (AARP, Inc, 2016).

Employees who develop chronic health conditions or disabilities that limit their capacity to work later in life often face obstacles in employment retention (Habeck, Kregel, Head, & Yasuda, 2007; McMullin, & Shuey, 2006). Some employees have also documented negative attitudes in their workplace regarding disabilities. These negative attitudes continue to be a barrier to employment for people with disabilities (Bruyere, Erickson, & Ferrentino, 2003). Being an older worker and also then experiencing a disability or chronic health condition affecting their work is what one group of researchers call "double jeopardy" (Cichy, Rumrill, Li, & McMahon, 2015). In light of all the attributes of older workers, discrimination of older employees is illogical (Reade, 2015). A 2011 Manpower report focuses on the importance of retaining older workers who possess critical "skills and knowledge" to both fulfill critical roles within the enterprise as well as groom younger workers to one day advance into leadership positions.

A survey conducted by the Society of Human Resource Management in 2012 revealed that in the next 10 years the major issues human resource professionals will need to contend will be retaining and rewarding the best employees (59%) and developing the next generation of corporate leaders (52%) (Mulvey, Schmit, Esen, Alonso, & Scanlan, 2012). These challenges are intrinsically linked with what the Conference Board, a membership organization working to inform global business leaders of trends affecting the economy, reports that the demographic phenomenon of aging workers and management of disability in the workplace is the “preeminent HR issue of the coming decade” (Conference Board, 2012).

In a 2011 international Manpower survey of employers, only 14 percent of respondents reported that they have specific strategies in place that are designed to recruit older adults into their workforces, and only 21 percent of employers reported that they have strategies in place to retain their older workers (Manpower Group, 2007). The report suggests that employers need to assess their workforce and develop a plan for the future before their “key” talent retires and the shortage. The report also offers a number of strategies to retain older workers including job redesign, flexible work hours, or telework, a leave from work or part-time working arrangements (Manpower Group, 2007). Many if not most of these strategies are also suggested as accommodations for people with various disabilities in the workplace including older workers (Job Accommodation Network, 2015).

The good news is that most employers can accommodate this by simply adjusting work schedules (94%), providing leave (91%), providing light duty (87%), modifying equipment (86%), or job restructuring (43%) (REED Group and Spring Consulting, 2013). These findings reinforce JAN’s research suggesting 59% of accommodations have no hard costs associated with them while the typical cost of accommodating a worker is only \$500 (Job Accommodation Network, 2016). Findings such as these dispel employers’ fears associated with the costs of accommodations. These statistics are important to persuade employers, who may think that accommodations are costly, to rethink and reconsider their position.

2.4. Trends influencing the employment of older workers

Four trends will affect the future employment of people with disabilities including older workers with disabilities or chronic health conditions. First, technological innovations will widen access to the workplace, and health care advances that extend and improve life will increase the proportion of the talent pool composed of people with disabilities. Second, existing incentives and proposed quotas that are in place for those doing business with the U.S. government and foreign governments will increase the motivation to hire people with disabilities. Third, changing attitudes toward remote work, and the increasing availability of technologies that enable remote work, will increase access to information and communication technologies, and offer wider application of universal design to further improve access of remote work to persons with disabilities (Conference Board, 2012). Fourth, more employers are capitalizing on the talents of people with disabilities by offering a variety of workplace accommodations. In the next decade or so, human resource professionals will need to garner the support of others in the enterprise in order to delay a large segment of their workforce, older workers including those with disabilities and chronic health conditions, from retiring. It will be the responsibility of human resource managers to extoll the value of aging workers as they prepare organizations for the impending workforce transformation (Society for Human Resource Management, 2016). The primary purpose of this study is to investigate/explore experiences of aging workers engaged in the job accommodation process using data from evaluation project (Department of Labor 1004062R) of the Job Accommodation Network (JAN). In particular, the study examined the influence of age on the accommodation process.

3. Methods

3.1. Sample

Data came from JAN (the Job Accommodation Network), which serves as the nation’s most comprehensive resource on workplace accommodations in support of increased employment opportunities for persons with all types of disabilities. JAN consultants provide individualized and confidential accommodation information and advice to private and federal employers, rehabilitation and service providers, individuals with disabilities, and their family members. The JAN’s survey was designed and approved by the Office of Disability Employment Policy and the Office of Budget and Management (Control Number 1225-0059). The purpose of the survey is to collect information regarding the accommodation processes for people in the US. On completion of service, JAN consultants asked if customers were willing to receive a follow-up phone call to complete the evaluation survey.

The research team then attempted to contact all who agreed to participate and prompted them to recall the specific case for which they used JAN services (some might be repeat customers, depending on employment status). Some chose not to participate or were not able to be reached after the fifth or sixth call. Interviews last approximately 20 minutes. The survey instrument used a variety of question formats including Likert scales, forced-choice lists, and open-ended questions. For the current study, the sample of 1,721 individuals was collected from individuals with disabilities from July 2009 through August 2016 and used for analyses (response rate 43.38%). Most respondents were contacting JAN in an effort to retain their current employment positions, rather than seek new employment, which suggests that many may have acquired a disability while in their current position. The majority of the sample was female (70%) and White (75%). About 30% had high school diploma and almost 50% of the sample received either college education or higher. On average the sample had been in their current company for 9 years.

3.2. Measurement

Age. For the purpose of the study, age was dichotomized: over age 46 was coded as 1.

Accommodation Decision. Accommodation decision was categorized into a binary outcome: whether or not an accommodation was made after interaction with JAN.

Controls. Demographic characteristics (e.g., race, gender, education) were entered into analyses as controls. Also, since it has been reported that employee who have been at a company longer is more likely to be accommodated, length of time with company was controlled for the analyses.

Experiences with Accommodation Process. The experience in the accommodation process was assessed using open-ended questions asking the reason for not receiving an accommodation. These data were collected by the interviewer, who attempted to record verbatim the responses of customers.

3.3. Analyses

Multivariate logistic regression analyses were conducted to examine age effect on job accommodation decisions using SPSS. Additional qualitative analysis on experiences with accommodation process was conducted by two independent researchers. The information collected through open-ended questions were reviewed by interviews and JAN staff to check for consistency, utilizing their experience of both providing service and collecting data. Then two independent researchers analyzed valid information based on theme.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics of Age Groups

In both age groups, the majority of respondents was females and White. Both groups reported that almost 30% had college degree. While the group whose age is under 45 reported a little higher rate of high school diploma (33% vs. 28%), the older-age group (over 46) reported a little higher rate of graduate degree (21% vs. 17%). The group of age under 45 reported that they have been with their companies for 6 years, while the group of age over 46 reported approximately 11 years of working relationship with their companies. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the sample.

Table 1. Description of Sample

Variable	Overall % or Mean (SD)	Under 45	Over 46
Gender			
Female	69.7%	66.5%	71.8%
Education			
No high school diploma	2.5%	2.1%	2.6%
High school diploma or GED	29.8%	33.3%	28.5%
Associate's degree	18.4%	18.7%	18.3%
College graduation	29.4%	29.2%	29.1%
Degree from graduate schools	19.9%	16.7%	21.5%
Race			
White	74.5%	71.3%	77.9%
Length of Time with Company	8.9 (8.1)	6.0 (5.4)	10.9 (9.0)

4.2. Examine Age Effect on Accommodation Decisions

As seen in Table 2, after adjusting for gender, education, race and length of time with company, age has marginally significant effect on accommodation decisions: those who are 46 years or older were 20% less likely to be granted an accommodation than those who are under 45 (OR=0.80, CI=0.62-1.01, p=.06). Gender, Education, Race, and Length of time with company did not show any significant main effects on accommodation decision. Given that the workforce is aging and expected to continue to do so, this finding raises more questions and merit further inquiry.

Table 2. Multivariate Logit Model for Accommodation Decisions

	Accommodation Made
	OR (CI)
Controls	
Gender (Female)	1.23 (0.95 – 1.59)
Education	
High school diploma or GED	0.58 (0.26 - 1.27)
Associate’s degree	0.78 (0.35 - 1.73)
College graduation	0.85 (0.39 - 1.86)
Degree from graduate schools	1.16 (0.52 - 2.55)
Race (White)	0.89 (0.69 – 1.16)
Length of Time with Company	1.00 (0.99 – 1.02)
Age (Over 46)	0.80 (0.62-1.01)*

* p <.10** p <.05 *** p <.01

4.3. Experiences with the Accommodation Process

The responses indicate a need for education, not only on the part of employees but also employers. It may also indicate the need for assistance in navigating a complicated system to avoid potential age discrimination either by action or inaction. For example, many stated that the employer may have ignored the request, let the employee go, or removed accommodations once they had been granted. Sample comments include: Employer failed to recognize different degrees of disability and said that parking was assigned on a first come first served basis. Company is resisting formal accommodation. When she requested accommodation in writing she experienced retaliation. Employer did not give reason, he was fired. She was receiving accommodations, employer removed them, she requested again, and employer did not grant request. Determined not possible to accommodate. Other comments suggest that employees need additional education or assistance in navigating the accommodation process. For example, many stated that they quit when they did not receive an accommodation, or that they did not ask for an accommodation for fear of retaliation. Others were not certain why accommodations were denied. Sample comments include:

- She was not sure why she was denied.
- They refused to accommodate, so I had to quit.
- Employee put request in for accommodation- was not granted and was fired.
- Decided to resign instead. Did not request accommodation officially in writing.

6. Discussion

Although an important contribution to the research, this study is not devoid of limitations. First, the customers of JAN are likely to be those highly involved in the accommodation process, whether or not their experiences were successful. Second, the use of a telephone survey limits the response rate: with caller ID, many potential participants may not answer the phone. Third, the accuracy of the data is dependent on the interviewer. Although trained, it is difficult to capture verbatim the complexities of the experiences of the accommodation process. There are also components important to the accommodation process that is not captured by this survey; for instance, the evaluators do not have access to disability type or industry of employment. Based on the experiences of this sample, a greater understanding is needed to ensure that workers are accommodated as they age and face the increased likelihood of disability. This will be essential for employment retention.

The discipline of social work offers an important vantage point towards understanding how accommodation policies and practices are implemented and the experiences of individuals as they age; however, more research is needed to understand the barriers to retaining these individuals. This research will contribute to this understanding. This research indicates that older workers are less likely to be provided with accommodation solutions to enable them either to retain their employment positions or to be recruited into the workforce. These findings call for steps to be taken by social workers and stakeholders concerned to address this issue. Weaver (2006) discusses how social workers' commitment to support and help disenfranchised people uniquely makes the social work profession different from other helping professions. In line with its mission to "enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (Code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers), social workers and social agencies need to be prepared and better equipped to go the extra mile to offer additional support. We have a role to play in educating the aging population about their rights and inform them on policies such as the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 (U. S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2006) which prohibits age discrimination in recruiting and workplace practices.

Social workers' ethical principle of Social Justice mandates us to ensure that all persons, including older workers, have "access to needed information, services, and resources, equality of opportunity, and meaningful participation in decision making for all people" (Code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers). Social workers have always been a voice for the voiceless and vulnerable in society including the poor, elderly and persons with disabilities. Social workers play an advocacy role in petitioning and lobbying for the passage of legislation and policies addressing the needs of persons with disabilities, which implies we should be at the forefront highlighting the plight of people with disabilities and specifically older people with disabilities. Programs of social work need to include course content on disability policy and practice. Understanding the ADA, the definitions of disability, reasonable accommodations, and the process of securing them will provide social workers with the necessary knowledge to advocate for better client outcomes and policy changes when needed.

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