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Wendy Killam

Bill Weber

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ARTICLES

# Career Adaptation Wheel to Address Issues Faced by Older Workers

Wendy Killam and Bill Weber

*Older workers face increasing challenges in the workplace. Many find that they work more years than anticipated because of changes in social security and uncertain retirement accounts, along with the need for adequate health-care. Counselors face unique opportunities to assist older workers. This article presents a Career Adaptation Wheel for Older Workers. The model can be used to help identify areas in which older adults are having challenges with job selection, colleagues at work, changes in the workplace, and learning new tasks. Counselors can then begin to consider appropriate interventions to help older workers adapt to changes in the work environment. This model offers a conceptual framework within which one's career can be viewed.*

To understand the needs of older workers, it is important to consider the changes in the United States in terms of industry. During the 1950s and 1960s, mass production was common, with a workforce composed of semiskilled and full-time workers and training occurring on the job. There was little opportunity for advancement (Herr, 2001). In the 1970s, there was a tendency to hire workers who had certain skills and were experts. They added to a company's products and services through their knowledge base. The types of positions that increased included those in accounting, engineering, computers, social service, and research (Lord & Farrington, 2006). In the 1980s and 1990s, the new workforce was composed of more highly trained workers. There had been a significant decline in jobs requiring manual labor, and many jobs required specialized skills. A growing number of people were graduating from high school and going to college and there were a growing number of women seeking employment (Smith, 2009). Most jobs in the 1980s and 1990s began to require a 4-year degree or several years of experience within the field. This put a focus on the need for skilled and experienced workers, which continues today (Lord

*Wendy Killam and Bill Weber, Department of Human Services, Stephen F. Austin State University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Wendy Killam, Department of Human Services, Stephen F. Austin State University, 1936 North Street, Nacogdoches, TX 75962 (e-mail: wkillam@sfasu.edu).*

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& Farrington, 2006). Also, since the 1990s, people have been more willing to move for employment opportunities. This was not the case in the latter half of the 19th century (Smith, 2009).

Despite workers being more highly skilled, fewer production jobs, and an increase in the number of women working, the number of older workers will continue to increase drastically within the next several years. There are a number of reasons for this, such as an aging workforce, declining birthrate, and people working more years (Collins, Hair, & Rocco, 2009). One major reason that people may work more years is changes in social security. Because of changes in the system, people will not be able to collect full social security retirement benefits until age 67 rather than age 65 (Wenger & Reynolds, 2009). Taking a pay cut that comes with retirement is another reason people are choosing to work longer. Older workers are some of the most highly paid workers because of their unique skills and experience (Sweet, 2007). Many companies are reducing or eliminating pension benefits, so this is another economic incentive for people to continue to work longer (Brewington & Nassar-McMillan, 2000). When personnel cuts occur, older workers are susceptible partly because of their higher pay and the perception that they lack technological skills (Sweet, 2007).

Older workers bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to the workforce, but this is not always recognized by younger bosses (Wenger & Reynolds, 2009). They are often viewed as lacking flexibility and having difficulty with adapting and changing. They tend to be overlooked for career development opportunities because of these perceptions (Lord & Farrington, 2006). In fact, discrimination occurs frequently in the workplace and is based on individual attributes, including age. This discrimination may be seen in hiring practices, promotions, and firings practices. Workplace discrimination is an issue that can have an effect on an individual's physical and psychological health (Chou, 2012). It may also affect how employees relate to others in the workforce.

## **YOUNGER BOSSES**

Relationships in the workplace can be complex. For older workers who have younger bosses, there may be difficulty because of differences in work style, ethics, and generational differences. There are currently four different generations in the workforce, and this brings the potential for conflicting work styles and expectations (Ferri-Reed, 2012). Older workers may resent having to take orders from someone who is the same age as their children or grandchildren. They also tend to feel less supported by younger bosses (Collins et al., 2009). There are numerous differences between older workers and younger supervisors. Older workers tend to be highly dedicated and hardworking and have a tendency to confirm things with their supervisors, whereas younger workers tend to be impatient and may be overconfident in their own abilities (Ferri-Reed, 2012). These differences can lead to difficulties in communication and

productivity, mistrust, and erroneous expectations. However, strategies can be implemented to address intergenerational conflicts in the workplace that can be integrated into the college experience for young adults (Hanks & Icenogle, 2001). Whereas older workers tend to have a very strong work ethic, younger workers from Generation X have watched downsizing occur and have witnessed a lack of company loyalty. They tend to be cynical, untrusting, and less loyal than older workers. Older workers may believe that younger supervisors lack the necessary skills and knowledge to be effective in their duties. Low expectations of the supervisor have been demonstrated to affect productivity (Collins et al., 2009).

## **RETAINING OLDER WORKERS**

To maintain a productive workforce, it is helpful to have experienced workers. Older workers tend to provide mentoring to new workers. This can increase retention of employees as people need and seek to develop connections and attachments with others. Thus, older workers can help younger workers to understand the unwritten rules of the organization and corporate politics and policies. The use of attachment theory can be beneficial in understanding this behavior. Younger workers can become attached to older workers who can serve as a valuable resource. When attachment anxiety is occurring at work, it often can indicate a desire to quit and reduced collaboration (Richards & Schat, 2011). Emotional support is important throughout the lifespan, and, given the amount of time that people spend at work, it makes logical sense that mentoring relationships could be beneficial. Older workers can also provide a historical context in terms of the ups and downs that occur in the organization. Social support from supervisors has been directly linked to job retention (Henkens, Van Solinge, & Cozijnen, 2009).

Research also has suggested that older workers prefer flexibility, such as flexible hours, part-year schedules, and job sharing (Armstrong-Stassen & Ursel, 2009). Many states are now considering more flexible work schedules for employees. In a 2008 review, there were 28 states that had either begun to implement or had implemented flexible schedules (Gonzales & Morrow-Howell, 2009). Additionally, older workers need to have the opportunity to upgrade their current job skills and acquire new job skills. For some, this may mean learning new technological skills. Whereas older workers may have been in the forefront during the early part of their career regarding the increased use of computers, technology has evolved to include smart phones, social networking, and other technology. However, knowledge is still highly valued. In a study composed of 26 midlevel managers from four large Dutch multinational companies, results indicated that managers were concerned about the retirement of valuable workers who had knowledge and experience (Henkens et al., 2009). Many organizations have had difficulty hiring people with specialized skills and need to retain older employees to meet business demands, yet older workers want

more flexibility with regard to work hours (Galinsky, 2007). However, managers are unlikely to offer flexible options to employees unless the employee has unique skills that cannot be found even in a tight labor market (Henkens et al., 2009). Despite the possibility of not having flexibility, it appears that many workers will continue to work during retirement.

## REASONS TO STAY OR GO

In the past, older adults were viewed as being incapable of making meaningful contributions and were excluded from the idea of being productive in the workplace (Carr, 2009). In fact, older workers have historically been encouraged to retire to make room for younger workers (Brewington & Nassar-McMillan, 2000). Because of changes in pensions and retirement plans, older workers may need to continue to work because of financial reasons (Brewington & Nassar-McMillan, 2000). In fact, approximately 80% of older workers will continue to work even after retiring (Kirk & Belovics, 2005). The trend to retire once a person reaches 65 has started to change, and, in some cases, managers may want to retain highly qualified workers.

Although managers may want to retain highly qualified older workers because of their knowledge and experience, they may be more inclined to also consider employees' health. These factors are taken into consideration by managers when examining occupational safety. Specifically, they tend to look at hearing acuity, cognitive function, and reaction time as major factors to consider in terms of workplace safety (Kirk & Belovics, 2005). Studies have indicated that although "older workers call in sick less often than younger workers, the rate of absenteeism (i.e., number of workdays lost as a result of illness) increases with age" (Henkens et al., 2009, p. 1,567). For some workers, healthcare benefits may be a reason to maintain employment. However, healthcare is just one factor that a person must consider when it comes to deciding to remain employed. Older workers are subject to stereotypes that they are fragile and in poor health. At work, they may have been subjected to discrimination (Duncan & Schaller, 2009).

Another factor of concern is age discrimination. In fact, a 2007 study conducted by AARP found that age discrimination is a major barrier for those who are 50 years of age or older with regard to staying in the workplace. In another survey, 84% of individuals who were 60 years of age or older indicated that they have been the victim of ageism, including actions such as jokes, disrespect, and assumptions concerning physical health (Rosigno, Mong, Byron, & Tester, 2007). A survey by Smirnova (2010) found that only 11.5% of participants believed that older managers were favorable to the company's development, with 38.9% indicating that they had difficulty working for an older supervisor. Lord and Farrington (2006) indicated that studies have shown there is no significant difference in the performance of older and younger supervisors. However, older managers were less likely to receive a promotion. There is a perception that

they are less productive and are not interested in further career development opportunities. Despite the difficulties and challenges with continuing to work, older adults must consider the financial effect of retiring.

Older workers have to consider their expected retirement savings, investment returns, and healthcare costs. If married, an employee must also consider the spouse's benefits and healthcare (Wenger & Reynolds, 2009). According to Cahalin (2009), it is important for workers to remain healthy, and, by doing so, they will be more inclined to extend their work life. Job strain can lead to illness and issues. Thus, this is an important aspect for employers to consider. Although many employers have provided workers with wellness programs, there are many that do not do so.

In addition to considering health issues, some older workers may opt to retire to spend more time with family (Fraser, McKenna, Turpin, Allen, & Liddle, 2009). Workers may feel a conflict in terms of the time it takes to work versus the time it takes to handle family issues. Despite the legal protection of the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993, some workers may believe that they will be looked upon unfavorably for taking time off of work. This leads many to struggle to decide how to handle the situation. According to Forma (2009), many workers feel conflicted about finding time for both work and family. They feel stressed trying to manage these responsibilities and may need to consider changing job duties, leaving work, or taking a break from work.

## **FUTURE JOB OPPORTUNITIES AND TRENDS**

Currently, approximately 13% of the work population is age 65 or older, and, by 2030, the projection is that this number will increase to 20% (McGuire, 2009). A study by Kidahashi and Manheimer (2009) found that only 27% of those surveyed between the ages of 60 and 70 believed that they would never work again. Thus, it is evident that older workers will be working longer and are here to stay. This is partly a result of the decline in public services expected and the lack of social security, resulting in many older adults working longer, according to Gonzales and Morrow-Howell (2009). Additionally, there have been major changes in social security with regard to the age of full retirement. For some individuals, full benefits will not be available until the age of 67, which will no doubt increase the number of older workers (Wenger & Reynolds, 2009).

The number of workers ages 55 and older continues to increase significantly because of the need of workers to increase retirement savings (Copeland, 2014). This has created a need for employers to be more sensitive to the needs of older workers. With retraining efforts, one of the biggest changes is the use of computers and technology. In a study by Lee, Czaja, and Sharit (2009), older workers were eager to learn new skills; they preferred hands-on training but also wanted feedback. Thus, training programs need to be designed to allow for hands-on learning and feedback. However, organizations tend to use online

computer training because the perception is that this method is more cost effective. Traditionally, jobs have been structured in a certain way and have required 40 or more hours per week from employees. Older workers want jobs in which they can spend time not only working but with family and being involved with community service (Moen, 2007). This is one factor to consider when it comes to job placements.

With regard to job placement, the effects of aging need to be considered, because older adults tend to lose nearly 30% of their physical strength by the age of 60 (Sanders & McCready, 2009). Participants in a study by Sanders and McCready (2009) also indicated a desire to be able to work part time and have a flexible schedule. Wenger and Reynolds (2009) also indicated that part-time positions may be beneficial to some workers because they are often less demanding and allow a person to make time for family. Additionally, some workers may prefer temporary jobs to allow for even more flexibility. However, part-time and temporary work often provide fewer benefits. Some companies pay part-time workers substantially less. The reality is that employers have been reluctant to restructure the workplace to accommodate the needs of older workers with regard to flexibility, and this has been true for most nonprofit and government jobs also (Moen, 2007).

Some states are taking a proactive approach to addressing the needs of older workers. Although older adults do not make up the majority of the workforce, many older adults are continuing to work longer, which can affect a state's economy (Gonzales & Morrow-Howell, 2009). Some managers may become frustrated when older workers talk about the history of the organization. However, managers need to consider managing workers based on generational strengths. Managers may need training on how to address the needs of older workers and avoid stereotyping (Sanders & McCready, 2009). According to Segrist, Tell, Byrd, and Perkins (2007), it is important that all workers take time to continually assess their knowledge and skills to remain employable in today's marketplace.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELORS**

The growing number of older workers staying employed presents opportunities for counselors. Counselors can work with individual employees on work goals and securing employment that fits their current situations. They can also work with employers by providing training programs, such as teaching communication skills to younger supervisors and developing wellness programs. Additionally, counselors can serve as mediators in workplace situations to help employees from different generations gain insight into their differences and to communicate and work together more effectively.

In working with older adults on employment issues, one must consider career adaptability. This has been defined as readiness to handle and cope with the



changes in work and work conditions (Ebberwein, Krieschok, Ulven, & Prosser, 2004.) Typically, interventions used when working with younger adults are also effective when working with older adults; however, older adults may respond more slowly (McGuire, 2009). It is also important to keep in mind that the basic elements of a helping relationship need to be present. Older adults may actually resent having a younger counselor. Thus, trust will need to be established. A counselor will need to consider the client's level of cognitive function. In older adults who are depressed, there is evidence that cognitive decline may occur, and, in some cases, this condition may exist with Alzheimer's disease (McGuire, 2009). Thus, the counselor, in addition to understanding career development issues, must be highly aware of potential mental health issues. The counselor needs to be able to recognize these issues and properly address them either in counseling or by making an appropriate referral.

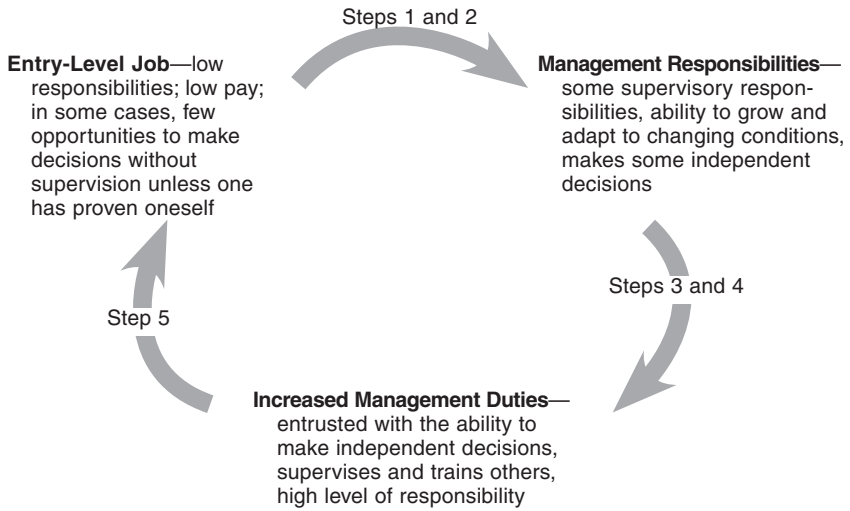
### **CAREER ADAPTATION WHEEL FOR OLDER ADULTS**

Given that life seems cyclical in many ways, we propose that careers also tend to be cyclical. This idea is supported by the fact that people often begin by working a part-time job, obtain training or education and work a full-time job, and then transition to part-time work or return to work after retirement. In fact, studies have indicated that most individuals are expressing a growing interest in working beyond age 65 and that the decision to retire is strongly linked to dissatisfaction at work and feeling devalued (Cohen-Callow, Hopkins, & Kim, 2009).

Although the focus of this wheel is on work adjustment, counselors also have the responsibility of helping people to successfully integrate other parts of their lives as well. Work issues can have a huge effect on life satisfaction and how people are able to cope with life changes. Numerous studies have found that work environment can have a direct effect on physical and psychological health (Chou, 2012). With regard to work, people tend to start off in entry-level positions and work their way up to management positions. The goal for many to strive for a higher position is to obtain an increase in pay, but, at the same time, the person may want to try to develop other areas of life. The increase in pay with a higher position often comes with an increase in responsibility. As people grow older, they may wish to retire and have no responsibility. However, full retirement is not a possibility for many older adults because of the numerous, previously discussed reasons. Thus, they may seek a reduction in responsibility at work and a reduction in work hours. There are key steps along the way for each of these transitions. It is the role of the counselor to assist clients who are stuck or struggling with these steps to make decisions that will allow them to have the flexibility, balance, and work life they desire.

Within the work cycle, there are five basic steps that can be used as a basis of understanding older workers (see Figure 1). By understanding these





**FIGURE 1**

**Five Basic Steps of the Work Cycle**

steps, a counselor can begin to address the issues faced by older workers in a systematic process. Each step will be addressed, along with the basic implications for counseling.

**Step 1**

During this step, the individual is considering what type of work he or she would like to do. The person considers strengths and weaknesses as well as previous employment experiences. In this step, it is critical for the person to receive counseling. Counselors can assist clients in understanding the transferability of job skills. The counselor can also help the client to understand the effects that work will have on other areas of life. The client will have to make major decisions regarding how to manage a job plus other responsibilities and activities.

**Step 2**

A person begins a new job as a novice in many ways. The person may have some understanding of the job duties and be competent in performing the duties. However, the political environment of the office, minor supervisor responsibilities, and the ability to perform other jobs has not been mastered. Many older workers may be frustrated and overwhelmed with having to learn new tasks. They may feel overwhelmed with the changes that technology has brought to the workplace if they have not worked in a few years. An older adult who seeks counseling at this step in the career path may feel underappreciated and resent having a younger boss. The older worker at this stage may need a safe place to

express emotions and explore career options. The older worker may need to decide if the current work situation is a good fit.

**Step 3**

The person becomes competent at his or her job and gains the trust and respect of supervisory personnel. The worker may even be given some minor supervisory tasks, such as helping to train new employees. The worker may have the opportunity to be cross-trained. A counselor working with an older adult client who is in this step of the Career Adaptation Wheel will have the opportunity to help the client to determine specific career goals. For example, is the goal to just continue to work to make enough money to live or is there more to work? Is the goal to work part time or have flexible hours to be able to spend time with grandchildren? The client may desire to move up in the company. If this is the case, the client may face challenges of age discrimination. The counselor can encourage the client to find ways to make work meaningful and ways to enjoy one's off time.

**Step 4**

The worker has gained the complete confidence of his or her supervisor. He is rated as effective at his job, and, although there may be some room for improvement, the worker is able to work with very little supervision. The supervisor may begin to consider delegating managerial tasks at this stage of development. The counselor can continue to provide supportive services if needed. The client may need to consider what is desired when it comes to continued employment. The client may be considering how long to work.

**Step 5**

Even if the worker is not the supervisor of record, this employee may have supervisory responsibilities that are delegated, including mentoring new or younger employees. In other words, the person may have been given the responsibility but not necessarily the authority. The worker is highly competent in all areas of his or her job and can work independently without supervision. The counselor can continue to assist the older worker in other areas if needed.

**DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The Career Adaptation Wheel is a model that was created to give counselors insight and understanding to the work life cycle. It is particularly useful when working with older adult clients. As the number of older adults staying in the workforce continues to grow, there will be the need for counselors to assist them with adapting and changing to the dynamic and global work environment. The work environment is more diverse than ever before and requires workers to have technology skills. Staying current can be stressful. There are also a grow-

ing number of older adult workers who desire to have more flexibility in their work schedules, yet there is reluctance on the part of employers to adjust and change from the standard 40-hour (or more) workweek.

The needs of older adult workers have not always been addressed in the career counseling literature. The Career Adaptation Wheel is an attempt to begin to address those needs and help counselors to have insight and understanding into the stressors, challenges, and obstacles that older adult workers are facing. Research studies to determine the effectiveness of this model are needed. Future studies need to focus on the specific aspects of work that are challenging for older adults and how counselors can intervene to assist older adult workers. Changes within the workforce may require that employers begin to listen to the needs of older workers—especially those who have highly specialized skills and desire flexibility. As we move further into the 21st century, there will be opportunities for counselors to have an effect on the work environment.

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