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Statement Regarding the Work-Related Rights and Dignity of Older Persons

Prepared for the UN Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing

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"Abuse of older persons is an act of commission or omission (neglect) that may be intentional or unintentional, and that may be of a physical nature, psychological (involving emotional or verbal aggression), financial or material, inflicting unnecessary suffering, injury or pain." (WHO, 2002)

A large body of research in the behavioral and social sciences attests to the physical, psychological, and economic importance of decent and meaningful work for older persons.¹ As the number of older persons worldwide continues to increase, and people are able to work longer, organizational scientists have focused on delineating the cultural, social, psychological, cognitive, physical, and technological obstacles that older persons face in their place of work or while seeking work. Working with gerontologists, sociologists, economists, and demographers, industrial/organizational psychologists have generated new knowledge about the capabilities of older persons, their potential for learning new job skills, and the positive consequences of both decent and meaningful work for this population. Moreover, recent reviews of the literature document the importance of a respectful workplace on physical and psychology health and well-being.^{2,3}

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Research into the experiences of older persons at work has shown that this segment of the workforce often faces unique difficulties. For example, societal policies and socio-cultural norms may discourage the fair treatment of older persons in decisions related to hiring, training, layoffs, and pay. In the workplace, supervisors and co-workers may hold negative stereotypes about the abilities, motivation, and attitudes of older workers, and they may fail to provide older workers with age-appropriate physical and emotional support for improving job performance. The cumulative findings from studies of older workers also provide an evidence-based foundation for informing policy and developing interventions that promote workplace equality among and non-discrimination against older persons.

A. Defining an “older worker”

Cultures and societies differ widely in their laws and social norms about the chronological age at which a person is considered an “older worker.” Although chronological age is often used to define an older worker for legal purposes (e.g., the U.S. Age Discrimination in Employment Act sets this age at 40 and above), and policy makers, trade unions, etc., may apply a particular category (e.g., 55-64) to define older workers, it is important to note that a person’s age in the workplace is typically defined *relative to the age of the majority of persons that make up the person’s workgroup, job type, or organization*. Because people judge the age of others relative to those around them, and to the norms and expectations that characterize their workplace, the judgment of who is an “older worker” varies across cultures, organizations, communities, and jobs.⁴ Indeed, if a worker in a particular job is much older than others in that job, the older person may be viewed as even older than would be indicated by his or her chronological age.

The age at which a person is considered an “older worker” also depends on the culture and country in which the individual lives. In developed countries, recent trends toward later age entry into the workforce and later age work retirement has shifted the popular definition of “older worker” toward persons who are in their sixth or later decade of life. In developing countries, where individuals often begin work in early adolescence and have less access to high quality healthcare as they age, the designation of a person as an “older worker” may occur at a lower chronological age than in developed countries.

B. What is commonly (and often incorrectly) assumed about older workers?

Research examining generalized beliefs about the qualities of older workers indicates the existence of both positive and negative stereotypes. Although cross-cultural research in age stereotyping is currently limited, from what is available, the stereotypes are consistent across cultures that have been examined⁵.

Some positive stereotypes about older workers tend to focus on socio-emotional characteristics and the benefits associated with long years of work experience. Common positive stereotypes include the notion that older workers are: (1) more reliable, (2) more experienced, (3) more committed to their job, (4) more trustworthy, and (5) more responsible.

However, there are many common, unfounded negative stereotypes about older worker that can lead to prejudices and biases that impact their attitudes, performance, and well-being at work.

Specifically, these stereotypes are that they have lower ability levels, lack of flexibility or adaptability to new situations, have poor social skills, and have a reduced interest in new technology compared to younger persons. Further common negative assumptions about older workers include: (1) an unwillingness or resistance to change, (2) an inability to change, (3) lowered levels of competence, (4) lowered levels of physical ability, (5) lowered capacity for advancement, (6) physical and mental slowness, (7) poor interpersonal skills, (8) being “out of touch,” (9) being uninterested in technology, and (10) being expensive to hire^{6,7}.

C. Does the research evidence support these lay beliefs about older workers? What is currently known about age-related changes in the abilities, knowledge, and skills that are most important for job performance?

Research on the impact of aging on older workers’ competencies provides very little support for widespread negative stereotypes about older worker motivation, learning abilities, or job performance. Although chronological age is associated with decline in some characteristics, there are improvements on most dimensions.⁸ The following summarizes what is currently known about the impact of aging on the characteristics of persons that are relevant to work.

I. Across most of the lifespan, aging is associated with a *gradual, often imperceptible* decline in what are known as “fluid” intellectual abilities, such as reasoning and short-term memory. Perhaps more important, however, are recent findings that indicate that the decline in these abilities typically begins in young adulthood (in a person’s early 20s), *varies considerably from person to person*, is not uniform over time (with most pronounced effects occurring very late in life), and critically dependent on the individual’s health. Moreover, these declines are more than compensated for by improvements on other dimensions.

II. Across the lifespan, aging is associated with a *steady, often noticeable increase* in general knowledge and “wisdom” acquired through experience (called “crystallized intelligence”) as well as in job-related knowledge. In addition, as people age, they *tend to become more dependable, emotionally stable, and agreeable.*^{9,10,11} Older persons have also been shown to be, on average, *more effective at solving emotional and interpersonal problems than younger persons.*^{12,13}

Taken together, these findings suggest two key conclusions about older workers’ workplace potential:

1. Aging has a positive impact on job knowledge, interpersonal skill, emotional and behavioral reliability, and interpersonal problem solving. *These positive age-related changes contribute to higher levels of job performance and enable many older workers to successfully compensate for gradual age-related declines in memory processes and select physical abilities.*

In developing nations, a growing proportion of jobs require high levels of knowledge and interpersonal skill. *In these jobs, older workers can be expected to show similar or higher levels of performance than younger workers.* A quantitative summary of over 100 studies¹⁴ further indicated that older workers work more safely than younger

workers, are better organizational citizens, and engage in fewer counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., theft, lateness) than younger workers.

2. *The negative impact of age-related changes on job performance is limited to a very small number of jobs that make heavy demands on memory processes or select physical abilities (e.g., air traffic controller). Further, in such jobs age-related losses may often be mitigated by the use of technologies that reduce the memory load or physical demands on the older worker.*¹⁵

D. Are older workers trainable? Can they learn?

Observed age-related declines in specific cognitive abilities have often been interpreted to mean that older workers are less able learners than younger workers, thus accounting for why older learners often perform more poorly than younger workers in standard job training programs. Recent investigations indicate, however, that deficits in older worker training performance may be best understood in terms of three aspects of training: motivation for training, learning, and motivation to transfer learning to the job environment.¹⁶ To date, evidence does not suggest the existence of age-related differences in motivation for learning. Older workers continue to learn, albeit sometimes more slowly, than younger learners, particularly in training formats that make heavy demands on short-term memory processes.¹⁷ Further, a comprehensive summary of the literature showed that age was generally unrelated to training performance.¹⁸ Moreover, specific training formats can be designed to increase the likelihood that older workers will be more confident in their learning, will learn, and will transfer what they learned back to their jobs.^{19,20}

E. What is currently known about older person health and well-being at work?

Given vastly different trajectories of physical health decline among older workers, it is difficult to predict an age at which health and physical abilities will begin to show decline on the job, though it is likely that workers in more physically-demanding jobs will be more at-risk for strain and injury at work than those in less physically-demanding jobs²¹. Research has shown that job redesign efforts to aid older workers can improve comfort, ease, and longevity in those types of jobs²².

However, the mistreatment of older workers has serious consequences for their stress and health. Quantitative reviews of the literature show a relationship between workers' job satisfaction and perceptions of injustice/unfairness and their physical and mental health.^{23,24} These findings suggest that the mistreatment of older workers has societal implications as well.

F. What is currently known about older worker employability?

One of the most commonly held negative stereotypes is that older workers are less satisfied with their job and lack motivation for work. However, a comprehensive quantitative summary of the literature²⁵ on the relationship between age and job attitudes indicated just the opposite; namely, that *older workers tend to be more satisfied with their job and more committed to their employing organization than younger workers.*

Research findings also contradict the negative stereotype of older workers as unmotivated. A review of more than 86 studies on the relationship between age and work motives conducted across the world revealed that age was positively associated with motivation to help others and to engage in interesting, challenging work.²⁶ These results provide further evidence for the importance of providing older workers with decent, challenging work and for the beneficial role that older workers may play in mentoring and in teamwork.

Although older workers do not appear to differ from younger workers in their motivation to work, poor economic conditions often cause individuals to be laid off of work. In contrast to younger workers, however, older workers have a more difficult time finding suitable re-employment. The difficulties that older workers face in obtaining work have spurred greater attention to understanding the obstacles that these workers face in job search. A review of the relationship between age and reemployment outcomes around the world²⁷ found a consistent, but small negative relationship between age, job search duration, and reemployment success across a wide range of countries. Multiple reasons have been suggested for why older workers take longer to find work and are often unsuccessful in obtaining suitable reemployment, including hiring discrimination and older worker deficits in job search skill. To date, however, it remains unclear what conditions most effectively foster older worker reemployment following job loss. For older workers with long job tenures, motivation to work and perceptions of the how one will be treated in the workplace may be more important than employability in determining reemployment success.

G. Conclusions and Recommendations

The evidence described above indicates major disconnects between widely-held negative stereotypes of older workers and the actual impact of aging on worker characteristics. Anecdotal reports of employment discrimination and older worker mistreatment in the workplace are abundant. Older workers are less likely to be given training and development opportunities, which puts them at a distinct competitive disadvantage in finding decent work, and further reinforces the belief that they are uninterested/incapable of keeping up. Further, a recent quantitative review of the literature showed a relationship between injustice/unfairness and the physical and mental health of workers,²⁸ suggesting that the mistreatment of older workers has societal implications as well.

There is a clear need for the development of policies to redress the disconnect between these pervasive but incorrect negative stereotypes of older workers and the capabilities of these persons for effective job performance. Research findings also indicate the need for greater attention to strategies that will improve older person opportunities for obtaining meaningful work in a respectful workplace. Toward this end, we recommend the following:

a. Provide age-appropriate training and development opportunities to older workers.

- Promote motivation for new skill learning among older workers by
 - o providing incentives for learning success.
 - o presenting material to be learned in age-appropriate training formats.
 - o encourage and reinforce learning collaborations with younger workers.

b. Provide training to supervisors and other governmental and organizational decision-makers about the many strengths of older workers and how to support them.



- Build an organizational culture that values and supports older workers in individual jobs and on teams.
- Provide guidance in how to supervise older workers.

c. Clearly articulate to governmental and private employers and to the broader community the benefits of hiring older workers, and publicly reward older person workforce participation.

- Build organizational cultures that value and support older worker knowledge of interpersonal skills and community relations.
- Provide guidance to recruiters and supervisors to dispel inaccurate negative stereotypes of older workers and provide evidence-based information on older worker strengths.

d. Assist older persons in enhancing employability by skill building and helping to mitigate age-related barriers to job search and reemployment.

- Build government/organizational partnerships to provide older workers with job search skill training and job search assistance.
- In environments/cultures where physical labor is more common, build government/organizational partnerships to provide older workers with job training for alternative, less physically demanding jobs.

Finally, we note that the bulk of evidence on older workers to date has been gathered in developed countries, where bias against such workers occurs despite the existence of laws in place to protect their rights. In countries without such protections in place, these issues are expected to be far more rampant. Additional evidence on the employability and work conditions experienced by older workers in developing countries is sorely needed. In these countries, particular attention should be paid to identifying socio-cultural norms and biases that may limit older person participation in job training for decent work. Research is also needed to identify how older workers of different ethnicities in developing countries seek work and the potential barriers these persons face in finding and keeping jobs that pay a living wage and promote health and well-being.

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