

THRIVING OR SURVIVING AT WORK?

Effective strategies for supporting wellbeing in late career

Nowadays, much importance is rightly attached to psychological wellbeing in the workplace. Research has demonstrated consistently that employees' wellbeing is positively associated with physical health and is a strong predictor of high individual work performance as well as organisational performance (eg customer satisfaction, productivity, profitability and employee turnover).

by Stanimira Taneva and John Arnold



The concept of *Thriving at work* represents a specific form of psychological wellbeing. It is described as a simultaneous experience of vitality and learning. Vitality reflects a person's energy and enthusiasm for work, while learning refers to building capacity by acquisition and application of knowledge. Thriving may serve as a gauge of a person's progress at work and, thus, help employees increase both their short-term functioning and longer-term development.

Thriving workers are not just surviving (ie being able to handle job demands through creating a relatively safe environment), but feeling enthusiastic,

acquiring new knowledge and skills and experiencing growth. Thriving workers, compared to non-thriving ones, overall perform better, are more creative, have better relationships with their co-workers, feel more satisfied with their job and committed to their organisation and are healthier.

Conventionally, thriving at work is associated with younger workers. This is due to common age stereotypes suggesting that older (compared with younger) workers are less energetic, proactive, motivated to learn and develop themselves; hence, perhaps less able to

thrive. Recent research has demonstrated consistently that, overall, these negative age stereotypes are inaccurate. Therefore, it is worth exploring how much thriving at work (as opposed to "hanging on", or surviving) occurs in late career and, if so, in what circumstances older employees feel both energised and as if they are learning.

Our research is the result of a two-year Marie Curie (IEF) fellowship awarded to Dr Stanimira Taneva by the European Commission in 2013 and supervised by Professor John Arnold. We studied the personal and organisational antecedents of thriving at work in late career. We started

by interviewing 37 employees aged 55 years and over and 10 human resource managers from 10 large organisations in two sectors (healthcare and information and communication technologies) in two European countries (the United Kingdom and Bulgaria). Then, we conducted an online survey with over 900 older workers (aged 55+) from both sectors and countries.

We found that late career employees across countries and sectors reported some age-related changes in their work values, needs, approaches and capacity. These changes were mostly perceived as advantages, rooted in increased knowledge and life experience. Generally, older workers appeared to be more aware of their own potential and needs, more willing to take a proactive approach in managing late careers, and more positive towards opportunities for personal and professional growth than might be expected from how they are usually portrayed.

Most of our aged 55+ workers saw themselves as energised and learning/developing themselves (ie thriving), though perhaps in slightly different ways than earlier in their career. For instance, finding meaningful work and a positive social work environment was considered more important than achieving a promotion or earning more money. However, some participants did adopt a surviving strategy, ie coping with high work demands by preserving and/or maintaining their mental and physical resources. This was particularly the case when job demands were perceived as too high to manage.

Most older workers were likely to self-regulate their successful adaptation to age-related changes (and, thus, their wellbeing and performance) by using three strategies, called selection, compensation and optimisation. Respectively, these mean focusing effort on a small number of key tasks, crafting their role so that it played to their strengths and improving their skills through training and development.

The use of these strategies was positively associated with high thriving at work and high job performance. They are often seen by researchers as strategies to compensate

for declining cognitive flexibility and energy, but our older workers saw them simply as ways of being effective at work that experience had taught them.

The nature of the work also affects thriving. High physical demands, which were present in some health sector jobs, tended to undermine thriving. Autonomy to organise and carry out the work in one's own way, and the chance to contribute fully to the social and community life of the workplace, both helped thriving. The lesson is clear: don't micro-manage or marginalise your older workers.

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Moreover, we identified a set of strategic human resource management (HRM) practices that contributed significantly to higher levels of thriving at work, while reducing less-positive experiences of surviving at work. Among these practices were: training to update current skills as well as to learn new skills, opportunities to transfer experience to other (eg younger) colleagues, access to challenging and meaningful tasks or assignments, recognition of the significant role mature employees can play, useful feedback from supervisor/manager, financial incentives to remain in the workforce instead of retiring, additional (even if unpaid) leave and opportunities to work past retirement.

Most importantly, these organisational (HRM) practices that appeared particularly valued by older workers, suggested an overall extended future time perspective and developmental opportunities.

Our findings contrast with traditional views of late career employees as being focused

mostly on protecting the status quo and, at best, maintaining reasonable levels of work wellbeing and performance.

Instead, they suggest that many older workers desire and are capable of further development. When these developmental needs are supported by organisations, employees will experience higher levels of work wellbeing and will demonstrate better job performance. Keeping older workers healthy and happy is an integral part of today's agenda for extended and sustainable working lives.



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