Stress and coping among older workers

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Age-related changes in physical and cognitive abilities can raise adaptive challenges for older working adults. Older workers exhibit considerable capacity to manage and cope with the stress of job and environmental demands, but at some point, many can become overwhelmed, and find themselves at increased risk for health consequences, injury, disability, and diminished productivity. Older workers are, however, a highly heterogeneous population, and many continue to work safely and successfully. Employers are encouraged to join efforts to provide an optimal person-environment-fit for all of their employees, but with a sensitivity to the increased variability to be expected among older employees.

1. Introduction

The population of middle-aged and older workers in industrialized countries is a large and important one. Population estimates in the United States, for example, suggest that labor participation by workers age 55 and older will grow by 8.2 million over the next decade, and that by the year 2008, over 50% of the labor force will consist of workers over age 40 [18]. These figures reflect, in part, improving (self-reported) ability to work among persons over age 60, which in turn reflects higher education levels, diminishing incidence of diseases such as cerebro/cardiovascular disease and arthritis, and increased employment support under law for persons with disabilities [13]. For the most part, these employees are experienced, stable, highly motivated, and loyal to their employers [16,34].

At some point, however, middle-aged and older employees can face important adaptive challenges in the workplace. And the relationship between aging and the stress and coping process is complex [21]. Although there is much individual variability, age-related differences are apparent in (1) the nature of stressors likely to be encountered, (2) the appraisal of potential stressors, (3) emotional and physiological responses to stress, (4) the depth and sufficiency of one’s adaptive reserves and coping resources, and (5) the formulation and use of coping strategies.

By middle-age, many employees have begun to experience age-related changes in health, sensory, and physical functioning. Such changes can undermine their productivity, decrease their tolerance for shift work [22], and threaten their safety in a work environment designed for a younger, “average” worker [21]. Older workers are also likely to be 20+ years post-formal education. In a rapidly evolving economy, this raises concerns about occupational obsolescence and having to compete with younger, more recently educated co-workers [4]. Their employers are less likely to consider them as candidates for expensive training, critical to career maintenance and continued development [20], and they are less likely to seek out training on their own [19]. In the case of industrial layoffs, older workers take longer to find new employment, particularly employment at similar compensation levels. This reflects, in part, their relative educational obsolescence, employers’ beliefs that older workers are less qualified or productive, and a concern that a good percentage of their human capital (their value to their old work organization) is not transferable to a new employment setting [20]. In response to such issues, the US Congress in 1967 established the age of 40 years for eligibility for protection under the Federal Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA).

In this context, occupational health researchers have focused on trying to quantify the relationships between expected changes in physical and cognitive functional capacity as workers age and the theoretical constant of work demands. Assessments of physical, environmental and organizational risk factors in the workplace have resulted in (a) improved predictions of risk for work-related disability and drop out, and (b) important insights for training and work-redesign [25,26].

Many older workers adapt quite well in the face of such challenges. They remain safe and productive on
the job, and enjoy career development into late life. Considerable research has examined the relationship between age and occupational performance, finding little, if any, consistent relationship between age and productivity, and thus little basis for discriminatory treatment of older adults in the employment setting [56]. Of particular interest, older working adults actually report experiencing less occupational stress than do younger adults. For example, Remondet and Hansson [44] compared the experience of employed persons age 30–53 years with that of persons age 54–72. In this study, the older group reported significantly fewer problems with personal control on the job that might trigger stress, less job tension, less generalized stress, less depression, and fewer stress-related disruptions of job performance. Similarly, Aldwin, et al. [3] found that men aged 55–64, while they reported more problems with health compared to men aged 45–54, actually reported fewer problems associated with work.

Many older workers, however, do become overwhelmed or discouraged (e.g., with chronic health problems, job demands, or lack of career opportunity), and they withdraw from the workforce [16,52]. Still others look forward to an uncertain career path and to their chances for a comfortable transition into retirement [24]. Not surprisingly, anticipated retirement can raise its own concerns. For example, financial security may be threatened among those who lack the expertise or opportunity to engage in personal retirement saving and investing, those whose pension plans have been disrupted during industrial upheaval, and especially among working women, whose pension participation may have been less continuous or whose financial security has been threatened by divorce [9].

The experience of occupational stress, then, may involve an accumulation of minor insults and hassles as well as the threat or onset of significant exposure to uncontrollable harm. These may reflect the nature of the job itself, workload, time pressures, and exposure to disruptive, dangerous, or toxic aspects of the physical environment. The organizational and social context of the job can also contribute to stress, in the form of constrained or unpredictable resources, threats to job security, role ambiguity, conflict with co-workers, and unsupportive supervisors, among many variables [27]. In this connection, for example, Osipow and Doty [40] found that older workers, with their experience and increased status in the work organization, experience more stress emanating from their responsibility for people, and from work load, compared to younger persons, but less stress based on conditions of their physical environment.

To the extent that an older person (1) experiences decline in important physical or cognitive job-related abilities, (2) is overwhelmed by the demands of the workplace, and (3) lacks experience or coping resources with which to compensate, age may be viewed as a risk-factor for occupational stress [56]. In the sections that follow, we examine findings (1) from the gerontological literature, and (2) from the applied literatures on work, safety, human factors, and rehabilitation as they relate to aging in the workplace. Throughout, we will attempt to draw implications for prevention, assessment, and rehabilitation, and recommendations for older individuals and their employers.

2. Gerontological perspectives

2.1. Heterogeneity in aging

Society often views and treats older adults (and older workers) in stereotypic terms. However, research has shown that adult development and aging are in many domains associated with increasing variability. From birth, an individual’s unique combination of traits and abilities are differentially influenced by biological and environmental influences [23]. In our working adulthood, developmental opportunities often reflect our interaction with diverse intellectual, social, and physical contexts. Growth and the development of diverse competencies, personal resources, physical and cognitive abilities, and capacities for dealing with stress are to be expected. Similarly, we should expect the development of diverse personal vulnerabilities with respect to occupational stress.

The implications of increasing heterogeneity with increasing age are widespread. For example, geriatric researchers have long warned the health-care community of the need to assess older patients for individual differences in likely response to trauma, surgery, medications, and for capacity to recover and re-establish independence, and return safely to work [45]. Similarly, a consensus in the accident and safety literature emphasizes the importance of periodic assessments of older drivers’ cognitive and physical abilities, rather than simply assuming age limits (e.g. 65 or 70 years) after which it is unsafe to drive [53]. In addition, longitudinal research on the development of intellectual abilities across adulthood shows that the trajectory of age-related change (and decline) differs substantially across individuals, and for those individuals, across abilities [48]. We provide this context to remind readers to expect increasingly diverse reactions with age to stress in the workplace, and to reflect this expectation in assessment and intervention planning.
2.2. Age-related changes in emotional experience and responsiveness

Emotional reactions are at the core of the stress experience. It is instructive, then, that researchers have learned much about the basic relationships between aging and emotion. For example, in later life, subjective reports of well-being actually increase, a counterintuitive finding, given age-related risks for disability, decline, and loss [37]. There appear a number of feasible explanations.

Older persons may experience a dampening of emotional responsiveness. Lawton, et al. [31] found that older adults report reacting to fewer worries. However, they also reported fewer emotional reactions to pleasures, and the experience of fewer positive or negative emotions in general. These results were confirmed with measures of physiological response. Researchers conclude that such results reflect, in part, (a) an increasing acceptance of aging and related implications for health and life-options, (b) increasing expertise with age and experience in the prevention and management of life stressors, reducing the need to cope with crises, and (c) the process of emotion regulation [3].

2.3. Coping and emotion regulation

Older persons appear to become quite effective in the use of cognitive strategies to regulate emotions [10,50]. For example, they may establish more realistic goals in coping with a stressor and they may begin to compare their outcomes only with age-peers, with whom they share common fate or status. They are likely to re-appraise the consequences of their stressful experiences in an effort to find a balance between associated costs and gains.

Richard Lazarus [32], however, has argued that changes in coping with stress in later life are not necessarily a developmental phenomenon. Instead, if older adults begin to cope differently with work stress, much of that change may reflect changing demands, constraints, or resources in the workplace. So older persons are likely to be coping with different stressors (e.g., chronic pain or health conditions, obsolescence, age-discrimination in organizational policies). And they may view their problems as less changeable or controllable. Their coping styles would likely reflect these factors. Lazarus cautions, however, that all this cannot be attributed to age, per se. Given immense individual variability in the aging process, such problems (and alterations to coping) would be expected to covary more directly with such variables as health.

Finally, a number of more basic insights emanate from research on emotion and the brain. In this context, it is useful to consider findings with respect to emotional systems that may have implications for behavior relevant to the workplace [41]. Consider, for example, the plight of massive numbers of employees in the last decade who were victims of industrial layoffs and restructuring, and the associated threat of losing friends, and their social and professional identity. It is of interest in this instance, that emotional experiences associated with the “Separation Distress” system seem more intense in early life, when they may play a role in ensuring social inclusion, security, and opportunity for development. This pattern may be related to physiological mechanisms, but it also seems related to the increasing role with aging of cognitive mechanisms in emotional responsivity. That is, older individuals, having undergone the cycle of facing and coping with an emotion-evoking event many times are likely to have learned the limits of their potential exposure, the nature and intensity of its consequences, and the usual process by which one returns to a more comfortable and predictable circumstance. With aging, experience, and maturity, then, cognitive abilities increasingly influence one’s emotional response to distress [41].

Another of our emotion systems, the “Appetitive Motivational” system, may be relevant in that it is viewed to influence the arousal of desires, likelihood of addiction, reward expectancies, one’s goal-directed focus, and the process of positive reinforcement. However, neurochemical elements of this system are reduced with aging, and may be associated with diminished levels of arousal distress [41].

Finally, the brain’s “Fear” system is of considerable interest because it is highly adaptive in early life, eliciting a fear response to falling, to the dark, to snakes and the like. However, the influence of this system on the stress experience also tends to diminish with age, experience, and the opportunity to develop a repertoire of coping strategies, which could have the effect of raising the threshold at which a fear stimulus would trigger a fear response. An absence of irrational fear-arousal, then, should allow older persons, in their lives and in their workplace, to remain calm while coping with a broader and more intense array of occupational stressors [41].

2.4. Age-related changes in physiological functioning

The meaning of old age in a physical sense has changed in modern times. Each new generation has
been healthier and lived longer. Of those persons aged 55 to 64 years, for example, more than 75% report no work disabilities [8]. At some age for everyone, however, issues of health and disability can become a risk factor for safe and productive job performance.

The capacity of an older person to cope with stress can be substantially affected by the physiological consequences of normal aging and by disease process. With normal aging, for example, there is a progressive deterioration of core physiological functions, including the immune response, the cardiovascular, skeletal, endocrine, and sensory systems, the central nervous system, the vestibular system, aerobic capacity, perceptual abilities, and so on [23]. Older persons also tend to experience an accumulation of chronic conditions (e.g., heart disease, arthritis, diabetes, impairment of vision, hearing, and sense of balance). Functional consequences include diminished strength, endurance, ability to walk, metabolic function, lung function, temperature control, resistance to disease, changing thresholds for sense of touch and for tolerance of pain, diminished adaptive reserves and capacity for self-repair [45]. Also, with advancing age, intrinsic factors (relative to environmental factors) increase in importance as a cause of one’s inability to avoid or manage potential occupational threats to well-being. The research on falls and accidents provides an important example. In later-life, postural instability and falls are more likely to reflect diminished mobility, multiple medications, cardiac status, deterioration of the vestibular system or the proprioceptive sensory system, degraded ability to sense the beginning of a fall or to recover balance, or to integrate environmental information about hazards. Vulnerability to falling is also increased by visual disturbance, and middle-aged and older adults experience declines in a wide variety of visual competencies such as field of vision, dark adaptation, field-dependence, depth perception, utilization of color cues, search of complex environments, ability to ignore task or threat-irrelevant information, and acuity of resolution for moving objects [39]. It is understandable, then, that older adults who experience a deterioration in their health and physical functioning are more likely to drop out of the workforce [38].

2.5. Human factors issues

At some point, a workplace designed to provide an optimal match of task demands and work capacity in the general population can become stressful for older employees. As an imbalance is reached between work-load and an older person’s physical capacity, it may become necessary to expend a greater percentage of physical capacity and reserves in performing routine tasks, to endure greater skeletal and muscular strain, and exchange more oxygen. Long-term adaptations of this type would be expected to result in an increased incidence of disease onset, injury, and disability [28].

Human factors researchers have made considerable progress in understanding the kinds of changes that could be made to enhance the person-environment fit for older persons in the workplace [36]. But, such analyses for individual workers would be prohibitively expensive. Human factors standards, typically established for the general population, must be adjusted to reflect sensory, cognitive, and physical potential among older workers. Altering the characteristics of the job and work-environment may then require multiple changes to achieve an optimal match for a given older worker. With respect to the visual environment, for example, it may be necessary to increase print size and levels of illumination, reduce glare, enhance contrast, provide multi-modal signals (e.g., backup auditory warning signals), reduce the amount of information that must be digested in any one perceptual chunk, allow more time for the completion of a task, and then to provide older employees with safety training, individualized feedback, and individual control over such variables as illumination and pace of work. Given the immense variability among older persons in the consequences of age-related change, it will likely also be necessary to be conservative in human factors interventions, to ensure a workplace that is safe and relatively stress-free for as broad an employee population as possible [11].

2.6. Injury and disability

Researchers have also examined patterns of occupational injury and health among older workers. The frequency of accidents is lower among older workers [53]. Older workers are also less likely than their middle-aged counterparts to experience lesser forms of injury such as muscle sprains, which can disrupt ability to work [12]. However, disabilities resulting from accidents are usually more severe, and potential for recovery is lower [53]. Investigators have also examined the relative influence of age, industry, and occupation on incidence of injury-accidents, using Federal Government data. In one such study, the percentage of variance attributable to age was 11.4% for total injury incidents, 10.7% for temporary disability, 39.6% for
permanent disability, and 79.5% for work-injury fatalities. Of particular interest, also, in these injury data, was the pattern (e.g., for falls) that workers age 45 years and older were not only more likely to fall, but that they were at increased risk in relatively safer work environments [2].

The good news is that older adults are often able to cope with age-related declines in physiologic (and cognitive) function, which reduces the likelihood of stress and threat to safety, well-being, or occupational performance. Research also suggests significant prevention and rehabilitative benefits from physical and cognitive training interventions and from job re-design and human factors interventions [28,30,48]. Older workers can also impact these outcomes, however. The reported age-disadvantage in industrial accidents appears to be reduced, for example, in occupations such as police officers and fire fighters which routinely demand evidence of personal fitness to remain on the job [29].

Employers have also found ways to accommodate older workers, providing assistance with heavier work, altering or shortening work schedules, allowing breaks, re-designing job components, providing new equipment, and so on. For example, it appears that older workers benefit disproportionately from the introduction of higher quality tool design [51]. In one large study of over 1,100 male and female employees over the age of 50 who had experienced a job-threatening health event, 34% had been meaningfully accommodated by these kinds of efforts by their employers [14]. It is a concern, however, that older employees appear to have less access to occupational rehabilitation services, are less likely to be encouraged by employers to try for full rehabilitation, and are much less likely than younger persons to return to work after being disabled [55].

2.7. Age-related changes in cognitive functioning

A variety of age-related changes in cognitive function may also have implications for the experience of occupational stress. Cognitive processes that we employ on a daily basis (e.g., perceiving, remembering, planning, decision-making, learning, monitoring, and problem-solving) are important to all aspects of our performance in the workplace. They are important resources, too, for perceiving, appraising, coping with, and managing potential stressors at work.

Many of these abilities show age-related change. Declines are evident, for example, in speed of cognitive processing, with implications for reaction time, perceptual accuracy, ability to monitor environmental cues to hazards, avoid accidents and falls, operate vehicles or equipment. Declines are also found in cued and free recall, and in working memory, that aspect of short-term memory involving storage and manipulation of information [43]. These functions are central to problem-solving.

The mechanisms involved in such declines continue to be the subject of research. One theory is that of a generalized slowing of mental activity at the level of the central nervous system. On complex, time-sensitive cognitive tasks, then, older adults spend disproportionately amounts of time on the earlier portions of the task, and simply do not have time to see the task or problem through to completion [47]. There is also evidence of a strong connection between sensory and intellectual functioning in aging. Baltes and Lindenberger [6] found that status of visual and auditory acuity were broadly related to measures of intellectual functioning (perceptual speed, reasoning, memory, knowledge, and fluency). Their data suggest that both sensory and intellectual function reflect the changing status of brain physiology across adulthood, but that sensory measures are by far the better predictor.

There is good news, however. Considering that age is associated with decreased cognitive functioning, and that cognitive functioning is a reliable predictor of occupational functioning and performance, it remains of interest that age per se is not consistently correlated with job performance [56]. This may reflect, in part, differences in the nature of one's employment. For example, longitudinal research has shown that complex and intellectually challenging jobs appear to increase intellectual functioning in late-life, whereas non-challenging jobs have the opposite effect [49]. Park [42] has suggested a number of additional hypotheses for the lack of a simple relationship between aging and job performance. First, Park notes that many older employees occupy positions with which they are very familiar, and for which very little further learning is required. Second, some older employees have much experience and expertise in the skill base required for their current job, allowing them to continue to do that particular job even though they may be experiencing a general decline in cognitive ability. Third, some older employees may develop broad occupational expertise and job-related problem-solving abilities over the years that help to compensate for diminished skills in any particular area of one's job. Fourth, older employees often enjoy seniority and organizational status. Such resources would be expected to increase their access to environmental supports in the job setting. For example,
they may find it easier to enlist the support or collaboration of co-workers who do have the cognitive or job skills needed to complete a task or solve a problem.

Another important consideration is that developmental change across later life involves more than loss and decline. Instead, such development has been viewed as a mix of gains and losses. Gains could include the development of specialized occupational or life expertise, achieved status or resources [5]. But gains might also be viewed in the context of loss. That is, in coping with or compensating for a loss in cognitive or physical function, older working adults may find it possible to develop unforeseen substitute skills, collaborative relationships, or creative strategies for accommodating a loss [15].

Wisdom. Lifespan intellectual development has been viewed as a dual process, which includes both cognitive mechanics and cognitive pragmatics [7]. Cognitive mechanics, those neurophysiologically-based functions such as the speed of information processing, are subject to slow decline. However, cognitive pragmatics, those bodies of knowledge that are affected by the richness of our cultural experiences, appear to endure over the lifespan. In this connection, psychologists have begun to focus on the construct of wisdom “as an expert knowledge system concerning the fundamental pragmatics of life” [7, p. 122]. Wisdom is viewed to reflect both intellectual and motivational properties, in that persons considered to have developed wisdom would have acquired broad and deep areas of knowledge and competence, care about the most important questions in life, understand and be comfortable with the limits of their knowledge and with uncertainty, and be motivated to use this gift in the service of others. A variety of factors are believed to contribute to the development of wisdom, to include individual differences in emotional stability and cognitive style, life experiences that foster the learning of expertise, and life experiences that encourage the development of personal maturity, responsibility and service. Although research suggests the lack of a simple relationship between age and wisdom, it appears that wisdom (unlike other cognitive abilities such as working memory) is relatively undiminished with age. It has been viewed to serve as a buffer to the inevitable aging losses that occur in other domains of intellectual ability [7].

Wisdom may also play a role in appraisals of life- and occupational stress, with the effect of raising thresholds for perceived threat or distress. Perhaps of greater import, however, the presence of a wise person with some status in a work organization may have a broad positive impact in the workplace. In a recent study, Limas and Hansson [33] asked working adults to nominate a wise person with whom they had worked (using the criteria for wisdom delineated above), and to tell in their own words what the presence of this wise person had contributed to their organization. The median age of persons nominated was 50 years. A content analysis of responses revealed five themes: Wise co-workers were perceived to have added value to their organizations by providing (1) stability and (2) unity to the organization under conditions of stress. They were also credited with (3) helping to create a civil and humane workplace, and (4) a culture of equity, through their virtuous and often unrecognized efforts. Finally, they were viewed to provide the organization with (5) needed vision and leadership.

3. Adaptive process

Researchers acknowledge, however, that the gain/loss ratio at some point turns negative, implying an eventual diminishing capacity and increased vulnerability to stressors, including stressors at work [5,15]. Baltes and Staudinger [7] have suggested two causes for a decreasing balance of gains and losses associated with aging. First, they view every developmental change as an adaptive specialization; the pursuit of adaptive development in one domain often implies the foregoing of options for alternative areas of development. Thus, if an older worker purposefully focuses on maintaining job skills critical to a current position, opportunities to prepare for alternative forms of employment may be lost. Second, increasing age in later life is associated with diminished “cognitive and motivational reserve capacity” (p. 17). Demands to adapt to a new life (or occupational) stressor, therefore, would at some point be expected to surpass the limits of an older person’s coping reserves.

In light of these patterns, researchers have focused extensive attention on the question of how to prevent, defer, or compensate for developmental loss, in life and in the work setting.

We described earlier how coping patterns appear to change, in response to changes in the kinds of stressors that older persons are likely to face. More specifically, we noted that coping among older adults tends to be more emotion-focused, involving cognitive strategies for managing the consequences of increasingly uncontrollable stressors. It is our sense, however, that until very old age, there are many parts of one’s life (and
working life) in which the older person can actively continue to influence important outcomes, and to minimize exposure to occupational stress and its consequences. Such efforts have been investigated within the rubric of “successful aging”.

3.1. Successful aging

A central idea in the successful aging literature concerns what lessons we might all learn from those older persons who have not experienced significant age-related decline in function, and have thus aged more successfully than the norm [46]. Their success in part reflects their ability to focus on the problem, and to assert some control over the life-style (and career) factors that contribute to functional decline (e.g., nutrition, exercise, health habits, continued social and intellectual engagement). Examinations of these processes in the literature have focused on identifying (a) strategies that prevent or defer age-related deterioration, (b) ways to compensate for age-related decline, and (c) to optimize function and value in alternative abilities. Each of these has application to the workplace.

Individual initiative on the part of older workers seems important in promoting these strategies. For example, given the relative disinterest of employers in these issues, Sterns and Gray [54] argue that there is a growing need for increased assertiveness and self-management on the part of older workers themselves with respect to obtaining training and career development opportunities. Research by Featherman [17] also suggests the need to develop adaptive competence. Featherman and colleagues studied engineers with roughly the same ability and education who had (or had not) risen to prominence in their fields. Those engineers with more successful careers appeared to have developed strategic expertise specific to managing their careers. They had specialized, made careful choices regarding where and how to invest such expertise, were more reflective and strategic in responding to career-related challenges or potential setbacks, always focusing on how to turn unexpected circumstances to their career advantage.

Of particular interest in this connection is Baltes and Baltes’ principle of Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC) [5]. The premise of this model is that when faced with age-related declines in work capacity, ability, or adaptive reserves, it becomes increasingly difficult to continue to maintain performance across the broad spectrum of one’s work-activities and responsibilities. In response, this model suggests the importance of specialization, that is, identifying priorities among performance domains on which to concentrate one’s efforts (Selection). It is then important to devote more time and effort to optimizing performance in these most important areas of performance (Optimization). Finally, it is necessary to find ways to compensate for non-reversible consequences of age-related declines in function (Compensation). Such efforts might involve using equipment to enhance ability or to reduce work load, job redesign that redistributes work loads, etc.

This model has recently received empirical support with respect to successful aging in the workplace. Abraham and Hansson [1] found that employed adults, age 49–69 years, who used SOC strategies in their workplace reported greater success in maintaining needed job competencies, whereas the relationship was negligible among younger workers. Moreover, such strategies were used more among older respondents who reported experiencing higher levels of current job stress.

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These findings are consistent with the results of an earlier study of how elderly lawyers cope with their fast paced, high stress profession. Meltzer [35] found lawyers over age 60 to report less stress than younger lawyers. The older lawyers attributed their success in this regard to being able to regulate their exposure to those aspects of the job that are chronic stressors. For example, they unilaterally reduced their work volume, taking on fewer clients and working fewer hours. They began to specialize in more routine, less conflicted areas of the law, avoiding the courtroom and restricting representation to former clients with whom they had a comfortable relationship. They also adopted a sense of emotional detachment from their clients.

Unfortunately, however, not all employees have the luxury of using the Selection strategies in the Baltes’ SOC model, its use being more prevalent among persons with higher status and power in the work organization, that is, persons with greater job latitude, power to design their own work, and to delegate tasks to others. Persons with less organizational status in the Abraham and Hansson study were found to focus their efforts more on the two remaining strategies (Optimization and Compensation).

4. Conclusions

We would emphasize four important themes from the preceding discussion. First, older adults are widely valued in the workplace for their experience, stability,
and motivation. However, at some point many will face adaptive challenges, and increased vulnerability to occupational stress because of changing physical, cognitive, or health status, need for training, or the inflexible demands of their work environment. Given anticipated increases in the size of the older working population, these issues make occupational stress among older workers an especially important topic.

Second, it is important to understand the implications of increased heterogeneity in later life. Individual older employees should be expected to vary in their experience of age-related change in physical and cognitive abilities, but also in their reactions to workplace stress and their potential to benefit from employers’ interventions. It is therefore critical to assess older workers individually, rather than to assume generalized aging effects.

Third, older adults in general have shown considerable ability to adapt to or compensate for age-related declines, and the successful aging research has begun to identify strategies with which to cope with occupational stressors likely to threaten older employees. It should be a goal for researchers in the near future to integrate into their models of successful aging a more complete representation of the workplace and the demands it places on older workers for managing and coping with work-related stress.

Finally, employers can make a difference in preventing work stress, and in managing its consequences for safety and productivity among older employees. Our sense, however, is that an employer’s most important leverage in this context is in prevention. This conclusion reflects two lines of evidence reviewed above: (1) That rehabilitation efforts with older persons who have suffered the kinds of illness, injury, or disability often associated with occupational stress appear less effective and successful than is the case with younger persons; and (2) That older workers are disproportionately benefited by human factors improvements in work and tool design, and by efforts to enhance the overall person-environment fit of the workplace.

The responsibility for effective prevention, however, is shared by employers and individual employees. Employers should view aging workers as individuals, periodically assessing their continued fit to the work environment, and where feasible, providing additional training, support, or modification in work or workplace design. They might also explore how the traditional workplace (often designed for younger workers) could be redesigned to accommodate an aging workforce. Many ergonomic interventions (e.g., larger warning signs, fewer demands for repetitive movement, better tools) could benefit employees of all ages. Older employees should also take an active role, by remaining fit, keeping skills current, monitoring any age-related changes to safety- or performance-related abilities, and developing conscious strategies for coping with age-related change.

References


