Active Aging at Work

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Executive Summary

Demographic changes have led to an increased interest in the topic of active aging among organizational researchers, practitioners, and policy makers. Active aging at work is the process of optimizing opportunities for high levels of physical, mental, and social well-being, work engagement and performance, as well as fair treatment and employment security as workers get older. Workers aging actively are able and motivated to work longer, past traditional retirement ages, and continue to be happy and productive members of the workforce. In this white paper, we outline individual, job, team, organizational, non-work, and societal factors that contribute to active aging at work and derive practical implications for organizations. Active aging at work is influenced by (a) individual difference characteristics and proactive behavior, (b) job design and work role changes, (c) team diversity and leadership, (d) human resource practices and organizational climate, (e) caregiving responsibilities and volunteering activities outside of the work context, and (f) age discrimination and availability of employment opportunities. Organizations can foster active aging at work through age-inclusive human resource practices, including recruitment and retention activities, career management, training and development, work design, health and performance management, and managing the transition to retirement.

Continuously low or shrinking birth rates, the aging of the baby boomer generation, and rising life expectancies and retirement ages are causing unprecedented population and workforce aging around the globe. These developments have spurred an increased interest in the topic of active aging. The World Health Organization defines active aging as "the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation, and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age." As a policy framework, active aging is now endorsed widely by organizations such as the United Nations, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the European Commission.

In the work context, active aging means that as workers age, they (a) maintain or improve their physical, mental, and social well-being; (b) continue to show high levels of work engagement and performance; and (c) experience fair treatment and employment security. As a consequence, older workers are not only able and motivated to work past traditional retirement ages, they also continue to be happy and productive members of the workforce.

Based on research evidence accumulated over decades, we outline individual, job, team, organizational, non-work, and societal factors that contribute to active aging at work. That is, we take the view that aging workers can actively influence their development and environment, and that aging workers are themselves influenced by their environment. We conclude by outlining implications for organizations that want to implement age-inclusive human resource (HR) management practices, including recruitment and retention activities, career management, training and development, work design and health and performance management, managing the transition to retirement and bridge employment, and combating negative age stereotypes.

Background: Factors Contributing to Active Aging at Work

Aging is a continuous process that lasts from conception until death. Because there is immense variability in how people age, most researchers do not specify a cut-off age to define when someone is "old" or an "older worker." Instead, the terms "younger" and "older" worker are used here—and more generally in organizational science—for descriptive purposes only. For practical reasons, organizations and governments often define "older workers" as those individuals aged 40, 45, or 50 years and older. Most studies in the field of work and aging include workers between career entry (typically sometime between 15–25 years) and retirement entry (typically sometime between 60–70 years), so findings can be generalized to the "working age" population. In this section, we primarily describe evidence on average age-related differences and changes in various individual and contextual characteristics, as well as important work experiences and behaviors. It is important to note, however, that age is generally a rather weak predictor of work outcomes and, therefore, it is important to consider more proximal age-related mechanisms (e.g., work experience) that influence these outcomes. Moreover, there can be substantial variability within age groups, and this variability tends to become greater with increasing age. Thus, when average age-related trends are discussed, it is important to keep in mind that there are also differences between workers of similar ages.

Individual Factors

Workers' physical and cognitive abilities, personality characteristics, beliefs, and goals change with age in ways that can affect their motivation for and performance at work. Contrary to popular beliefs about the detrimental effects of age, however, these changes can be characterized as encompassing both losses and gains. On average, physical strength, cognitive speed, reasoning abilities, and memory decline with age and thus represent age-related losses. However, knowledge accumulated through work and life experiences, as well as emotion regulation competencies tend to improve with age. Older workers focus on positive emotions and events, and report higher levels of job satisfaction, interpersonal trust, loyalty, and affective commitment than younger workers. Thus, these characteristics represent age-related gains.
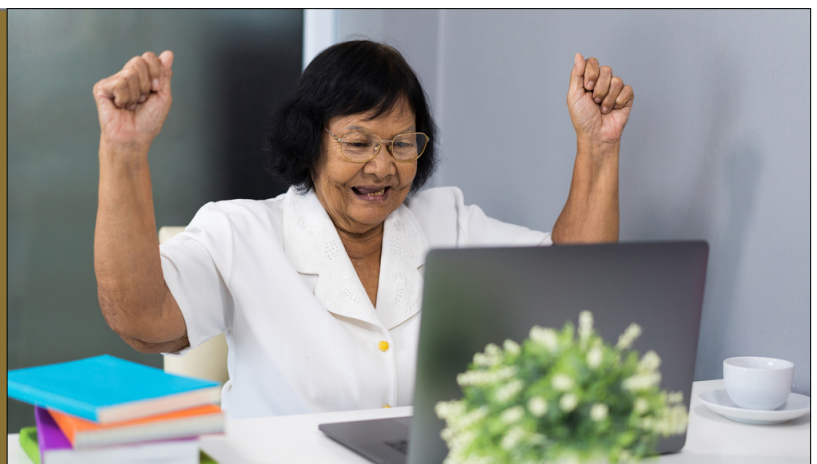
Age-related gains can compensate for potentially detrimental effects of age-related losses. For instance, in most jobs, older workers compensate for declines in cognitive speed, reasoning, and memory by relying on their knowledge gained from years of prior work experience. Older workers also have increased opportunities for environmental support, such as support from colleagues or using tools. Indeed, age has been shown to be generally unrelated to task, creative, and training performance, whereas organizational citizenship behavior and safety performance tend to improve with age and counterproductive behaviors decrease with age.

As workers age, they may also perceive changes in their abilities, which may affect their self-efficacy and perceptions of their future work-related opportunities. For example, older office workers might realize that a software upgrade is more disruptive now than when they were younger because they have trouble remembering the tools shown in training. Workers further experience age-related reorganization of personality traits. Older workers, on average, tend to be more conscientious, emotionally stable, and agreeable than younger workers. Moreover, they tend to be somewhat less extraverted and less open to experience. These shifts in personality suggest stable, reliable, and cooperative workers.

In addition to changes in abilities, personality characteristics, and beliefs, goals may also change as people age. On average, with increasing age, people focus less on growth and development goals, and more on maintenance goals, prevention of losses, and emotional meaningfulness. This suggests that the perceived importance or preference for job characteristics and work outcomes also changes with an individual's age. Motives shift from a focus on achievement and career advancement at younger ages to motives at higher ages pertaining to accomplishing worthwhile tasks or interesting work, helping other people or contributing to society, autonomy and flexibility in how the work gets done, use of already learned skills, and job security. Hence, work motivation does not generally increase or decrease with age, but its content and focus changes.

Finally, workers' use of action regulation strategies positively influences their active aging process. To make optimal use of their personal resources, and to manage the demands of their job, older workers typically select fewer work goals, optimize the effort needed to attain these goals, and compensate for age-related losses by using alternative means. For example, seasoned project managers who enjoy managing teams might choose developmental goals related to managing people. They are likely to delegate the responsibility of learning new project management software to subordinates to free up time to manage more direct reports.

Older workers focus on positive emotions and events, and report higher levels of job satisfaction, interpersonal trust, loyalty, and affective commitment than younger workers.

It is important to note that the trends discussed above represent average age-related changes that have been documented through research and that there is immense variability in age-related changes in abilities, personality, motivation, and performance. Moreover, differences between individuals increase with age. Some 65-year-olds may have the memory ability of an average 40-year-old and remain open, extraverted, and achievement oriented throughout the lifespan. It is thus important to consider the unique characteristics of the individual worker in the context of the normative changes described above. For example, younger workers will typically have low job and organizational tenure, and perceive their future full of work opportunities. Some older workers might also be starting a new career and thus have low job tenure and perceive their future full of work opportunities as well. Thus, organizations should take factors other than chronological age, such as job tenure, occupational future time perspective, and perceived health into account when considering the goals of individual workers.

Job and Team Factors

Job and work role characteristics that provide a good fit with workers' changing abilities and motives contribute to active aging at work. Jobs that primarily require older workers to rely on their accumulated knowledge and experience are more likely to result in positive worker outcomes than jobs that primarily require cognitive speed, reasoning abilities, and memory. Most jobs require a mix of these abilities and, thus, enable older workers to use their knowledge and experience to compensate for potential declines in some cognitive abilities.

Jobs that provide older workers with high autonomy, that is, freedom and responsibility in how they carry out their work tasks, opportunities to use their knowledge and skills, and a sense of meaning lead to greater worker engagement, perceptions of future opportunities at work, well-being, and better performance. Moreover, on average, older workers flourish in work roles that involve helping and caring for others, particularly younger people, such as mentoring and other-oriented organizational citizenship behavior.

> Moreover, team members of all ages benefit when leaders structure tasks according to individual age-related abilities and motives, and help teams focus on higher-order goals instead of demographic differences.

Older workers would also be expected to value social embeddedness, suggesting that the team environment will be important. Composing age-diverse teams signals to workers that they are valued independent of their age, which in turn leads to higher well-being and individual and team performance. Moreover, age-diverse teams allow for interactions and knowledge sharing between younger and older workers. Research also indicates that age diversity in teams should be managed to maximize the positive effects of exchanging different views and perspectives, and to minimize the negative effects of age stereotypes and discrimination. Thus, leaders play an important role in the active aging process by providing models for unbiased consideration and encouragement for workers at all ages. Moreover, team members of all ages benefit when leaders structure tasks according to individual age-related abilities and motives, and help teams focus on higher order goals instead of demographic differences. Regardless of leadership, research highlights the viability of age-diverse teams. Team members can change their jobs collectively and independently from the leader by assigning team tasks according to the unique strengths and interests of each team member.

Organizational Factors

Two company philosophies are prevalent with respect to aging: one is a depreciation model that assumes that the value of employees peaks early in their careers, reaches a plateau in midcareer, and then steadily declines. By contrast, the conservation model assumes that employees remain valuable across their career if they are adequately trained and managed. Similarly, employers use three types of HR strategies to manage their older workers: an exit strategy through early retirement (i.e., a depreci-

ation model), an investment strategy through workplace accommodation, as well as employee development, maintenance, and utilizations strategies (i.e., a conservation model). The depreciation model represents a focus on age-related losses, whereas the conservation model recognizes the gains that accompany age-related losses and the potential for all workers to develop throughout the career lifespan.

Accommodative HR practices include reducing the workload, granting additional leave and semiretirement, and support for employees in regulating age-related losses. Developmental HR practices entail regular training opportunities, continuous development on the job, and promotion, all of which fulfil employees' needs to develop. Maintenance HR practices include flexible work schedules and ergonomic adjustments, which support employees when they experience age- and life stage-related challenges, such as family responsibilities. Finally, utilization HR practices entail task enrichment and lateral job moves, utilization of employees' existing knowledge and experience, and making job tasks interesting. The perceived availability of these HR practices leads to positive work outcomes, such as increases in job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and motivation.

Because it is the perceived availability of these HR practices that affects positive worker outcomes, line managers and supervisors play an important role in communicating intended HR policies and practices to their employees. In addition, line managers can tailor HR practices to the specific abilities of older workers. These tailored arrangements are referred to as idiosyncratic deals (I-deals), which are defined as special terms of employment negotiated between an individual and an employer that satisfy both parties' needs. Research shows that development and flexibility I-deals, such as individual arrangements regarding training and flexible work schedules, have a positive impact on older workers' motivation to work beyond traditional retirement ages.

The implementation of different HR strategies evokes different types of organizational climate, in terms of employees' shared perceptions of organizational policies, practices, and procedures. A depreciation philosophy and accompanying exit strategy might evoke an age discrimination climate, which involves shared perceptions of the unfairness of organizational policies, procedures, and practices towards older workers. A conservation philosophy and accompanying investment, development, maintenance, and utilizations strategies are more likely to evoke an age-friendly organizational climate, which involves shared perceptions of nondiscriminatory practices and the shared belief that workers of all ages contribute to the company. An age-friendly organizational climate is associated with greater perceptions of future work opportunities, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and motivation to continue working after the traditional retirement age among workers, and with greater collective commitment and performance at the company level.

Nonwork and Societal Factors

An array of factors outside of one's work context can influence active aging at work, including home and family, age-related stereotypes and norms, and employment opportunities. For instance, age-related changes in caregiving responsibilities and volunteering activities will negatively affect the amount of time and energy a worker has to expend at a current job. Although outside of an employing organization's control, these influences are not trivial. An increasing number of middle-aged and older workers provide care to their parents or other close family members; some simultaneously care for younger grandchildren, adult children, and/or older relatives living in their homes. At the same time, some older workers may choose to focus time outside of work on volunteer activities to build their local community as they approach retirement. Although research shows that these activities improve well-being and ease the transition to retirement, their effects on job performance are unclear. They may take a worker's focus away from the job, or they may provide a balance between work and life that will subsequently enable workers to avoid burnout and remain productive and engaged.

Older workers often face negative age stereotypes and discrimination, which are detrimental to active aging at work. Research has shown that negative age stereotypes (e.g., that older workers are less productive, unable to learn, and resistant to change) are generally unfounded. They may persist because older workers themselves often internalize negative age stereotypes or worry about being stereotyped based on their age. Although explicit forms of age discrimination have become rare due to equal employment opportunity laws, more subtle and implicit forms of age discrimination, often in the form of incivility, persist and have detrimental consequences for older workers. For example, subtle age bias might mean that even though all workers are offered an opportunity for training, only younger workers are encouraged to attend; it might also mean that the suggestions of younger workers are taken more seriously than those of older workers. Older workers might also internalize age-related stereotypes and thus self-select out of new training opportunities and stop offering suggestions at work.

ALLIANCE
FOR ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

Organizations can foster active aging at work by implementing age-friendly and age-inclusive HR practices

Another factor that might hinder active aging at work are widely accepted age norms and social expectations, particularly about age-appropriate work behavior and appropriate retirement age. Notably, these norms typically exist at the societal level, particularly in societies with an emphasis on traditional career trajectories. Organizations can unwittingly hinder active aging at work (e.g., the typical age to be promoted in the organization, the age at which most colleagues retire). Perceptions of age and retirement norms at any level influence worker motivation, well-being, and their ability to actively age at work.

Finally, a societal factor that contributes to active aging at work is the availability of attractive and secure employment opportunities for older workers, including bridge employment and self-employment. Bridge employment offers older workers the possibility to use their accumulated knowledge and experience, and helps ease the transition to retirement. Moreover, an increasing number of older workers are interested in becoming self-employed after retiring from their career job, because self-employment offers them high levels of autonomy and independence as well as an additional income stream in retirement.

Implications for Practice:
What Can Organizations Do to Foster Active Aging at Work?

Organizations can foster active aging at work by implementing age-friendly and age-inclusive HR practices that address the factors discussed in the previous section. These practices help create an organizational environment in which workers of all ages can achieve their full potential without discrimination. We suggest that HR practices that are particularly beneficial for older workers are also beneficial for workers of other ages; thus, age-friendly and age-inclusive HR practices contribute to further humanization of work. It is important to acknowledge that organizational practices take place within a national policy framework that includes legislation regarding pensions, taxes, and benefits, as well as support for lifelong education, training, and health promotion. Employers can work with policy makers, public authorities, and media organizations to help improve the broader societal conditions (e.g., dispel myths about older workers) and opportunities for active aging at work (e.g., creating tax regulations that benefit self-employment among older workers). In the following section, we discuss specific HR practices regarding recruitment and retention of older workers, career management, training and development, work design and health and performance management, managing the transition to retirement and bridge employment, and combating negative age stereotypes.

Recruiting and Retaining Older Workers

As a first step, organizations should assess the age structure, estimated time to retirement of the individuals in their workforce, and future skill requirements to allow for effective HR and succession planning. Depending on the country and sector they operate in, organizations could face labor shortages in the very near future. For example, the World Health Organization projected that organizations in the healthcare sector worldwide will be short of almost 13 million workers by the year 2035. Thus, the recruitment and retention of older workers is a topical issue that should be high on an organization's agenda.

Recruitment and employment of older workers should be emphasized in an organization's diversity strategy. When recruiting and selecting workers, organizations need to ensure that older workers have equal rights and opportunities. Recruiters and recruitment messages must not directly or indirectly discriminate based on age. Because older workers are less likely to be invited for a job interview than younger workers are, recruiters and managers need to be made aware of the strengths of older workers (e.g., work experience, loyalty and strong work ethic, professional networks). Organizations can recruit older workers who previously worked for other organizations or from their own pool of alumni. These workers will come to the job with an extensive portfolio of knowledge and skills. During the recruitment process, organizations should employ recruitment sources used by older jobseekers (e.g., specialized websites, employment agencies specializing in older jobseekers) and communicate that

> [O]lder workers can change the way they think about their jobs—focusing on what is interesting and impactful—and/or find tasks within their current role that expand the role in a way that is interesting to them.

the organization values older workers' strengths (e.g., by involving current older workers in recruitment activities). Moreover, organizations should communicate features of the job that are attractive to older jobseekers, such as flexible working arrangements, and the possibility to teach/mentor others.

Organizations can make efforts to retain older workers by making them feel valued. In addition, managers and supervisors should be made aware of age-related changes and stability in personal (e.g., abilities and motives) and situational factors (e.g., caregiving) to be able to tailor the design of the job and other HR practices to older workers (e.g., offering interesting work and flexible work schedules). In summary, organizations can come a long way in recruiting and retaining older workers by building an age-friendly organizational culture that values age diversity and the strengths of all workers independent of their age.

Career Management

Age-inclusive career management means that workers of all ages have the opportunity to develop their knowledge and skills, change work roles, and progress in their careers to fulfill their potential. Older workers are often in a maintenance career stage. They tend to be promoted and/or adopt new work tasks and roles far less than younger workers. In order to deal with this type of career plateau, older workers can change the way they think about their jobs—focusing on what is interesting and impactful—and/or find tasks within their current role that expand the role in a way that is interesting to them.

Older workers may face resistance to moving into new roles. Managers may be only concerned with the careers of their younger workers. Organizations can develop the careers of older workers by developing alternative career paths that are not necessarily upward focused and by obtaining information about older workers' knowledge, skills, and interests to map them to different career opportunities. In addition, organizations can encourage proactive career management. This might involve stimulating older workers to communicate their career goals to supervisors, and to work with supervisors to develop job opportunities that develop strategically valued skills. These arrangements can benefit both the organization, which will retain high-performing workers, and the older workers, who will be more engaged and secure in their jobs. In summary, extended working lives require sustainable careers or different career experiences that provide meaning to the individual worker (although not necessarily moving upwards).

Training and Development

Workers of all ages should have the opportunity to participate in training and development activities to adapt to changing work requirements. This is particularly important in the context of the protean career, defined as a self-initiated, self-sustained individual career trajectory that emphasizes the role of individual development for successful career outcomes. In other words, it is the individual employee, and not the organization, who is responsible for decisions about continuous development, career trajectories, and retirement in today's workplace. As such, attending to one's own personal development through training and development are important tasks for a successful, long career. There are, however, special considerations for older workers.

Older workers, on average, are likely to be slower in mastering training content. Yet, formal training opportunities (e.g., classroom or online training that follows a syllabus or script whereby learners are led step-by-step through training content) can be

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adapted to losses in a person's cognitive speed and abilities when it is self-paced and structured to reduce memory demands. Training content that scaffolds upon existing knowledge will also take advantage of the vast knowledge and experience of older workers. Skilled organizational trainers can structure an organizational classroom for differential instruction to meet the needs of individual trainees in terms of pacing and content. Technology also offers many affordances for training customization from simple things such as the ability to adjust the font on a computer screen to more complicated approaches that adapt training structure and content to the prior knowledge and abilities of the trainee. In summary, training that can be adapted to the unique needs of the learner, whether done by an instructor or through training technology, will be more effective and ultimately more efficient than a one-size-fits-all approach.

Workers report that less than 10% of their personal development comprises formal training and development activity. Rather, unstructured/informal learning at work (e.g., on-the-job training, peer learning) is the most common method for a worker's continuous development. Over the course of a career, workers will participate in myriad informal developmental activities related to the growth of career-related skills (e.g., taking on new responsibilities in a current role to gain skills for a promotion, cross training, and taking continuing education courses outside of work to further one's career). Assignments that leverage an individual's existing expertise while providing opportunities to expand some skills is an excellent way to engage older workers in developing new skills.

Informal learning is a key component of active aging at work. It is related to career management and is beneficial for both the organization and the worker. In particular, the increasing importance of the development of learning organizations implies that the extent to which employees engage in self-directed informal learning is a major factor in an organization's success. In summary, organizations that support worker engagement in both formal and informal training and development benefit from attracting talent of all ages that want to engage in learning throughout their careers.

Work Design and Health and Performance Management

Because health, cognitive abilities, and work motives change with age, organizations should evaluate the appropriateness and attractiveness of job characteristics for older workers. To promote active aging, workplaces need to be designed and adapted so that they maintain and promote workers' physical, mental, and social well-being and prevent health challenges and disabilities. This involves making work stations adjustable, providing tools and devices to assist with physically strenuous tasks, providing adequate breaks, and avoiding repetitive motions. In addition to creating ergonomically friendly and healthy jobs, organizations can improve the potential for jobs to motivate workers through modifying job characteristics. For example, older workers value autonomy, meaningful work, and work allowing them to use their knowledge and skills. Tasks that match these preferences and motivate older workers include mentoring younger workers and advising senior managers about experiences related to the history of the organization, such as describing strategies that have and have not worked in the past.

It might be difficult for organizations to design jobs and HR practices for the heterogeneous group of older workers. Therefore, the best strategy for increasing the motivating potential of jobs may be tailored to the individual. Organizations could adopt a bottom-up approach in which older workers are encouraged to make changes to their jobs to increase the fit with their abilities and interests. This proactive form of behavior is called job crafting. Older workers could modify the number and scope of their tasks and workplace relationships, as well as redefine the meaning of their tasks. For example, project managers could redefine their tasks by emphasizing the importance of their mentorship on the professional development of their subordinates and viewing the project management tasks as a means to achieve this outcome. Organizations can stimulate job crafting by implementing high involvement work practices such as participation in decision making, information sharing, and flexible working arrangements.

Older workers may also value flexible working arrangements because these arrangements provide them with the autonomy and the ability to accommodate responsibilities and interests outside of the workplace (e.g., caregiving responsibilities and volunteering activities). These arrangements may also have benefits for the physical and mental well-being of older workers, particularly to the extent that they permit workers to disengage from stressful work and develop an identity outside of work that can help ease their transition to retirement. Working arrangements can be flexible in terms of where, when, how, and by whom the work is completed. Examples of flexible working arrangements are part-time work, project-based or seasonal work, telework (from home or other locations than the company), flextime (choosing when to start and finish work within certain boundaries), paid or unpaid time off for caregiving responsibilities, and job sharing.

Another way for managers to provide autonomy to their subordinates is through management by objectives. Managing by objectives is a performance management system in which managers set goals together with each employee that are aligned with organizational goals. By evaluating objectives, managers provide employees with autonomy to determine how to reach those objectives, and thus provide leeway to craft their jobs. In addition to monitoring performance, managers can continuously monitor their subordinates' well-being and development. Hence, the performance appraisal conversation is expanded to include a discussion of an employee's development and well-being, as well as career opportunities and retirement plans. Unfortunately, managers are inclined to skip performance appraisals of older workers.

Managing the Transitions to Retirement and Bridge Employment

The retirement landscape is changing. An increasing number of people are retiring from their first career, starting a new career, or after some time returning to work in "bridge employment"—they "unretire." Workers in bridge employment typically have fewer work hours and a reduced workload, and start working in a different occupation or become self-employed. Organizations should assist older workers in their transition to bridge employment. This may involve phased retirement, financial retirement planning, as well as succession planning and knowledge transfer. These types of arrangements may also align well with the age-related shift in worker goals from achievement to caring for others and giving back to the organization and broader community.

Combating Negative Age Stereotypes

To achieve active aging at work, it is important that negative age-related stereotypes are recognized and eliminated at the societal, organizational, interpersonal, and individual levels. At the societal level, it is important to avoid stereotypical depictions of older workers, for instance in the media. At the organizational level, older workers should be explicitly encouraged and supported to participate in activities (e.g., training) and roles (e.g., protégé) that may be considered "age-inappropriate" to debunk negative stereotypes. At the interpersonal level, younger, middle-aged, and older workers should regularly work together in age-diverse teams so that stereotypical views of coworkers are invalidated. Supervisors and leaders are important role models in this context. Finally, older workers themselves should ensure to not become victims of "stereotype threat," which entails worrying that one is perceived by others through the lens of negative stereotypes about one's age group. Feelings of stereotype threat can lead to job dissatisfaction, disengagement from work, and reduced well-being and performance.

Next Steps and Conclusion

With increasing age, workers become more heterogeneous in their levels of well-being, engagement, and performance. Active aging is an important goal for individuals, organizations, and society. Over decades, a large body of research evidence has accumulated on individual, job, team, organizational, nonwork, and societal factors that contribute to active aging at work. It is now possible to derive evidence-based implications for organizations. Age-inclusive HR strategies help older workers maintain or improve their health and well-being, continue to show high work engagement and performance, and perceive fair treatment and employment security. Organizational practitioners can contribute to active aging through recruitment and retention activities, training and development, career management, flexible working arrangements, work design, health and performance management, actively managing the transition to retirement, and combating negative age stereotypes. Last but not least, an active, productive, and satisfying work life may also contribute to active aging outside of the work domain and in retirement, by helping to maintain and enhance individuals' cognitive, emotional, and social abilities and skills.

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