Introduction

Nearly half of all pre-retirees expect to continue working into their 70’s and 18% plan on working into their 80’s (Brown, 2003). In recent years the literature has begun to address experiences of older adults who continue to work after retirement age. A survey by Met/Life Foundation/ Civic Ventures (2008) found that a second career option is highly attractive to workers in the second half of their life. However, the stress of changing careers and learning new skills isn’t underestimated, nor can the negative impact of stress on both mental and physical health. Despite this, there are clearly benefits related to continuing to work beyond retirement age, such as improved financial security, self-esteem and self-confidence (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong & Sheraden, 2009).

The cognitive health of older workers and its impact on job demands, new learning, and safety in the work environment has not been well studied. This area of research is critical if we are to understand and impact this growing workforce.

Social Ecological Model

The Social Ecology Model of Health Promotion (McLeroy, Steckler & Burdine, 1992) is applicable for promoting cognitive health in older working adults and in promoting healthy, safe working environments for older adults (Melillo, 2013). Areas for potential research can be identified through the five inter-related levels of inquiry: interpersonal, intrapersonal, institutional, community, and public policy.

Research Areas

Intrapersonal

• Assessment of individual physical and mental health and its effect on cognitive well-being and learning.
• Family history of cognitive loss, genetic predisposition.
• Response to life stressors.
• Life style habits.

Potential survey questions:
✓ At what age do you plan to retire?  
✓ What factors will impact your decision to retire?

Interpersonal

• Family caregiving stress and responsibilities.
• Social Support
• Job Stress
• Work Life Balance
• Socioeconomic Status
• Culture and ethnicity

Potential survey questions:
✓ Does your health care provider evaluate or ask you about your cognitive health?  
✓ Do you work with anyone who has cognitive impairment?

Institutional

• Work place health programs.
• Physical work environment:  
  ✓ Safety hazards & interventions
  ✓ Musculoskeletal disorders & ergonomics
  ✓ Chemical, physical, and biological hazards & interventions
• Psychosocial work environment:  
  ✓ Work organization & stress
  ✓ Karasek’s Decision Control Model
  ✓ Siegrist’s Effort-Reward Model
  ✓ Learning environment
• Shift work
• Safety climate & safety culture
• Policies to protect workers’ safety, health, and well-being
• Cost-effectiveness of workplace safety & health programs
• Management philosophies

Potential survey question:
✓ If you noticed a colleague with some form of cognitive change would you notify management?

Community

• Access to physical activity resources
• Media campaigns for promoting well being
• Community access to healthy food choices

Potential survey question:
✓ Where would you seek information about cognitive impairment?

Research Areas

Public Policy

• Administration on Aging
• Bureau of Labor Statistics
• National Institute on Aging
• National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health
• Occupational Safety and Health Administration
• AARP
• Centers for Medicare/ Medicaid Services
• Executive Office of Elder Affairs (Mass. Gov.)
• Massachusetts Department of Public Health

Potential survey question:
✓ Are you aware of resources available to the public regarding cognitive health?

Factors to Enhance Workplace Climate for Older Workers

• Organizational support (including retirement planning policies volunteering opportunities)
• Non-discriminatory practice
• Targeted training opportunities for enhancing skills/knowledge
• Recognization and acknowledgement of institutional history/value and expertise to the organization
• Promote a culture of caring and teamwork
• Flexible work schedules/varied work arrangements
• Avoid shift work
• Reduce distractions in the work area
• Provide space enclosures or a private office
• Allow employee to play soothing music using headset
• Increase natural lighting
• Reduce clutter in the employee’s work environment
• Plan for uninterrupted work time
• Divide large assignments into smaller tasks and steps
• Flexible retirement options
• Restructure job to include only essential functions
• Information and referral assistance with ability to manage child/grandchild care and elder care responsibilities through formal care networks/referrals
• Have an expert on aging talk to employee
• Education that incorporates adult learning principles
• Make other employees aware of the value of hiring and retaining older workers
• Make other employees aware of the value of the hiring and retaining older workers

Final Remarks

• “A high stress job may be the pivotal life style dimension that poses greatest risk for illness because it prompts inappropriate coping strategies to eliminate stress” (Stokols, 1996, p.291).
• National Research Council & Institute of Medicine (2004) calls for research:
  ✓ to provide better understanding of the factors related to the health and safety needs of older workers, and  
  ✓ to identify effective policies, programs, as well as intervention techniques and strategies in addressing the health and safety needs of older workers.

References


Early in life, the North American population is growing older.