

## “YOU ARE TOO OLD (NOT) TO LEARN” – A CRITICAL RECONSIDERATION OF “OLDER EMPLOYEES”

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### ABSTRACT

Today's working environment faces the major challenges of demographical change and digitalization. Deficit-oriented stereotypes question the ability of older employees to keep pace with these technological innovations. Consequently, the elderly are perceived as less valuable for the company leading to fewer vocational training offers. Facing this dilemma, this contribution aims at uncovering the prevailing stereotypes against older employees and present a new approach of looking at older generations. Focusing existing experienced-based knowledge instead of assumed deficits as a starting point for further didactical work and research, basics of age-appropriate vocational training get pointed out in order to raise target group specific potentials in the context of the challenges of digitalization.

### KEYWORDS

Older employees; vocational training; deficit hypothesis; experienced employees

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Changes in pension policy conditions (e.g. less early retirement) lead to longer working life (Thieme et al. 2015). On the other hand, the increasing digitalization of working environments (the so-called „Fourth Industrial Revolution“) also influences existing well-proven working conditions by transforming existing jobs (Spath et al. 2013). Consequently, older people need to know how to act in changing working environments in order to securing their livelihood in the context of socio-political changes. In companies, stereotypes predominate against this group of employees (Pfaff and Zeike 2018) which lead to disadvantages (Billet 2011).

This contribution takes up this problem using the example of continuing vocational training in enterprises against the background of advancing digitalization. The goal of this paper is to sensitize for the consequences of a deficit-oriented perspective on older employees. Additionally, an alternative perspective on the role of older employees based on current literature is demonstrated as a starting point for further didactical work and research. First, the existing stereotypes towards older employees and the resulting consequences for vocational training are presented (Sec. 2). Decoupled from stereotypes, potentials of older employees for companies will be presented (Sec. 3). The learning behavior of older people and the prerequisites for age-appropriate vocational training get pointed out in a third step (Sec. 4). Finally, a summary is given and conclusions are drawn (Sec. 5).

## 2 NEW CHALLENGES! – OLD STEREOTYPES?

Work profiles will change massively due to technical innovations and digitized workplaces (Timonen and Vuori 2018). Examples are the use of mobile technologies in production that enables faster communication channels between individuals as well as the increased use of data in production environments. Therefore, the

competence to deal with new technologies is required. On way to develop these competencies can be vocational training (Gronau et al. 2017). Target group-specific learning behavior of older employees demand special requirements on vocational training (e. g., Dymock et al. 2012). However, offers directly geared to the needs of older employees are rare (Bellmann et al. 2013). In companies, a deficit-oriented perspective defines the understanding towards older people. This deficit hypothesis supposes a loss of cognitive and physical abilities (Schmidt and Tippelt 2009). Consequently, companies perceive old employees as less productive, less willing to learn and less innovative (Dymock et al. 2012). This stereotypical perspective can be observed (with exceptions) throughout Europe (Bellmann et al. 2013). The real consequences of stereotypical attributions become clear taking the example of vocational training: From a business-oriented perspective, organizational parts which can contribute a great deal to the success of the company (should) get subsidized. Arguing in line with the deficit-oriented perspective, older employees are less valuable for a company. From the company's point of view, it thus seems unprofitable to support them. It can therefore be assumed that the lack of target-group-specific offerings is attributable to identified stereotypes. In summary, the predominating deficit hypothesis appears to contribute to structural disadvantages for older employees. In order to overcome these stereotypes and their consequences, an alternative perspective needs to be proposed.

## 3 (G)OLD EMPLOYEES

The fact that old employees have been with the company for a long time can lead to organizational advantages, e.g., higher levels of loyalty to the employer. This reduces the risk of a job change (Peeters and van Emmerik 2008). As a result, a transfer of company knowledge to competitors might become less likely. Older people also have long accumulated experience-based knowledge. Specific challenges which require

this type of knowledge (e.g., Interpretation of machine data) can be solved more efficiently by older people than by younger ones. At the same time, technical systems are becoming more complex as a result of increasing automation, which increases their susceptibility to errors due to situations that cannot be anticipated in advance (Bainbridge 1983). Among other things, employees have the task of acting as control authorities to react reflexively to errors in technical working environments. Thus, experience-based knowledge and the ability to apply this knowledge in the sense of action competence gain in importance (Gronau et al. 2017). In summary, elder have a different kind of potential compared to younger less experienced workers, especially in the context of the challenges of digitalization. Furthermore, the current literature suggests that the deficit-oriented approach is not tenable: Methodical knowledge, existing experience-based knowledge (Franken 2016), and digital assistance systems (Apt et al. 2016) can compensate a possibly existing reduced physical capacity and their consequences. It might even be interesting to consider a reciprocal relationship at this point: declining cognitive performance is partly due to one-sided and undemanding activities and lack of learning opportunities at work (Koller and Plath 2000). Consequently, the cognitive performance can be enhanced by age-appropriate vocational training and learning opportunities at work (Schmidt and Tippelt 2009). To point out the prerequisites for this, it is necessary to give a deeper understanding of the learning behavior of older people.

#### **4 NEVER TOO OLD TO LEARN**

While theory-oriented and externally controlled learning contents lose importance among older people, the connection to experience-based knowledge and one's own practical work becomes more important. Especially in vocational training, extrinsic motivation (e.g., job promotion) is less important than intrinsic motivation (e.g., interests in the learning topic) (Tikkanen

and Billet 2014; Thieme et al 2015). On top of that, environments and work designs which stimulate learning are also necessary to support efficient learning (Schmidt and Tippelt 2009, Tikkanen and Billet 2014). Taken together, it can be hypothesized that older people do not learn *worse* than younger people but *differently*. The following prerequisites are derivable for age-appropriate vocational training: A.) content based on experience-based knowledge and working experience and B.) opportunities to get involved in the choice of content.

To achieve this goal, older employees have to receive more attention both in society as well as the working context in order to overcome the prevailing deficit hypothesis. If, however, the biological age and social devaluation processes retained as a supposedly meaningful reference point, existing stereotypes, and the outlined consequences will remain. Searching for an alternative reference point for companies, this contribution proposes an orientation on experience-based knowledge and also a linguistic redefinition from *old* employees to *experienced* employees. Establishing this linguistic transformation, a first effort is made to separate experienced employees from existing stereotypes. Referring to this new approach, further conceptual work can be conducted in the field of vocational training.

#### **5 CONCLUSION**

All in all, the literature suggests that experienced employees incorporate much more potential than society currently acknowledges. Especially in context of increasing relevance of experience-based knowledge, experienced employees play an elementary role in the digital transformation. This paper serves as a starting point for further didactical work and research. In order to overcome stereotypes, a new approach decoupled from deficit hypothesis based on experience-based knowledge was proposed. Emphasizing the connection of this knowledge and one's own practical work for learning, basics of age-appropriate vocational training were pointed out.

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