

Improving supervisors' age management skills through a peer learning training – Who benefits the most?

*Research goals and why the work was worth doing:*

The study tests the efficacy of a peer group-based training intervention focusing on improving supervisors' age management skills. In many industries supervisors are increasingly expected to support aging employees' work ability and working careers to prevent early retirement and to ensure an adequate amount of labor. However, there is a lack of evidence-based methods to improve leadership skills in age management.

*Theoretical background:*

The studied intervention aims to enhance supervisors' 1) preparedness for age management (i.e., self-efficacies regarding skills and abilities to support older workers and abilities to deal with possible setbacks in age management) and 2) positive age attitudes towards older workers. Theoretically the intervention applies Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior emphasizing specific self-efficacies and attitudes as important determinants of human behavior. The ability to deal with obstacles is based on Meichenbaum's view of cognitive stress inoculation training. Accordingly, the inoculation process, in which the participants recognize the possible setback, develop respective solutions, and rehearse these solutions, develops their learned resourcefulness. The training itself utilizes peer learning techniques: the participants and skilled trainers create together a supportive learning environment that enables the participants to learn from and support each other.

*Design/Methodology/Approach/Intervention:*

The data were collected in a randomly assigned field experimental study using a wait-list control group design (RCT) between 2021 and 2022 among 216 supervisors. The study was conducted in 10 Finnish work organizations. The supervisors responded to online questionnaires before (T1), immediately (T2) and six months (T3) after the intervention. The intervention group participated in a videoconference training in their own work organization. The training lasted nine hours and included three group meetings. The control group received similar training after the last follow-up survey (T3).

*Results obtained:*

GLM for repeated measures showed that the training improved supervisors' preparedness for age management and changed their age attitudes towards older employees to a more positive immediately after the intervention. The training also increased supervisors' motivation to lead and decreased their worries about leadership in the six-months follow-up. The results of the hierarchical regression analysis found one significant moderating effect: the training was particularly useful for supervisors who worked in organizations with poorer age management culture and practices.

*Limitations:*

The training was voluntary, and thus it is possible that only the most motivated supervisors signed up for it. Second, the participation alone may have affected supervisors' evaluations (i.e., uncontrolled novelty effect).

*Conclusions – research and or practical implications/Originality/Value:*

Based on our results, we recommend peer group techniques for strengthening age management skills among supervisors. Our study brings a new theme to leadership interventions and provides an effective and evidence-based tool to promote age management at work organizations.

*Relevance to the Congress Theme "The Future is Now: the changing world of work":*

Working population is aging in Europe and labor shortage is a current problem in many industries. Thus, measures to promote labor market participation of all vulnerable groups, including older workers, should be studied and executed now in all levels of societies. Evidence-based interventions are needed, for example, to develop new competences among supervisors and to reduce age-based stereotyping and discrimination.

*Relevant UN SDGs:*

Although the labor status of older employees has improved in many European countries, the negative attitudes and discrimination associated with aging still exist at workplaces. We have developed the training intervention to enhance supervisors' skills to understand, support and interact employees with older age and decrease possible negative attitudes related to older employees. This is one step in a wider aim to reduce inequality in employment among older workers.

*Keywords:* age management, intervention, supervisor, intervention, RCT