Old and out? : age, employability, and the role of learning

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INTRODUCTION

In this valorization addendum, we discuss the possibilities of how the knowledge created in this dissertation is transferred into practice. We begin with analyzing three relevant groups of stakeholders. Subsequently, we list the products and activities that aid the implementation in practice that emerged during the research process and beyond.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RELEVANCE FOR THREE TARGET GROUPS

Next to the academic community, the findings of this dissertation are especially relevant to three groups of stakeholders: national and supranational policymakers and policy advisors, companies and consultants, and individuals.

National and supranational policymakers and policy advisors

The demographic shift puts enormous stress on the welfare state: an older population means more health expenditures, more pension payments, and less taxes. Therefore, many governments increased the default retirement age. However, statistics show that many people drop out of the workforce well before the retirement date (OECD, 2014). This may indicate a lack of employees' ability to create and fulfill work for themselves (employability; cf. Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). Therefore, raising the level of the labor force's employability is a primary goal of national and supranational policymakers. For instance, the European Commission's EUROPE 2020 program prioritizes inclusive growth (European Commission, 2010). This means, amongst others, that the employment rates of women, younger, and older workers should be increased.

Another example is the certification process initiated by the Austrian government, in which Austrian companies can get certified as having good and fair age management practices in place (Federal Ministry of Labour Social Affairs and Consumer Protection, 2015). To a large extent, this certification focuses on issues in the domain of health management. Especially for information-based work, which is increasing in the Western
societies, the physical requirements to work are relatively low. The findings of this dissertation suggest to also pay attention to the competences needed to create and fulfill work for oneself on top of the physical requirements of working.

**Companies, other organizational entities, and consultants**

The demographic shift hits organizations, too (Loch, Sting, Bauer, & Mauermann, 2010). The findings of this dissertation and the products generated in the process of doing the research are aimed at helping organizations to meet this challenge. This is reflected by the fact that the project was funded by A+O Metalelektro, an association of companies that includes more than 159,000 people in the metal-electro sector (A+O Metalelektro, 2015).

First, organizations may use the "From Learning 2 Innovation" application (Froehlich, 2014a) to get an overview of their workforce's informal learning from others and a benchmark against other companies. What is more, suggestions of what specific changes may be implemented can be offered upon this analysis. For example, the results may show that the level of interaction between the employees is relatively low. To stimulate informal learning from others, it might be feasible to re-structure the task packages, so that people have to collaborate with each other, rather than working in parallel. Also, interested companies find information about the topic and contact information of the researchers involved in the project on the homepage of the project. To further reduce the gap between academia and practice, we have published also in practitioners' journals (Beausaert, Van Erp, Froehlich, Segers, & Gerken, 2014) and gave presentations in non-academic settings (e.g., Froehlich, 2012a, 2012b, 2014b). In the next year, we will intensify this effort.

Second, the findings of this dissertation provide pathways that help organizations in supporting their employees' development of employability.

- While data about chronological age is often cheaply and readily accessible, other factors may be more useful for decision-making (Zacher, Heusner, Schmitz, Zwierzanska, & Frese, 2010). Human resource management practices are often targeted at a certain age group of workers (Kooij, Jansen, Dikkers, & De Lange, 2014).
However, our results indicate that it might not be the age per se that matter when it comes to, for example, the undertaking of developmental measures, but future time perspective.

- Organizations may educate against ageism, for example by fostering high-quality intergenerational contact (Iweins, Desmette, Yzerbyt, & Stinglhamber, 2013) or offering age awareness trainings (Armstrong-Stassen & Templer, 2005), and reconsider their human resource management approach towards older employees (Kooij et al., 2013, 2014).

- Employees' learning should be supported and stimulated – irrespective of the employees' age. For employees it is especially important to be aware about the strong effects of informal learning from others in their professional network on their employability and to become proactive in exploiting these learning opportunities.

Third, companies may also use the knowledge gained from this dissertation to attract new employees and to retain old ones. Since companies do not provide the same level of job security as they did a few decades ago, having the competences to be employable matters (Dries, Forrier, De Vos, & Pepermans, 2014). Offering a job that will enhance people's employability is therefore an attractive selling point on the labor market.

Fourth, for consultants, the social network analyses presented in Chapter 6 is an interesting approach, as it allows to perform state of the art research in a relatively small setting (e.g., a single unit of a company). From this, evidence-based interventions can be implemented.

**Individuals and career advisors**

Aging is, first of all, an individual phenomenon. Staying employable and increasing one's potential of employment and having an income also in higher age is important. After all, living longer also means that expenses need to be covered for a longer time. However, older employees are often the first victims to restructuring measures and people that lose their job in their fifties often have trouble finding new employment. The findings and
implications of this dissertation can help individuals to reflect and act upon their employability.

Moreover, the perspective of the protean career suggests that the responsibility for one's career has shifted from the organization to the individual (Briscoe, Hall, & DeMuth, 2006; Hall, 1996, 2004). In this respect, one's employability becomes even more important. Individual employees may therefore use the research findings to optimize their attitude towards their future career and their actual learning behavior. Specifically, the "From Learning 2 Innovation" application, which is based on the dissertation's findings, may be freely used by any interested person (Froehlich, 2014a).

**ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTS**

The project, in which this dissertation is embedded in, has produced a number of specific products and services: academic literature and presentations, practitioners literature, workshops for practitioners, a smartphone and web application.

**Academic literature and presentations**

Next to offering solutions for practice, dissemination of the results also in the academic community is important. Accordingly, we made it a priority to present the findings of our studies at international conferences in the past (e.g., at the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARLI) conference, at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) general meeting, at the International Network for Social Network Analysis' Sunbelt conference, or at the German Educational Research Association (GERA) general meeting) and publish in indexed and peer-reviewed academic journals (e.g., Career Development International, Vocations and Learning, and The International Journal of Human Resource Management). Furthermore, while not part of this dissertation, two book chapters were written during the project. Moreover, we participated in an interdisciplinary research group ("Maintaining a focus upon learning at work for older employees: An interdisciplinary perspective") within the EARLI-Centre for Innovative Research framework, which allows cross-disciplinary exchange of ideas and information.