

From the Guest Editors

Challenges and Opportunities for the Older Worker

The purpose of this issue was to examine the challenges older workers encounter while working. The School of Occupational Therapy and the Center on Aging and Community at the University of Indianapolis cosponsored the work on this issue. The importance of this topic is underscored when considering the demographics of the workforce. By 2008, the median age of the workforce is estimated to be 41 years old, with 30% of the US population aged 55 and over [1]. The median age of the US labor force indicates the necessity of examining the needs of older workers to remain healthy in their jobs, as well as the needs of employers to remain competitive through the productivity of their older employees.

We received papers addressing a variety of topics, all identifying older workers as at least 45 years of age [2], and all broadening the working age limit to include individuals 70 years of age and older. Types of older workers the papers in the journal address include: staff and faculty in academia, nursing staff, industrial managers, a professional musician, laborers on worker's compensation, typists, care-givers, and union members. Themes common to these papers were:

1. The physical demands of work often exceed the capacity of older workers, thereby emphasizing the need for physical exercise to improve capacity (Moyers and Coleman; Dale's article on academics; Barton; Stikeleather).
2. Cultural norms and systems dictate standards for work behavior and require adjustment to accommodate age related changes (Moyers and Coleman; both of Dale's articles; Finch-Guthrie et al.).
3. Modification of the physical context is needed for the older worker to adapt to physical age-related changes (Moyers and Coleman; Dale's article on academics; Finch-Guthrie et al.; Barton; Stikeleather; Freeman).

4. There is a need to institute preventive measures for older workers so they can continue their work and remain healthy, (Moyers and Coleman; both of Dale's articles; Finch-Guthrie et al.; Stikeleather; Freeman)
5. More research is needed to understand work roles and tasks to determine risk factors, impact upon the physical and psychosocial capacity of older workers, and the interaction among work tasks and activities outside of work (Moyers and Coleman; Dale's article on older managers; Francis et al.; Beitman et al.).
6. Work has a positive influence on coping with pain and has multiple psychological, cognitive, and other health benefits (Moyers and Coleman; Barton; Hankin and Killian).

This collection of articles is a basis for advocacy in order to better understand the current experience of older workers. Better understanding leads to more effective therapy, strategies for prevention, improved work environment, research agendas, and appropriate public policy.

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