

Supporting the Career Development of Older Employees: an HRD Point of View

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In 1995 a quantitative exploratory survey into educational conditions promoting the career development of older workers was carried out in a multinational chemical corporation. Educational conditions are defined as demands made on the corporate HRD-policy, HRD-activities and employees' willingness to learn, as well as stimulating factors that promote the career development of older workers. Although the corporation is willing to perform an age-aware personnel policy, results indicate that this still concentrates more on younger employees, that participants in the career development process are insufficiently stimulating in their role and that the traditionally formal HRD-activities have little effect on the career development of older workers. This paper describes the survey, highlights its major results and offers possible recommendations to improve the existing situation.

Many organizations are confronted with an ageing workforce. This development may cause a problem since older employees are often viewed as less mobile and flexible and therefore less able to deal with rapid changes occurring in many organizations. The mobility of older employees in organizations is therefore an actual theme in personnel management in the Netherlands (Alaerds, 1994; Van der Heijden, 1995). One solution to this problem might be to increase the educational efforts specifically aimed at older employees. However, research has shown that most training activities are directed at young 'high potentials' rather than older employees. One reason for this is the unfounded stereotyping regarding older employees: since they are considered in advance to be inflexible and not motivated towards change, training is not considered an appropriate tool for updating their qualifications (Boerlijst, 1993). Furthermore, there is little investment in training older employees as employers doubt whether this investment will "pay off". According to some authors (Boerlijst, 1993; Van der Kloet, 1994), this may be the key reason for older people not functioning optimally.

One of the questions frequently posed in articles on mobility is: how can human resources developers positively contribute to mobility problems (Van der Zee, 1995)? This paper addresses possible answers in response to the career development problems of older workers from an HRD point of view.

Mobility is, in essence, a career planning and -management question (Boerlijst, 1993; Paffen, 1991). The growing interest in mobility is created by at least four developments. The first development has been already touched upon. Many organizations have to deal with an ageing workforce and thus feel the need to come up with policies that take this factor into account. Another development is that organizational structures have become 'flatter'. Whereas in the past bigger always meant better and organizational growth was a major goal of companies, nowadays there is a trend towards smaller, leaner and less hierarchical organizations (Daft, 1992). As a result, there are less possibilities for logical vertical career moves. A third trend is that working contracts are more flexible. Lifelong employment will be the exception for personnel of all ages: corporations have a fixed core staff and during busy times personnel are only hired temporarily. It is important to keep in-company staff flexible and open-minded so they can easily be switched among employers. A fourth trend is the growing responsibility of employees for their own career development. In the past employees became more or less 'passive' regarding their career the moment they entered an organization. Employers were responsible for the planning of careers and gave employees little control over their own progress through a company, preferring to place and promote without consultation (Beer, 1984). Under the current uncertain economic conditions this attitude no longer

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suffices. Employees are expected to be self-supporting and to plan their own careers, a responsibility switch which is especially new to older employees.

Many organizations, confronted with these trends, are looking for solutions. Given the fact that it is *people* within organizations who sell and market, develop and create products, take decisions and implement programmes, human resources are vital to an organization's success (Caligiuri & Stroh, 1995) and should be monitored carefully. Not having the right skilled people when they are needed might seriously undermine the success of strategic business choices.

One of the appropriate tools frequently mentioned in career management literature for keeping staff updated and ready for change is Training and Development. However, this theoretical statement has been insufficiently translated into practical conditions and implications. For this reason, a *quantitative exploratory survey* was undertaken in a large multinational, multi-sited chemical corporation in 1995. The purpose of this research was to gain a full picture of the problems and educational needs of ageing workers in order to optimize educational strategies and career policies.

Starting point for the research was (Rhebergen, 1995): *what educational conditions support the career development of older employees?* This paper addresses (1) the theoretical framework used, (2) the research design, (3) the major results, (4) the conclusion and discussion of the contribution HRD-specialists could make regarding the career development of older workers.

Theoretical framework

In order to solve the problems of an ageing work force, an age-aware approach is essential to meet the mobility needs of older employees. In this paper an age-aware personnel management is defined as preventative policies aimed at keeping people healthy and productive for as long as possible (Rhebergen, 1995). The word preventative is of special importance: if organizations succeed in taking appropriate steps from the outset of people's careers, reactive curative policies at an advanced age are superfluous. With age-aware personnel management, human resources management and development activities apply to all employees regardless of age, though they make allowances for special needs at different age and career stages. The boundary between 'old' and 'young' is arbitrary because of the different ages mentioned in the literature. No curative policy is required if preventive action has been taken. So, the boundary needs to be at a relatively young age. For this research, every employee 35 years and older was defined as an older worker.

Career development is a sub-discipline of age-aware personnel management. The term 'career' is defined here as an individually perceived sequence of attitudes and behaviours towards work experiences and activities over the span of a person's life (Hall & Goodale, 1986). Typically, the term connotes upward mobility and aspiration. From this perspective, career management is not thought of as being important for people who make career moves in a horizontal direction. Under the current flatter structures, a broader concept of a career seems to be under discussion. Career development nowadays means development in both a vertical and horizontal direction (Paffen, 1991). Individual careers evolve from an interaction between the competencies and career goals an individual brings to the organization and the work experiences and possibilities the organization provides (Beer, 1984). Effective human resource flow policies and practices must allow a continuous process of matching individual career needs and organizational requirements. This statement underlines the importance of personal career planning and management. Personal career planning is a process which the person, and not the organization, manages. To do this, employees need an insight into their own knowledge, skills, expectations and possibilities. The organization's role in this is to coach, advise and provide learning activities for self-inquiry. It is generally accepted that the more control individuals have over their career choices, the more likely they will choose a career path fitting their core competencies and values, thereby ensuring satisfaction and growth (Beer, 1984). The major goal then is to plan careers which embody new tasks and learning activities and which, regardless of the career direction (vertical or horizontal), guarantee personal learning.

However, learning activities have to meet certain conditions to be constructive in career development. A literature review was done to find out what these might be. This revealed the importance of three groups of conditions, namely those related to policy, HRD-activities and to the individual worker. Figure 1 shows an overview of the found conditions in relevant literature. These conditions

don't guarantee career development, but should be seen as facilitating career development. They function as a theoretical basis for developing research instruments.

Figure 1. An overview of educational conditions (Rhebergen, 1995)

Policy conditions	Conditions related to HRD-activities	Conditions related to individual workers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● awareness of older workers' problems ● providing resources ● strategically embedded measures ● inspiring line managers' role ● open communication ● adapted rewarding resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● creating an appropriate learning climate ● paying attention to individual learning needs ● paying attention to personal career planning ● an age-aware instructional method ● paying attention to the (re)training of line managers in their coaching role 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● a learning attitude ● critical reflection/self assessment ● entrepreneurship towards own career ● creativity

In short, the policy conditions imply that age-aware personnel management starts with a strong *awareness* that the way older workers have been treated in the past creates flexibility problems within organizations (Boerlijst, 1993). Next, organizations have to provide material and immaterial *resources* to improve this situation. Measures have to *fit the strategic choices* made (Hall & Goodale, 1986). Since human resources management within organizations is largely the line managers' responsibility, they need to fulfil an *inspiring role* towards older workers. The internal corporate career policy has to be *communicated openly* so that people can anticipate the requirements (Paffen, 1991). An additional but not necessarily condition is an *adapted reward system*, including both material and immaterial rewards, like recognizing older workers' development.

HRD activities are broadly defined as including all structured learning activities like training, or courses as well as learning-on-the-job. A first condition related to HRD activities is the creating of an *appropriate learning climate* in which people are challenged to learn continually (Begeer, 1990). An appropriate learning culture pays *attention to the individual educational needs* of employees because every individual is unique (Hall & Goodale, 1986). Next, employers should give their employees insight into the *process of personal career planning* (Boerlijst, 1993; Paffen, 1991). The shift towards personal career management is only possible if employees are equipped with the appropriate knowledge of this topic. HRD activities must be designed in accordance with *age-aware instructional principles* like the giving of constructive feedback and an adapted social and logistic learning context (Thijssen & Prevo, 1994). Finally, *line managers have to be (re)trained* in their coaching and inspirational role.

Conditions at the individual level relate to the *learning attitude* of older people (Boerlijst, 1993; Hall & Goodale, 1986). A "good" learning attitude is characterized by the *willingness to learn*, a healthy *critical view* on people's own possibilities, an entrepreneurial attitude towards one's career and the ability to *view changes creatively* as a "chance" and not as a "threat".

Research questions

Most of the problems regarding career management are dealt with from an expert or specialist perspective. Little research, however, is done into gaining an insight into workers' perceptions. This type of research will add to current career management theories so that these perceptions are examined. Also, daily practices in multinationals concerning education and career development pass via stakeholders and participants in the career development process, so that their role has to be examined too.

Thus the main research question is:

'What educational conditions influence HRD activities which support the career development of older workers and what is the role of the line-manager, employee and personnel management specialists (the career specialist and the HRD specialist) in this process?'

This main question is divided in the following research questions:

1. to what extent is HRD policy perceived as directed at older employees?
2. to what extent do older workers perceive their line manager, personnel and career development specialist as being stimulating with regard to HRD activities and career development, and to what extent are they themselves mentally alert and willing to learn?
3. in the opinion of older workers, which HRD activities contribute to career development and to what extent are the careers of older employees currently being developed?

The last subquestion provides an insight into the functioning of HRD specialists and the quality of their advice.

Research design

An exploratory survey was chosen because of the 'how' type research question. To answer the research question a questionnaire was developed and personally delivered to members of the target research group. In total 312 middle level employees received a questionnaire. Of these, 225 completed the questionnaire; a response rate of 72%.

The questionnaire consisted of items related to six groups of variables: existing HRD policy, the role of line-managers, employees, the personnel department (as an 'umbrella' for mobility and HRD), career development specialists and HRD activities. The questionnaire was developed in three phases to ensure validity and reliability.

The statistical analysis began by investigating the non-response group. This analysis showed that non-response rates between sites were comparable; no systematic deviations were found. With regard to the average age of the response and non-response group, the analysis showed that it was the more older workers who refused to cooperate. Nevertheless, the differences between the groups were very small (the response group was only 1.1 year younger on average than the population). We therefore concluded that the nature of the non-response had no serious consequences on interpreting the results.

The second step consisted of analysing the six groups of variables. A frequency analysis was performed by comparing the criterion for a sufficient condition, 60% agree, with actual scores. Then, a ANOVA-analysis was carried out to see whether there were differences between different sub-groups. For example, were there differences in perception between relatively younger and older employees. Finally, regression-analysis was carried out to search for relations between variables. The results of these last two steps are not shown in this paper because they are of particular in-company value.

Results

Only the general trends are high-lighted as it would go far beyond the purpose of this article to describe all the results in detail. A selection has been made of the major results and represented in tables.

Concerning the first research question of whether policy is directed to older workers, examination of *policy* conditions revealed that the flexibility problems of older workers are recognized in policy statements. An explicit, strategic item in the company studied was improving the working climate for older workers. However, according to the results, this written commitment has not resulted in taking real improvement action, so we can conclude that the management is still not committed optimally to the perceived problems of older workers.

Table 1. A selection of the key response rates to questions on policy

	percentage of respondents in any category			
	totally agree	partly agree	partly disagree	totally disagree
1. Personnel policy is embedded in strategic policy	6	41	35	16
2. The employer is willing to invest in HRD activities that promote career development	43	47	6	0
3. HRD policy is sensitive to age-related needs	3	21	44	29
4. The employer teaches employees the basic principles of personal career planning	2	16	30	51
5. Employees have sufficient information on career interventions	2	12	30	54

Personnel management is not embedded optimally in corporate strategy (only 47% of respondents partly or totally agree; see table 1), while strategic, age-aware choices are not yet fully communicated top-down through the organization. The greatest obstacle for an age-aware personnel management is not a financial one: older workers believe management is willing to invest in career development education (90% of respondents partly or totally agree). However, in their opinion (73%) HRD policy could be more sensitive to their needs. Although older workers participate in HRD activities, this doesn't always meet their expectations. Personal career planning receives little attention in educational policy (18% of the respondents partly or totally agree) and employees are too little informed about career interventions to anticipate adequately (14% of the respondents partly or totally agree).

With regard to the second research question, the roles of the various stakeholders and participants in the career development process, results show that line-managers are seen as the most stimulating and facilitating. Considering the fact that recent personnel management views show that human resources management tasks are delegated to line-managers, this is a positive point. Line-managers however, are not optimally prepared and trained for their inspiring role (44% of respondents think they are; see table 2), but most managers had consulted their employees at least once in the past five years about career development and related educational needs (86% of respondents agree), although these contacts decline among older employees. In most cases, line-managers perceive personnel development at all ages as an important task (64% of respondents partly or totally agree).

Table 2. A selection of key response rates to questions on line managers in the career development process

	percentage of respondents in any category			
	totally agree	partly agree	partly disagree	totally disagree
1. Line-managers are trained in their stimulating role	16	28	32	17
2. Line-managers perceive employee-development at all ages as a relevant task	16	48	23	12

Line managers and workers may also consult supporting specialists (personnel department and career development officers) for career advice, though these are generally perceived as not being particularly stimulating and supportive. Older workers take the view that these officers are insufficiently open and accessible to them, unwilling to give adequate advice and show special interest in their career development (see table 3). It is possible that career development effort concentrates on the younger high-potentials.

Table 3. A selection of key response rates to questions on supporting specialists in career development

	percentage of respondents in any category		
	agree	neutral	disagree
Personnel department (PD)			
1. PD is 'open' to/accessible for older workers	50	34	15
2. PD gives adequate advice	8	26	64
Career development specialists (CDS)			
1. CDS are 'open' to older workers	40	41	13
2. CDS give adequate advice	8	27	61

Most respondents see themselves as active entrepreneurs in career development and HRD activities (see table 4). For example, they are willing to learn (97% respondents partly or totally agree) and are capable of dealing with working activities outside their own narrowly defined job function (90% partly or totally agree). The flipside is that they also confirm they have inadequate knowledge about personal career management (42% respondents partly or totally agree) and are badly coached, supported and stimulated by the organization.

Table 4. A selection of the key response rates to questions on employees' career development

	percentage of respondents in any category			
	totally agree	partly agree	partly disagree	totally disagree
1. Older workers are willing to learn new knowledge and skills	64	33	2	0
2. Older workers are capable of performing activities outside their own job function	56	34	5	3
3. Older workers have adequate personal career planning knowledge	9	33	38	19

The third research question concerns HRD activities and the extent to which careers are developed in the actual situation. To gain a picture of employees' attitude towards HRD activities, they were asked to rate the HRD activities they had attended over the last five years. Analysis showed that all employees had participated in one educational activity at least. Courses and training were the most frequent educational interventions (85% of respondents had participated in a course or training during the 1990-1995 period; see table 5).

Table 5. A selection of the key response rates to questions on HRD activities

HRD activities over the past five years and the career development relevance		
	%	% very important
1. Courses and training	85	49
2. Job enrichment	49	71
3. Temporary detachments	7	86
4. Participation in projects	56	53

An important point is that these activities are not always effective in contributing to career development (49% of respondents agree). Learning activities related to daily work activities, like job enrichment (71% agree), temporary detachments (86% agree) and working in multidisciplinary projects (53% of respondents agree) are seen as being by far the most important in keeping older workers flexible and in developing their careers.

Taking the overall results, generally we may conclude that the conditions for career development are present. Important reasons stating this are the fact that all employees are participating in HRD activities and their positive self-esteem in remaining flexible and multifunctional. But there are aspects which need improving, especially the supporting role of the organization. These improvements are further outlined in the conclusion and discussion.

Conclusion and discussion

In this paper we have highlighted the major results of a survey into the existence of educational conditions in a multinational, multi-sited chemical corporation; the role of the stakeholders in stimulating career development and the contribution of HRD activities to the career development of older workers.

A first conclusion is that the intention to carry out an age-aware personnel *policy* are good, although daily practices do not always concur with this. Older workers feel insufficiently valued and treated in an age-aware manner. So, there is a discrepancy between "intended" and "realized" policy. Major improvements to the organizational support can be achieved. Regarding the role of various stakeholders, it would be beneficial to (re)define and make clear their specific tasks and responsibilities. *Line-managers* are perceived as being the most stimulating to career development, although they are insufficiently backed up by supporting specialists in specific situations. *Personnel officers* and *career development specialists* are held accountable for advising on career development, but according to older workers they fail in this task. It is particularly important to clearly define the position of these staff and equip them with the necessary instruments and skills to be able to coach older workers. In the current situation the additional value of personnel specialists to line managers is ambiguous. Although older *workers* are willing to learn and see themselves as capable employees, we may conclude that the organization does not succeed in tapping their full potential. Their resulting negative feelings can create frustrations. Instead the organization should apply their rich work-experience and company-specific knowledge to realizing strategic goals.

A second major conclusion concerns the organization's attitude towards HRD activities. Frequently, *HRD activities* like training and courses are seen as appropriate to meet the needs of older workers. This is a traditional attitude. It's commonsense that people attend courses now and then, regardless of the value of the course and its appropriateness to personal needs. An important lesson

for HRD specialists is that the choice of formal learning activities is not always the right one. A renewed attitude is required. Development activities like 'learning by doing', 'learning on the job' and 'individual coaching' are perceived as being far more relevant to career development. It will be a good start to make older people feel important. One possible intervention is to create functions in which older workers can transfer their knowledge and experience to younger workers before retirement. Furthermore, in the composition of (project)teams, a mix of abilities and knowledge of both older and younger staff, thus supplementing each other, needs to be addressed.

A third conclusion concerns knowledge about personal career management. Since employees' responsibility for planning their careers is increasing, employees need to be equipped with relevant knowledge about this. On the one hand this means the organization has to provide all the information for planning careers, like vacancies and opportunities for lateral moves, and on the other develop personal career planning training, in which higher-order planning and self-assessment skills are learned, which prepares employees for their new responsibility for their own career development.

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