

Engaging aging:

A model of proactive work behavior and engagement with increasing age

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PERSONAL STORIES

In 1996, I started working with Wilmar at Utrecht University as a post-doctoral researcher on a burnout project. This was the start of a long and very fruitful collaboration, in which we co-authored numerous papers. We studied burnout among doctors, lawyers, teachers, managers, nurses, farmers, engineers, and many other occupational groups, and learned about the importance of equitable relationships between service providers and their clients. In our “feet on the table” discussions, we started asking ourselves: If 5% of the workforce has a high level of burnout, then what about the other 95%? From 1998 onwards – before the start of the positive psychology movement – we developed and validated the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale. The UWES became the golden standard in employee engagement research, because it works very well, and is able to predict vital organizational outcomes. Work engagement became a “smash hit” – not in the least because of Wilmar’s enormous drive to profile the concept during conference symposia, keynotes, workshops, and late-night drinks. I look back on 20 fascinating years, in which we became friends, and learned so much about the causes and consequences of the state we often experience ourselves: work engagement!

Arnold B. Bakker
Rotterdam, October 2018

I first met Wilmar in Lapland during a Nordic NIVA course on burnout in 1999. It was dark November only natural light coming from snow and Northern lights. I had just started at FIOH and the whole field was new to me, not to mention the fancy methods, such as structural equation modeling. In Lapland, Wilmar kindly commented my very first, complex latent model. Later, Wilmar wrote to me and told about a new concept and measure, something opposite to burnout it was, and whether I had a project where I might want to test this new measure. Therefore, already in 2001, I had an opportunity to investigate engagement among Finnish teachers. In 2002, I made my first research visit to Utrecht and thanks to Wilmar I got to know several dear colleagues and collaborators, many of whom are editors and writers in this book. Work engagement changed my work career. For nearly two decades now it has been an enormously popular concept in research but also in Finnish workplaces and media. Wilmar has first been the key mentor in my research career, after that a constantly inspiring and always supportive colleague, and then someone whom I dare to call a friend.

Jari J. Hakanen
Helsinki, October 2018

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Wilmar Schaufeli has proposed an influential conceptualization of work engagement, as well as the most-often used instrument. Now that retirement is looming on the horizon, it is timely to discuss the development of work engagement over the life span. Does work engagement change with increasing age? Which HR practices foster “engaging aging?” What strategies can employees use to stay engaged? After a short state of the art of work engagement, we briefly discuss its measurement, antecedents, and consequences. The chapter continues by investigating the effects of age. Research has indicated that employees lose and gain resources with increasing age. Combining these findings with the proactivity literature, we develop a model of “engaging aging.” We propose that a loss in personal resources provides a reason to be proactive, whereas a gain in personal resources enables proactivity. Since age is unsystematically related to personal initiative, we argue that age-focused HR practices are needed to energize employees and foster proactive work behaviors, such as (a) selection, optimization, and compensation strategies; (b) job crafting; and (c) proactive vitality management. Employees who use these proactive behaviors can be expected to stay engaged and be productive with increasing age.

Work engagement

Although William Kahn first introduced engagement in the literature in 1990, it was Wilmar Schaufeli’s definition and measurement instrument that really set off work engagement research. Accordingly, work engagement has been defined as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002, p. 74). In this definition, vigor refers to high levels of energy and the willingness to invest effort in one’s job. Dedication refers to being strongly

involved in one's work, and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, and inspiration. Finally, absorption refers to being fully immersed in work activities, whereby time passes quickly. In the past two decades, most research on engagement has used the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Schaufeli, Bakker & Salanova, 2006) – a brief, valid and reliable questionnaire that assesses each of the three engagement dimensions. Interestingly, research findings point at a positive relationship between age and work engagement – older employees are slightly more engaged in their work than younger employees.

Work engagement is different from other positive well-being constructs like happiness and job satisfaction in that it is an *activated* positive affective state. Thus, in contrast with feeling calm, content, and happy, engaged individuals feel excited and enthusiastic. Engaged individuals are therefore ready to invest important cognitive and energetic resources in their work activities. For example, in one of the first qualitative studies on work engagement, Wilmar Schaufeli and his colleagues describe the vivid experiences of an engaged bus driver. She really likes driving nicely and smoothly so that passengers enjoy the ride and are not being startled by sudden bumps or abrupt brakes (Schaufeli et al., 2001).

Research on the antecedents and consequences of work engagement has resulted in a new theory of occupational health and well-being, named Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001). Accordingly, work engagement is most likely when job challenges are combined with personal or job resources. For example, employees are most engaged when interesting and challenging tasks are combined with job resources such as social support, autonomy, and skill variety. Similarly, employees are most enthusiastic about their work when they face work pressure and deadlines on the days they feel optimistic and self-efficacious (i.e. when personal resources are high). When individuals have all the resources needed to adequately deal with their job demands, they can be engaged and may flourish, on a day-to-day basis. Importantly, JD-R

theory proposes that employees need to be proactive in order to stay engaged – a principle that we will use in this chapter to build a model of engaging aging.

Work engagement is so popular because the concept has important consequences for individuals and organizations at large. For example, work engagement has been positively related to other-ratings of task performance, creativity, and objective financial results, and negatively related to medical errors and counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011). These findings clearly indicate that engaged workers make the difference for organizations. Moreover, work engagement has been positively related to organizational citizenship behavior, prosocial behavior, and client satisfaction, clearly suggesting that engaged workers want to help others and deliver excellent services. Work engagement is also a unique predictor of (low) depressive symptoms and (high) life satisfaction (Hakanen & Schaufeli, 2012). Finally, and important for the current analysis of aging, work engagement has been linked to physical health and seems to have a positive impact on the inclination to continue working later in work-life (De Wind, Van der Pas, Blatter, & Van der Beek, 2016).

Resource Loss and Gain with Increasing Age

The average age of the workforce in industrialized countries is clearly increasing. This demographic trend may have important implications for organizations, because individuals lose and gain resources with increasing age. One obvious resource that declines over time is physical ability. Physical changes include reduced visual acuity and reduced hearing ability, muscular changes (reduced strength, power, and balance), reduced VO₂ capacity, and higher blood pressure (Truxillo, Cadiz, & Hammer, 2015). Moreover, a reduced ability to reach homeostasis increases susceptibility to extreme physical work conditions, and increases the time needed to recover from a stressful event (Hedge & Borman, 2012). As a consequence, employees may

develop several health problems when they become older. Such health problems may be minor (e.g., small aches and pains) or more serious (e.g., musculoskeletal disorders, cardiovascular diseases), and lead to reductions in work ability.

Another important resource that changes over time is cognitive ability. Research has documented that particularly fluid intelligence decreases with increasing age – most likely starting already around the early twenties (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004). Fluid intellectual abilities refer to working memory, abstract reasoning, attention, and the processing of novel information. Although research generally shows no significant relationship between age and job performance, older workers most likely need to invest more cognitive and time resources in their work than younger workers in order to reach the same performance level.

In addition to resource loss in terms of physical and cognitive ability, individuals who grow older lose important social resources. With increasing age, the number of close friends decreases, and children who grow up may have less time to provide social support – having a negative impact on older individuals' quality of life (Zaninotto, Falaschetti, & Sacker, 2009). Moreover, personality research suggests that there is a moderate decrease in social vitality over the life span (Truxillo et al., 2015). As individuals grow older, they seem to decrease on traits related to agency and zestful approach to life – indicating that they approach life with less anticipation, enthusiasm, and excitement.

However, individuals do not only lose, but also gain resources with increasing age. For example, crystallized intelligence increases, meaning that there are age-related gains in knowledge, skills, and wisdom (Truxillo et al., 2015). Older employees have practiced their skills and make better use of their knowledge than younger employees. They are better able to think and act using knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense, and insight. Another critical resource that develops positively with increasing age is personality. Research has shown an increase in conscientiousness and agreeableness, and a decrease in neuroticism over the life

span (Soto, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2011). This means that when individuals grow older, they are better organized and more self-disciplined, careful, goal-oriented, and hard-working – all behavioral characteristics that can facilitate work performance. Moreover, their higher score on agreeableness indicates that older individuals are more altruistic and caring for others – they provide more instrumental and emotional social support to colleagues who need it. Older workers are most likely also better *able* to help others, because with increasing age, their emotional stability has increased too. Thus, older workers show lower irritability, fearfulness, and social anxiety than younger workers, and have higher self-esteem, a better inhibition of impulses, and better coping strategies.

These findings are consistent with the results of emotional intelligence studies, showing a positive relationship between age and facets of emotional intelligence (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 1999). Accordingly, when people grow older, they are better in perceiving and regulating emotions. In working life, these competencies are very useful when work involves interacting with other people, including clients, colleagues, and the supervisor. Social stressors (e.g., conflicts with co-workers, social animosities at work) may also have a smaller impact on older than on younger individuals, because older people appraise stressful events less negatively than younger people. Moreover, older individuals are inclined to focus on positive rather than on negative environmental cues.

TOWARDS A MODEL OF ENGAGING AGING

Since aging coincides with important changes in employee resources, it seems crucial that organizations adapt their traditional human resources practices to keep their employees healthy, engaged, and productive (Truxillo et al., 2015). In this chapter, we use proactivity theory to argue that (all) employees need to constantly optimize their work and leisure activities in order to stay engaged and perform well, and that this proactive behavior is more needed with

increasing age. Proactive behavior at work involves self-initiated, anticipatory action, and may include taking charge, voicing concerns, and seeking feedback (Parker & Bindle, 2017). There is considerable evidence that engaging in such behaviors is related to favorable performance outcomes. Proactive behavior improves the fit between the individual and the job, increases opportunities to use one's resources and strengths, and may improve the meaning of work (Kooij, Van Woerkom, Wilkenloh, Dorenbosch, & Denissen, 2017). Unfortunately, research on the link between age and proactive behavior is inconclusive, with some studies showing weak positive, and other studies showing no relationships (Zacher & Kooij, 2017).

When people are proactive, they challenge the status quo rather than passively adapting to existing conditions (Crant, 2000). Proactive individuals take the initiative to improve their current circumstances – they envision and plan a different future by changing the self and/or the environment. According to Parker, Bindl, and Strauss (2010), there are three key motivational states that prompt and sustain proactivity, namely “can do,” “reason to,” and “energized to.” In this model of proactive motivation, “can do” refers to self-efficacy perceptions, feasibility appraisals, and perceived costs. In our model of engaging aging (Figure 1), “can do” motivation for proactivity is facilitated by resource gain. Employees, who have gained personal resources like emotional stability, self-discipline, and emotion regulation skills, will be well able to proactively adjust their work life. They can conserve their resources so that they stay engaged and perform well.

-- Figure 1 about here --

The “reason to” be proactive refers to a sense of personal responsibility and an internalized motivation to take personal initiative. In the model of engaging aging, the reason to be proactive is provided by the loss of personal resources. When employees have fewer

physical and cognitive abilities or experience more health problems, they have a clear reason to be selective, proactively adjust their job characteristics, or to change their health behaviors. The gradual loss of physical abilities and a reduced capacity to reach homeostasis increase the need to be proactive. By changing the work activities, and by proactively managing one's own energy level (e.g., by taking a regular walk, exercising), employees may increase the fit between their abilities and the environment so as to foster work engagement, creativity, and performance.

Finally, in Parker et al.'s (2010) model of proactive motivation, "energized to" refers to an affective-motivational state that offers individuals the energetic resources to be proactive. However, in our model of engaging aging, we propose that age-focused HR practices *initiated by the organization* are needed to energize employees to be proactive (see Figure 1). Organizations may use various age-focused HR practices, including age-focused job design (redesigning the structural job demands and resources with special attention for age), and age-focused training and development (e.g., Dijkers, De Lange, & Van der Heijden, 2017). Here, we briefly discuss three specific HR practices, namely (a) the creation of a health behavior climate, (b) job crafting training, and (c) idiosyncratic deals.

Age-focused HR practices

First, management may create a health behavior climate. Such a climate refers to employee perceptions of organizational policies, practices, and procedures for employee health behavior, including expectations and rewards that stimulate employee behaviors aiming at health promotion. By including health behavior in the strategy and vision, management and leaders can communicate that they take care of older employees. Further, organizations may optimize the "choice architecture" for health behaviors. By designing the work environment such that younger and older employees are nudged (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) to be physically

active and consume healthy food, organizations may indirectly optimize employees' health, work engagement, and performance.

A second possible age-focused HR practice is job crafting – the process of employees redefining their job designs in personally meaningful ways (Tims & Bakker, 2010; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). In job crafting interventions, employees learn to identify their most important job demands and job resources, and then set and implement goals to optimize their job design so as to increase person-environment fit and work engagement. Such interventions may take the form of one-day intervention trainings or workshops resulting in personal job crafting plans that are then implemented during several weeks. Recent studies have provided evidence for the effectiveness of such HR practices (e.g., Gordon et al., 2018). Job crafting interventions are particularly suited to deal with personal resources loss and gain of an aging workforce, since the interventions are always tailored to the individual needs and abilities of employees.

Third, organizations could use idiosyncratic deals. I-deals refer to personalized work arrangements that are negotiated between individual employees and their organizations (Rousseau, Ho, & Greenberg, 2006). I-deals vary in content and are heterogeneous among employees. Previous research has shown that the most prevalent I-deals are aimed at either flexibility in work schedule or developmental opportunities (i.e. training and career development; Hornung, Rousseau, & Glaser, 2008). These I-deals may protect from age-related resource loss, as flexible work hours enable recovery from physical strain, whereas developmental opportunities may help to meet constant learning demands in a context of changing work and technologies. Because a better person–organization fit is established through I-deals, people will be able and motivated to be proactive as they have experienced that the organization is willing to ‘deal’ with their individual needs (Hornung et al., 2008). I-deals

may also be task-related, and include, for example, assignment of different/more challenging tasks or receiving more responsibility.

It should be noted that there are probably many more age-focused HR practices that could be implemented, including age management programs, mentoring, and flexible work hours. The three HR practices discussed here are not the only, but most likely effective practices. Importantly, age-focused HR practices can energize employees to be proactive, and thus form the important third pillar of a proactive motivation model of engaging aging. Moreover, in our model (see Figure 1), we also propose that HR practices can strengthen the impact of resource loss and resources gain on proactive work behaviors. HR practices thus act as moderators and offer the energy needed to translate “reason to” and “can do” proactive motivation into proactive behavior.

Resource loss and resource gain may also have a combined impact on proactive behavior. According to conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018), people are motivated to protect their resources, and resource investment becomes more important in the face of loss. Thus, when confronted with impaired health or decreasing physical abilities, individuals may use their gained resources (emotional stability, wisdom, knowledge, skills) to compensate or deal with the resource loss, and proactively shape their selves and their work environment in order to stay engaged at work.

Proactive work behaviors

The engaging aging model (Figure 1) proposes that aging employees have a reason and the ability to be proactive, and age-focused HR practices like a health behavior climate, job crafting interventions, and idiosyncratic deals energize employees to be proactive so that they can be engaged and perform well. Furthermore, the model proposes that employees may be encouraged to use several behaviors to deal proactively with age-related resource change. We

discuss three of these behaviors, namely (a) selective optimization with compensation (SOC) strategies, (b) job crafting, and (c) proactive vitality management (PVM).

SOC Strategies

The theory of selective optimization with compensation (SOC; Baltes, 1997) proposes that individuals can use three different strategies to successfully develop over the lifespan, and deal with increasing age. The central proposition is that selection, optimization, and compensation help individuals to optimally allocate their limited resources. Selection focuses on the choice and prioritization of important goals to pursue in order to deal with resource loss. Optimization means that individuals invest additional resources to achieve the selected goals, whereas compensation entails replacing means that do not contribute to goal attainment with more effective means. Research has shown that the use of SOC strategies predicts outcomes like work ability, engagement, and job performance (e.g., Zacher, Chan, Bakker & Demerouti, 2015). For example, an elderly front-line manager may choose to prioritize becoming a good leader who motivates his followers instead of staying in the expert role (selection). In addition, he may participate in leadership training and read relevant books to reach this goal (optimization). When confronted with setbacks in the process of becoming an effective leader, he may devote more time to reach this goal, show self-compassion, and model other leaders' behaviors (compensation).

Job crafting

Job crafting was originally defined as “the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work” (Wrzesniewski & Dutton; 2001, p. 179). Tims and Bakker (2010) used the JD-R approach of job crafting, and defined the concept as self-initiated changes employees make in their job demands and job resources to better align

the work with their own abilities and preferences. Job crafting strategies include the crafting of structural and social job resources (e.g., asking for feedback), increasing job challenges (taking on new tasks), decreasing hindrance job demands (e.g., reducing bureaucracy), or optimizing job demands (e.g., changing work processes to make the job easier) (Demerouti & Peeters, 2018). Survey, diary, and intervention studies have shown that job crafting behaviors predict job resources, personal resources, work engagement, meaningfulness, and job performance. An aging employee could craft her job, for example, by seeking support in the learning of new IT applications (crafting of job resources) or by volunteering to participate in the company's mentoring program (crafting challenges). She could also change the work process or limit the time spent on checking emails (optimizing job demands).

Proactive Vitality Management

Both proactive vitality management (PVM) and job crafting are self-initiated and goal-oriented behaviors and take place at grass roots level at work. However, whereas job crafting mainly focuses on behaviors aimed to change aspects of one's job or work environment, PVM directly focuses on managing one's own physical and mental energies to promote optimal functioning at work according to employees' own personal needs and preferences (Op den Kamp, Tims, Bakker, & Demerouti, 2018). Individuals may enact PVM by using various micro strategies that help to stay vital or regain energies. Research has found that PVM is positively related to relaxation, cognitive liveliness, work engagement, creativity, and task performance (Op den Kamp et al., 2018). For aging employees, PVM could mean, for instance, to regularly exercise, take a walk in the park, or visit a gallery with the self-initiated goal to energize and inspire oneself. PVM can be done on a daily basis and may also take the form of regular micro-breaks with the intention to improve one's cognitive resources and be fit for the next work task.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we combined the aging and proactivity literatures to develop a model of “engaging aging.” Accordingly, personal resources loss with increasing age provides a reason to be proactive, whereas personal resources gain enables proactivity. Since age is only weakly related to personal initiative, age-focused HR practices are needed to energize employees and foster proactive work behaviors, such as (a) selection, optimization, and compensation strategies; (b) job crafting; and (c) proactive vitality management. Employees who use these proactive behaviors can be expected to stay engaged and be productive with increasing age.

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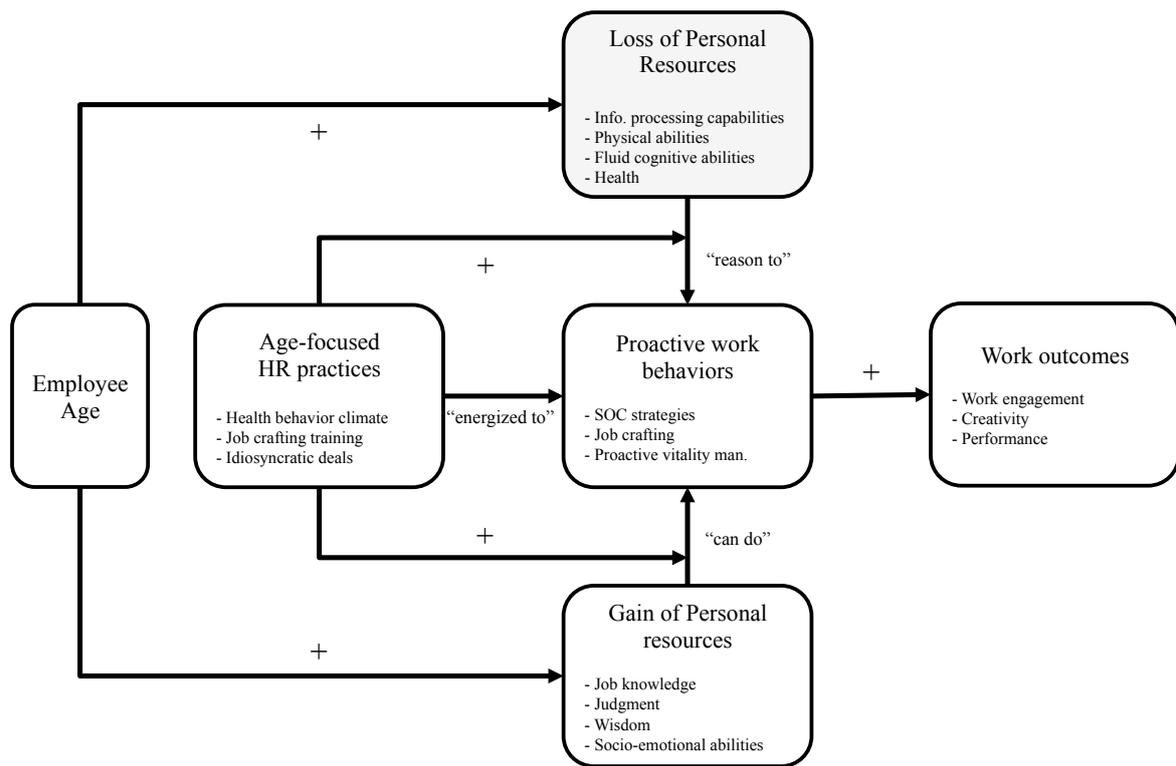


FIGURE 1: A Model of Engaging Aging