

## RESPONSIVE WORKPLACES FOR OLDER WORKERS: JOB QUALITY, FLEXIBILITY AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

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### Introduction

There are many reasons for employers to consider how to respond to the needs and perhaps unique requirements of older workers. There are different but equally compelling reasons for older employees to consider new options for continued work beyond conventional retirement ages. Yet we know too

little about what older employees want and need to map out a new future in the transition from work to retirement. What constitutes job quality for older workers? What keeps older workers engaged? What are the needs and requirements of different types of older workers?

### About This Study

In this issue brief, we examine the specific components of job quality for older workers (both hourly and professional) in a large U.S.-based retail chain store, CitiSales (a pseudonym), to assess their impact on employee engagement. Specifically, we ask:

- How engaged are older workers?  
Are there age differences in employee engagement?
- What are the elements of job quality for older workers?  
Do these differ for professional workers compared to those who are paid hourly?
- What are the drivers of employee engagement among older workers, both those in professional positions and those who are paid by the hour?

### Background

A recent study of over 578 organizations showed that a majority of the employers surveyed expressed a preference for at least some type of older workers.<sup>1</sup> Seeing them as loyal to the company the human resource representatives surveyed indicated that these workers are at least as attractive if not more attractive than younger workers on many attributes including their strong work ethic, reliability, and high levels of skill. Other research shows concern, at least in some industries and sectors, that these seasoned workers' early exit from the workforce will leave a gaping hole in much needed experience and productive work.

For their part, older workers may want to work beyond

the traditional retirement age.<sup>2</sup> Some must continue work due to reduced pension incomes, longevity, the need for health insurance, and in some cases poverty.<sup>2,3</sup> The poor can ill afford retirement at all.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, decades of research have documented many obstacles to continued work in later life. These include "employer perceptions regarding older workers, workers' perceptions regarding the benefits of working longer, and limited job opportunities for older workers",<sup>5</sup> along with business incentives and other pressures to retire.<sup>6</sup> Other obstacles may include perceptions among their co-workers and managers that older employees are not as capable as younger ones.<sup>7</sup>

How can employers ensure that the needs of employers and the needs of employees match in a way that works for both? Job quality is critical to keeping employees of all ages, including older employees, engaged. In addition, job characteristics that engage older workers in professional jobs are slightly different than those that engage older workers who are paid by the hour. Unfortunately, some stereotypes (misperceptions) about older workers negatively affect their engagement with the organization. Responsive supervisors, who sanction flexible work arrangements, are crucial to older worker engagement.

### Who is an Older Worker?

There is no consensus about who is and who is not an older worker. The definition varies across historical periods and industrial sectors and perhaps by role and is not as linked to chronological age as it once was.<sup>8</sup> Thus, researchers use different definitions. The largest recent study examining perceptions of older workers, defined late career workers as age 46-63. For the purposes of this research in a retail environment with a wide age range (18-94) we have used age 55+ as the definition.

### What do Older Workers Want?

*“...with few exceptions it is impossible to generalize about older employees—their individual differences are at least as great as those of any other age group...they include the wise and the foolish, the bitter and the cheerful, the dedicated and the clock-watchers, the slipshod and the careful workers...”<sup>9</sup>*

Of course, the question of what older workers want is difficult to answer, because, as the quotation indicates, there are many differences among them. Older workers may want to continue to work, but may want to work less; they may want more flexibility in general, or to work differently at different times of the year.<sup>2</sup> Some older women workers are still gaining altitude and hanker for promotions and other advances in their careers.<sup>10</sup> Experienced employees also want some flexibility and options for the job responsibilities assigned to them, the positions that might be offered to them, and the career paths

available to them.<sup>11</sup> Some want “bridge jobs”,<sup>12</sup> and some want phased retirement.<sup>13</sup> How is the business environment to engage these workers?

### What is Employee Engagement?

The issue of employee engagement has been a matter of increasing concern to today’s business leaders along with escalating claims that it predicts all manner of positive outcomes for organizations. At the same time, it has been said that more and more employees of today are “disengaged” and costing “U.S. businesses \$300 billion a year in lost productivity”.<sup>14</sup> Thus, business leaders have been looking for research to identify the drivers of employee engagement.

Until recently, little academic research existed on employee engagement per se. The work that does exist is limited by the kinds of organizations studied (basically too few), and the types of workers studied (mostly younger employees and professionals). These are important oversights. Among the few studies of employee engagement in the academic press, only two tested age as a factor. None assessed employee engagement among hourly workers, those who are most vulnerable to economic hardship. Indeed older workers are perceived to be “checked out” or just marking time until retirement, i.e., not engaged. And hourly workers are said to be “just collecting a paycheck”.

Employee engagement (EE) has been defined in slightly different ways by different practitioners since the concept was developed by Kahn in 1990.<sup>15</sup> Kahn viewed engagement as the “harnessing of organizational members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (p.694). Generally, engaged employees are those who have “a sense of energetic and effective connection with their work activities and they see themselves as able to deal completely with the demands of their job”.<sup>16</sup> “Simply put, fully engaged employees are those who go beyond what their job requires, putting in extra effort to make the company succeed.”<sup>17</sup>

Some say that employee engagement is just the latest “management fad,” or a new name for established concepts such as “job involvement” or “organizational citizenship” or simply “organizational commitment”.

However, the academic research literature has clarified employee engagement as a separate, independent construct:

- ➔ In summary, although the definition and meaning of engagement in the practitioner literature often overlaps with other constructs, in the academic literature it has been defined as a distinct and unique construct that consists of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components that are associated with individual role performance. Furthermore, engagement is distinguishable from several related constructs, most notably organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, and job involvement (p.602).<sup>15</sup>

Employee engagement is a two-way street: organizations must arrange working conditions that inspire commitment and loyalty from the employee; the employee then chooses how much commitment and loyalty s/he gives back. This delicate exchange differs from one organization to the next and for different types of workers. Thus, we examined the drivers of employee engagement in one organization that employed large numbers of both hourly and professional older workers. In this study we used a measure created for the company by a vendor, and modified over the years for their purposes, with employees rating their agreement/disagreement with each item on a 5-point scale. As shown in Table 1 the eight items measure the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of engagement.

**Table 1: Employee Engagement Items**

Employee Engagement Items (1=strongly disagree; 3=neutral; 5=strongly agree)	
<b>Cognitive</b>	It would take a lot to get me to leave CitiSales.
	I would like to be working for the company one year from now.
	Compared to other organizations, I think that CitiSales is a great place to work.
<b>Emotional</b>	I care about the future of the company.
	I feel like an important part of the company.
	I feel that my work makes an important contribution to CitiSales' success.

<b>Behavioral</b>	I am always willing to give extra effort to help the company succeed.
	I would highly recommend CitiSales to a friend seeking employment.

### What keeps Older Workers Engaged?

The research questions were answered using survey data from a study of over 6,000 employees, ages 18-94, from a U.S.-based retail chain store, CitiSales (a pseudonym), and interview data with 40 district and regional managers of these employees. (See sample characteristics in Table 2.)

**How engaged are older workers?** Results indicate that older workers (those 55 and older) are significantly more engaged than younger workers (those 54 and younger). In fact, employee engagement appears to increase with age among current cohorts who work in the retail environment we studied. These results differ somewhat from the one study we located that assessed age as a factor<sup>18</sup> which reported that employee engagement levels among employees from 14 organizations declined with age *until* they reached the oldest group (defined as 60+), who, they say, are the most engaged of all. Notably, older workers in both studies reported the highest employee engagement.

We found that, in general, managers who work with these older employees tend to see them as very engaged:

*"...very, very loyal employees-55 and older-extremely loyal and very customer oriented..."*

*"...the work ethic is there. Reliability is there. And I think service is a whole different mind set than what it is when you look at a younger individual..."*

*"...they just have a different respect for the job and the company and what their contributions [are] and how important it is to be loyal and those types of things..."*

*- Managers of "Citisales" commenting on the engagement of older workers*

**What are the elements of job quality for older workers?** Younger and older workers may think about their work and make judgments about it in different ways. We restricted our sample to workers

age 55 and older to assess job quality and its relationship to employee engagement among older workers themselves.

**Table 2: Sample Characteristics**

Age			Worker Status		
54 and Under	4931	88%	Part-Time	2199	37%
55 and Older	680	12%	Full-Time	3767	63%
Gender			Professional/Hourly		
Male	1496	26%	Professional	1580	27%
Female	4310	74%	Hourly	4207	73%
Race			Education		
White	4336	76%	Up to GED	1951	34%
Black	816	14%	Some College	2451	42%
Other	560	10%	Bachelors Degree or above	1390	24%
Marital Status					
Single	2277	39%			
Married/Cohabiting	2928	50%			
Other	664	11%			

We examined 29 job quality items for factors that constitute job quality for older workers. Although there were similarities in the components of job quality for professional and hourly workers, there were enough differences to suggest separate analyses. Therefore we performed separate tests for each. (See Table 3 for job quality constructs and the individual items that went into each scale for each group).

**What are the drivers of employee engagement for older workers?** As can be seen in Figures 1 & 2, the most important component of job quality in predicting employee engagement for both professional and hourly older workers is supervisor effectiveness, a finding much in keeping with research on younger workers. This outcome is not surprising given the supervisor’s role in setting up work conditions, assignments and schedules in a 24/7 work environment such as the one we studied. Generally, workers at CitiSales are expected to work at least some “non-standard” hours; the schedules often vary week to week; and the supervisor holds the key to any exceptions that need to be made.

These realities, in addition to the usual supervisory responsibilities of evaluation, motivation, and execution of duties make the quality of supervisors most crucial in employees’ experiences on the job. For both professional and hourly older workers, supervisor effectiveness played a strong, central role in driving employee engagement.

What makes for an effective supervisor then becomes important in understanding the link between other aspects of job quality and employee engagement. For both professional and hourly workers, having the flexibility to take care of unexpected personal or family matters is an important predictor of perceived supervisor effectiveness. Flexibility also includes having co-workers who are willing to swap hours or cover when the need arises and having the ability to change starting and quitting times.

**Table 3: Job Quality Factors for Hourly and Professional Older Workers (55+)**

<b>Older Professional Workers</b>		<b>Older Hourly Workers</b>
<b>Supervisor Effectiveness Group Specific Items</b>	<b>Supervisor Effectiveness Overlap (mentioned by both groups)</b>	<b>Supervisor Effectiveness Group Specific Items</b>
I have a clear understanding of the career paths available to me within CitiSales.	My supervisor is supportive when I have a work problem.	I think that cooperation and teamwork is strong within my store.
I have a clear understanding of the goals and priorities of my store/group.	My supervisor really cares about the effects that work demands have on my personal and family life.	My store consistently provides excellent service to our customers.
I have sufficient access to career development opportunities.	I feel valued as an employee of CitiSales.	I am allowed to make the decisions necessary to do my job well.
I receive the necessary level of training to perform my job effectively.	I am recognized when I do good work.	
	I am encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things.	
	I understand how my performance is evaluated.	
<b>Job Fit Group Specific Items</b>	<b>Job Fit Overlap (mentioned by both groups)</b>	<b>Job Fit Group Specific Items</b>
I am allowed to make the decisions necessary to do my job well.	I have the general tools and resources I need to do my job well.	My job is interesting and challenging.
	I have a clear understanding of what is expected of me.	My job makes full use of my skills and abilities.
	I am generally able to get my work done without facing too much red tape or bureaucracy.	I have a clear understanding of the goals and priorities of my store/group.
<b>Scheduling Satisfaction &amp; Input Group Specific Items</b>	<b>Scheduling Satisfaction &amp; Input Overlap (mentioned by both groups)</b>	<b>Scheduling Satisfaction &amp; Input Group Specific Items</b>
I am subject to hostility or abuse from customers.	How often are your preferences about the days and times of when you work taken into consideration by the person who writes your schedule?	Think about when you generally learn about your work schedule; is it more than enough, enough, or not enough time to plan personal, family, or other responsibilities?
	How much input do you have into the number of hours you work each week?	
	Overall, in the past month how satisfied have you been with the weekly schedule you've been assigned?	
<b>Opportunity for Development Group Specific Items</b>	<b>Opportunity for Development Overlap (mentioned by both groups)</b>	<b>Opportunity for Development Group Specific Items</b>
Think about when you generally learn about your work schedule; is it more than enough, enough, or not enough time to plan personal, family, or other responsibilities?	My chances of being promoted at CitiSales are good.	I have sufficient access to career development opportunities.

Older Professional Workers		Older Hourly Workers
My job is interesting and challenging.		I have a clear understanding of the career paths available to me within CitiSales.
My job makes full use of my skills and abilities.		I am subject to hostility or abuse from customers.
		I receive the necessary level of training to perform my job effectively.
<b>Flexibility for Personal/Family Issues Group Specific Items</b>	<b>Flexibility for Personal/Family Issues Overlap (mentioned by both groups)</b>	<b>Flexibility for Personal/Family Issues Group Specific Items</b>
	When an unexpected personal or family matter arises, I have the ability to modify my schedule.	
	I have the ability to change my schedule when I have family or personal business to take care off.	
	I have the ability to change my starting and quitting times on a daily basis.	
	How often are the people you work with willing to swap hours with you or cover for you when you need to take time off for a personal or family matter.	
<b>Perceived Fairness Group Specific Items</b>	<b>Perceived Fairness Overlap (mentioned by both groups)</b>	<b>Perceived Fairness Group Specific Items</b>
	At CitiSales, employees who ask for time off for family reasons are less likely to get ahead in their jobs or careers.	I have a positive impact on other people's lives through my job.
	In decisions about promotion, Citisales gives younger people preference over older people.	
<b>Teamwork Group Specific Items</b>	<b>Teamwork Overlap (mentioned by both groups)</b>	<b>Teamwork Group Specific Items</b>
My store consistently provides excellent service to our customers.		
I think that cooperation and teamwork is strong within my store.		

These are all elements of implementing flexible work arrangements in the retail environment.<sup>19</sup> It is often said that flexibility within such settings is impossible. Our findings suggest instead that flexibility is an essential component of job quality and one of the factors in evaluating the supervisor effectiveness, which in turn keeps employees engaged.

Also important for both groups of older workers is the employees' clear understanding of the job, having the resources to do it, and feeling that it makes use

of the employee's skills and abilities without too much bureaucracy (job fit).

Interestingly, another important factor in perceived supervisor effectiveness is having opportunities for training and development and promotions. This factor predicts supervisor effectiveness, but it also predicts employee engagement directly for the hourly workers. In earlier analyses using the entire sample we found that younger workers were more likely than older workers to see older workers as "checked out,"

as lacking enthusiasm for growth and development.<sup>19</sup> To the contrary, our finding suggests that having such opportunities is a major factor in keeping older workers engaged and involved in their work. Feeling that one's chances for promotion are good is one of the most important factors for professional workers. These findings suggest a clear take-away for business leaders who want to retain their older workers, both hourly and professional.

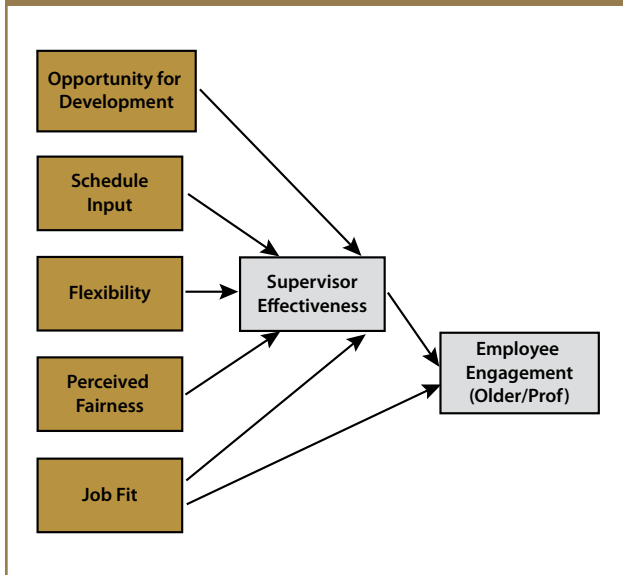
A few differences emerged between professional and hourly workers in terms of what affects employees' rating of the quality of their supervisor, and therefore engagement in the work of the organization.

**Professional workers.** For older workers in professional jobs, the feeling that the team functions well together, that cooperation within the store is strong is an important factor in seeing the supervisor as effective. Also important is the perception that promotions and career development opportunities are fair and equitably distributed. The feeling that CitiSales is more likely to promote younger than older workers is related to a negative evaluation of the supervisor. Similarly, the sense that employees

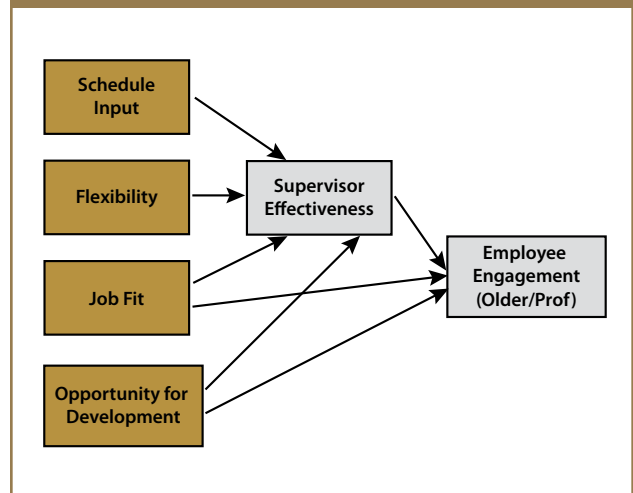
who ask for time off for family reasons are less likely to get ahead in their jobs or careers is associated with the perception that a supervisor is ineffective. In previous work, we found that those who perceived equal opportunities for both older and younger workers were more engaged than those who had the perception that CitiSales was more likely to promote younger workers than older workers.<sup>19</sup>

**Hourly workers.** For older workers in hourly positions, having one's schedule preferences considered (schedule input) is an important factor in evaluating a supervisor as effective. This factor was not significant for professional workers, but was highly significant when examining supervisor effectiveness and employee engagement for hourly workers. This means having input into the number of hours worked: some wanted more hours than they received; some wanted fewer hours. It also means of course being able to make schedule requests that allow for accommodations needed by the employee and feeling satisfied with the assigned schedule. Finally, it means getting the schedule enough in advance to plan or make arrangements for personal, family or other responsibilities.

**Figure 1: Drivers of Employee Engagement for Older (55+) Professional Workers**



**Figure 2: Drivers of Employee Engagement for Older (55+) Hourly Workers**



## Conclusion: Implications

Older workers can be highly committed to an organization and highly engaged in its success. In this and other studies, older workers are the most engaged of all the workers. There appear to be a key set of factors involved in keeping them engaged. First and foremost is a responsive supervisor—one who is supportive when work problems arise, who cares about the effects that work demands have on personal and family life, who values the employee and recognizes him or her for a job well done, who encourages the employee to come up with new and better ways of doing things, and who makes clear the criteria for performance evaluation.

In addition to these characteristics, the responsive supervisor of older workers must consider the scheduling preferences of his or her employees. The 24/7 retail environment that we studied requires creative strategies for making flexible work arrangements possible, but doing so is clearly feasible. There are also different approaches to making flexibility work for hourly workers compared to their professional co-workers. For both, however, having the flexibility to make accommodations for personal and family responsibilities is a very important factor in seeing a supervisor as responsive. We have long known about the importance of schedule flexibility for younger workers, especially young parents. Our results indicate that flexible work arrangements are important to older workers as well.

The responsive supervisor of older workers is also aware of stereotypes and avoids assumptions about their retirement plans. Far from being “checked out,” older workers often want training, development opportunities and promotions. These workers are more engaged when they are offered the chance to continue to grow and advance within the company. They are clearly less engaged and less committed when they perceive inequities in promotional opportunities, either for older workers or for employees of any age who take time off for family reasons. Of course, some older workers do want to either phase out or reduce hours or stay at the level of responsibility they have. The only way to find out what they want and where they might be headed is to ask them.

The responsive supervisor of older workers asks-- and recognizes the two-way street of engagement.

**The Center on Aging & Work/Workplace Flexibility at Boston College**, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, is a unique research center established in 2005. The Center works in partnership with decision-makers at the workplace to design and implement rigorous investigations that will help the American business community prepare for the opportunities and challenges associated with the aging workforce. The Center focuses on flexible work options because these are a particularly important element of innovative employer responses to the aging workforce. The studies conducted by the Center are examining employers’ adoption of a range of flexible work options, the implementation of them at the workplace, their use by older workers, and their impact on business and older workers.

The Center’s multi-disciplinary core research team is comprised of more than 20 social scientists from disciplines including economics, social work, psychology, and sociology. The investigators have strong expertise in the field of aging research. In addition, the Center has a workplace advisory group (SENIOR Advisors) to ensure that the priorities and perspectives of business leaders frame the Center’s activities and a Research Advisory Committee that provides advice and consultation on the Center’s individual research projects and strategic direction. The Center is directed by Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes, Ph.D., and Michael A. Smyer, Ph.D.

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