

## Older workers—are they aging successfully?

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A large percentage of the U.S. labor force is 55 and over or about to turn 55. Better known as “baby boomers,” these workers must now answer the question: What is my optimal retirement age? From the inception of Social Security in 1935 until the Social Security Amendments of 1983, the normal retirement age was 65. However, the age at which retirees could draw full benefits was increased gradually from 65 for individuals born in 1937 or later to 67 for those born in 1960 or later. Thus, with the retirement age extended, many older workers are considering staying in the labor force longer.

The extended retirement age is not the only motivator to persuade older people to work longer. Several other motivators exist, such as a financial need or simply that workers like their job. Another factor they must weigh is whether they can be successful in their work as they age. In their article “Who is aging successfully at work? A latent profile analysis of successful agers and their work motives,” Gregory R. Thrasher, Keith L. Zabel, Reed J. Bramble, and Boris B. Baltes (*Work, Aging and Retirement*, March 2018) address this uncertainty. To help older workers and their employers better understand successful aging at work, Thrasher and his colleagues look at several factors on the basis of the individual and his or her concept of aging (as explained below). In addition, from their findings, they also suggest ways employers can help their employees age successfully at work.

To determine if aging workers are working successfully, the authors begin their research using a “person-centered” or individual approach, which examines the characteristics of individuals together and separately. The survey interviewed 156 workers from ages 50 to 71. Workers were asked a series of questions concerning their concepts of age. For example, they were asked about subjective (the age people feel or believe they look), functional (the age that people see themselves), and organizational (age based on job tenure) age. They were also asked questions concerning their attitude toward aging, such as how they view their health and the amount of time they have left in the future or “future time perspective.”

From the responses to these questions, the authors divided the participants into two groups—healthy and unhealthy. Then the authors went a step further to determine who in these groups was aging more successfully. They looked at different work motivators, such as development, promotion, security, and social. These groups were then labeled as one of the following:

1. Healthy agers—those who have high levels of development and promotion motives (see themselves as very healthy) and feel more youthful
2. Classic agers—those who have low levels of promotion and development motives (see themselves as having poorer health) and feel less youthful

The authors went on to identify a smaller subgroup of workers called organizational agers, who had longer job tenures and were older than the healthy and classic agers yet had the same developmental and promotion motives as the healthy agers.

Thrasher and colleagues found that the majority of older workers are aging successfully; however, much of the success is based on the older workers themselves and their concepts of aging. The authors suggest that researchers performing future studies on the success of the aging worker should consider looking more into these individual subgroup differences. As for employers, the authors recommend that they look into ways to meet promotion and development needs that would address the motivations of older workers. This would, in turn, not only help them be more successful workers but more healthy, particularly since the number of older workers and the age of retirement will continue to increase over the next several years.