

Activities of Organizations in the Field of Social Responsibility in the Context of Human Resource Management with a Focus on Age Management

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Abstract: Organizations are expected to be more actively engaged in the current issues within their respective focus field, including, but not limited to, social responsibility. The traditional business approach ignores social issues in management objectives. Determining the direction of the age management development is a criterion for the successful implementation of the concept of corporate social responsibility. Strategic documents support the implementation of age management at the society-wide level but not at the organizational level. Age management represents a specialized approach to management while taking into account the current unfavorable demographic conditions. The main aim of the paper is to identify problem areas of age management in the time of COVID-19 in the selected organizations in the Czech Republic and to make recommendations for their optimization. The research is based on the quantitative questionnaire survey ($n = 183$) and the statistical evaluation of data while looking for relations between the application of management practices with respect to the age of employees and identifying factors of organizations. The key findings of the study reveal that the greatest benefit of collaboration among all generations of employees in organizations lies in improving employee motivation and performance (67%), followed by the increased performance (59%).

Keywords: corporate social responsibility; COVID-19; employee care; organizations in the Czech Republic; population ageing; social sustainability

JEL Classification: M10; M14

1. Introduction

Sustainable operations of organizations can strengthen their competitive position (Lorincová et al., 2018; Chalupa & Petříček, 2020; Pacana et al., 2020; Jankelová & Joniaková, 2021). Organizations that adopt optimal sustainable human resource management and intergenerational learning benefit from maintaining knowledge continuity, using the strengths and potential of different age groups (Blomé et al., 2018), good workplace relationships (Atkinson & Sandiford, 2016), overcoming negative age stereotypes (Dordoni & Argentero, 2015) and age as well as other discrimination. The implementation of age management is a long-term process and starts with the awareness of the organization's management; yet it is still at the beginning in the specific conditions of individual organizations in all economic sectors (Egdell et al., 2020). It needs to be emphasized that age management is concerned with

all age categories of employees. The 50+ group is currently crucial and decisive in view of the unfavorable demographic development (Dordoni & Argentero, 2015; Joniaková & Blštáková, 2015) and the situation on the labor market. It can be concluded that age management is not simply a management method that takes into account all age categories in organizations across all business sectors. First and foremost, it is a means of how to face the consequences of demographic changes in society well and efficiently and how to extend the active age of the population.

As for the implementation of age management, it is essential to note that the length of working life will further become longer, which will affect both employers and employees (Earl & Taylor, 2015). This implies the need for quite significant changes related to the setting of intergenerational cooperation, organizational culture, and climate (Ciutiene & Railaite, 2015; Joniaková & Blštáková, 2015). However, to be successfully implemented, the continuous learning of both young and talented employees, as well as 50+ employees, must be emphasized. The presented article focuses on the issues of age management and the necessity of solving them in the context of strategic human resource management, and thus achieving a competitive advantage and building the employer brand. The main aim is to identify problem areas of age management in the COVID-19 era in the selected organizations in the Czech Republic ($n = 183$) and to make recommendations to optimize them.

2. Theoretical Part

Age management is a management approach that takes into account the age, ability, and potential of employees (Garavaglia et al., 2021). The benefits (and downsides) of implementing age management can be identified at three levels, namely, social, organizational, and individual (Nilsson, 2016; Blomé et al., 2018). It can be concluded that age management is part of the Corporate Social Responsibility phenomenon (Feißel et al., 2018; Pytel-Kopczyńska & Oleksiak, 2019), specifically, activities focusing on the social pillar of sustainable business (Atkinson & Sandiford, 2016). Age management is vital for all ages of employees (Rašticová et al., 2019); however, for older workers in particular, specific working conditions need to be created with respect to occupational health and safety and increased risks (Dordoni & Argentero, 2015). It is advisable to adapt working hours to the flexible forms of work arrangement (Atkinson & Sandiford, 2016) by including training courses and limiting overtime. However, in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, despite the use of home working and flexible forms of work, the labor productivity of employees has been decreasing and there has also been a shift away from the principles of the relatively stable labor market in the past. Nowadays, there are repeated dismissals and stereotyping of 50+ employees.

Harnessing the potential of all workers in the labor market effectively should be an essential strategy for the human resource management of organizations (von Bonsdorff et al., 2018; Birkinshaw et al., 2019). It can be observed that there are some risks for organizations neglecting age-specific human resource management (Fuertes et al., 2013; Joniaková & Blštáková, 2015; Garavaglia et al., 2021). These primarily include the cost of incapacity for work, the loss of qualified employees and their critical knowledge and skills, the training

of new employees after employees retire, and many others (Stacho et al., 2013). The above is summarized in Table 1, which is based on three aspects, organizational, social, and individual.

Table 1. The benefits and negatives associated with the implementation of age management – Part 1

	The benefits of age management implementation	The negatives of age management implementation
Organizational aspect	Building employer brand and prestige	Higher demands on management (Joniaková & Blštáková, 2015)
	Harnessing the employee potential regardless of age (Blomé et al., 2018)	Increased financial demands (Conen et al., 2011; Fuertes et al., 2013)
	Gaining a competitive advantage (Bilinska-Reformat & Stanczyk, 2018)	The necessity to change existing communication models
	Improving the performance and excellence of organizations (Blomé et al., 2018)	The risk of failing to manage age diversity (Joniaková & Blštáková, 2015)
	Improving crisis management	The necessity of organizational change (Joniaková & Blštáková, 2015; Garavaglia et al., 2021)
	Improving organizational culture and climate (Atkinson & Sandiford, 2016)	The need for change in corporate culture (Joniaková & Blštáková, 2015)
	Talent acquisition	Limited personnel capacity for implementation (Blomé et al., 2018)
	Retention of key employees (Blomé et al., 2018)	The inexperience of HR staff in this area.
	Raising awareness and organizational autonomy (Garavaglia et al., 2021)	The need to raise awareness and support for its application at the social and corporate level (Aliaj et al., 2016)
Social aspect	Mitigating the consequences of adverse demographic development (Ciutiene & Railaite, 2015; Joniaková & Blštáková, 2015; Feišel et al., 2018)	The increasing complexity of the business environment
	The emphasis on employee health in the population (Aliaj et al., 2016; Blomé et al., 2018)	The impossibility of employing all age groups in all professions (drivers, police, etc.)
	Better social cohesion and communication (Blomé et al., 2018)	The need for coordination within European policies (Aliaj et al., 2016)
	The possibility of using support programs from the state	Increasing demands on spending (Aliaj et al., 2016)
	Preventing ageism (Fuertes et al., 2013; Atkinson & Sandiford, 2016)	The need for the radical revision of work, pension, health, education, and other processes (Dordoni & Argentero, 2015)
	Preventing women's poverty before old age (Earl & Taylor, 2015; Aliaj et al., 2016)	The persistent gap between policy and practice (Earl & Taylor, 2015)
	The possibility of solving the problem with less-educated immigrants (Aliaj et al., 2016)	
	Improving the funding of pension system (Aliaj et al., 2016)	The need for coordination within the framework of national employment policy
	Removing obstacles to extending working life (Egdell et al., 2020)	

Table 1. The benefits and negatives associated with the implementation of age management – Part 2

	The benefits of age management implementation	The negatives of age management implementation
Individual aspect	Improving employee motivation (Feißel et al., 2018)	The need to improve communication and social interaction
	The emphasis on employee health and safety, and stress prevention (Feißel et al., 2018)	Increased demands on knowledge transfer
	Integration in the team (Feißel et al., 2018)	Stereotyping behavior and barriers (Fuentes et al., 2013; Dordoni & Argentero, 2015; Garavaglia et al., 2021)
	The employee's perception of job stability, loyalty, and staying engaged (Joniaková & Blštáková, 2015; Blomé et al., 2018)	Increased demands on individual approach to employees

There are increased financial costs associated with the implementation of age management in connection with new job opportunities (Conen et al., 2011; Fuentes et al., 2013). In this context, Ciutiene & Railaite (2015) highlight recruitment, learning and knowledge management, changing attitudes, flexible working arrangements, health management, work environment, and ergonomics. The increasing interaction of different generations implies the need to set up educational processes in the organization that will encourage the sharing of knowledge and experience between generations of employees (Bolisani & Bratianu, 2017; Aydin & Dube, 2018). By encouraging continuous learning and knowledge sharing across generations, the corporate social responsibility of organizations can be developed. Understanding generational diversity is the best way to overcome negative prejudices against older people.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a “career shock” as Akkermans et al. (2020) put it. In addition to certain negative consequences not only for older workers (Kooij, 2020), the pandemic of COVID-19 also poses a challenge (Akkermans et al., 2020) for the management of organizations to make an intelligent and confident commitment to start placing more emphasis on social responsibility and building the prestige of an employer that is not indifferent to the employee health, safety or belonging together. However, it also depends on the role of the state to create the right conditions for people to be as employable as possible in the labor market, especially now in the time of COVID-19. In the long run, this pandemic can become a stimulus that can provide an opportunity for change and improvement in working with people.

The issues of applying age management in organizations and the effort to maximize the elimination of negative ageism are hot, engaging, and essential topics, unfortunately not only in the Czech Republic, which have been insufficiently discussed so far, as agreed, for example, by Bejtkovský (2015); Joniaková & Blštáková, (2015); Feißel et al. (2018); Urbancová & Vrabcová (2020); Kooij (2020); Garavaglia et al. (2021).

2. Methodology

In preparing for the research, previous publications and other documents related to age management and sustainable human resource management were looked into. The

questionnaire survey was designed to comply with the ethical guidelines and the requirement of anonymity. A Google form was used for implementation purposes, and the questionnaire was completed by the middle or senior management of the organizations, or in the case of smaller organizations, by the owner ($n = 183$). The survey was conducted from June 2020 to December 2020. The primary identifying questions of the questionnaire survey include the following statistical qualitative and quantitative variables (the so-called identifying factors), see Table 2:

- the sector of business activities (primary, secondary, tertiary),
- the size of the organization by the number of employees,
- the majority ownership (a Czech or a foreign organization),
- the type of the organization (private, public, non-profit), and
- the annual turnover.

Table 2. The organizations that participated in the research – primary data

Characteristics	Categories		
	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
The sector of business activities	4.4%	41.5%	54.1%
The size of the organization	<50	51–249	>250
	26.2%	28.4%	45.4%
The majority ownership	Domestic	Foreign	
	45.4%	54.6%	
The type of the organization	Private	Public	Non-profit
	85.8%	11.5%	2.7%
The annual turnover	<10 mil. EUR	11–50 mil. EUR	>50 mil EUR
	38.3%	37.7%	24.0%

The correlations between the selected qualitative and identifying factors were tested. The Chi-square (χ^2) tests of independence in the combination table with $(r-1)(s-1)$ degrees of freedom and Cramer's V at the $\alpha = 0.05$ significance level were used to test the homogeneity and independence hypotheses. The IBM SPSS Statistics 28 statistical software was used to evaluate the results. The results can only be generalized for the research sample.

3. Results

The questionnaire survey focused on the intergenerational cooperation among generations (X, Y, and Z) and age management in Czech companies ($n = 183$). Age management is a management method with respect to the age of employees, taking into account their life stages and changing states (competencies, motivation, health, etc.).

The overall majority of the surveyed organizations (55%) stated that they apply human resource management activities involving age diversity. Figure 1 shows the data of age management application in the surveyed organizations with respect to the size of the organization by the number of employees.

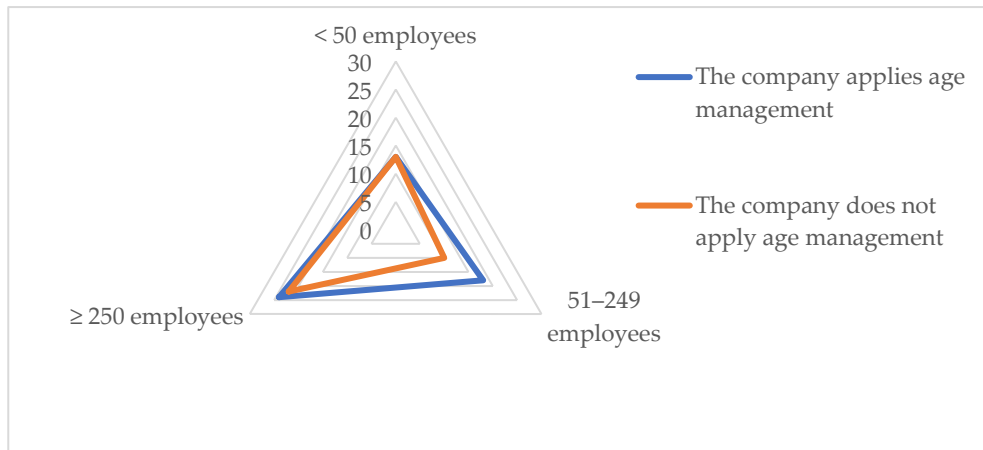


Figure 1. The application of age management and the company size (relative frequencies)

Figure 1 shows that age management is applied by 24% of the observed organizations employing more than 250 employees, by 18% of organizations with 51–249 employees, and by only 13% of organizations with the lowest number of employees. Approximately 80% of these organizations also report having information on how the age composition of their workforce is changing. On the other hand, the absolute majority of organizations report that they do not make plans for the age structure of their workforce within a period of 3 to 5 years and that there has been no difference in the department heads’ approach towards young or older employees in the last 12 months. It can be concluded from the above that the respondents answered the question regarding the implementation of age management in a relatively positive way, while they do not actively implement crucial, or core activities related to age management. The responsibility for actions related to human resources in the organizations lies with the human resources department itself in 69% of cases, middle and senior-level managers in 28% of patients, and line managers in 16%. Table 3 below shows the benefits that respondents perceive when speaking of collaboration among all generations of employees. The respondents could give more than one answer.

Table 3. The benefits of all generations of employees (i.e., students, experienced employees, seniors, etc.) collaborating – relative frequencies

The benefits of all generations of employees collaborating	Relative frequencies p_i
Improving motivation and performance	67.8%
Improving organizational performance	58.5%
Acquiring talented employees	56.3%
Retaining key employees	54.6%
Improving organizational culture	53.6%
Improving organizational climate	47.5%
Building an employer brand	32.2%
Gaining a competitive advantage	32.2%
Improving crisis management	20.8%
Improving the prestige of the organization	16.9%
I don't see any benefits.	1.1%

As can be seen from Table 3 above, the organizations see the benefits primarily in the context of increasing motivation and organizational performance, recruiting talented employees, and, last but not least, retaining key personnel. Table 4 shows the reasons for not applying age management. Again, the respondents were allowed to submit more than one answer.

Table 4. The reasons for not applying age management – relative frequencies

The reasons for not applying age management	Relative frequencies p_i
Managing age-diverse teams in the workplace is challenging for managers	32.8%
Work schedules place greater demands on communication	32.2%
Financial demands placed on management	9.8%
I don't see any downsides	37.2%

As evident from Table 4, the respondents mainly agreed that this is a management-intensive way of managing the organization, not only in terms of communication and financial requirements. Targeted measures to promote the health and professional development of the 50+ age group are more beneficial to the company than dismissals and early retirements. Such efforts include flexible working arrangements, such as flextime, part-time work, job-sharing, working from home, and, last but not least, condensed working weeks. Furthermore, five hypotheses have been tested at the 0.05 level of significance concerning the selected identifying factors:

1. H_0 : The organization's focus on age management does not depend on the business sector.
2. H_0 : The organization's focus on age management does not depend on the size of the organization.
3. H_0 : The organization's focus on age management does not depend on the majority ownership.
4. H_0 : The organization's focus on age management does not depend on the type of organization (the kind of ownership).
5. H_0 : The organization's focus on age management does not depend on its annual turnover.

Based on the statistical testing, it can be summarized that at the 0.05 level of significance:

1. The organization's focus on age management is statistically independent of the business sector (p -value = 0.493).
2. The organization's focus on age management is statistically independent of the organization's size (p -value = 0.314).
3. The organization's focus on age management is statistically independent of its majority ownership (p -value = 0.482).
4. The organization's focus on age management is statistically independent of the type of organization (the kind of ownership) (p -value = 0.476).
5. The organization's focus on age management is statistically independent of its annual turnover (p -value = 0.606).

To conclude, any organization, regardless of its sector, size, ownership, or annual turnover, can engage in age management; the difference between organizations may

be in the depth and scope of implementation. The research findings thus confirm the conclusions of international studies, e.g., Feißel et al. (2018); Kooij (2020); Garavaglia et al. (2021).

Based on the results obtained, it can be stated that organizational processes can only be optimized with a positive effect in any organization if the organization pays attention to its employees. The loyalty to the employer is continuously decreasing on the part of Generation Z and Millennials (Y) compared to Generation X. Therefore, the management of organizations must focus on harmonizing the values of employees and employers.

Therefore, a well-trained, continuously developed, and satisfied team is now all the more necessary in any organization in the time of COVID-19. Every organization must have job descriptions for individual positions and the required competences required of their employees, properly set and communicated KPIs (key performance indicators) always assigned transparently and unambiguously to a process, a service, an organizational unit, the entire organization, from which performance, quality and cost-effectiveness can be generated. Every organization must set transparent administrative processes, understandable strategies that will be communicated to employees. Furthermore, it is necessary to ensure the substitutability of employees not only during the COVID-19 illness but during any other health complications. It is needed to communicate with employees on a daily basis (even if it is online or by phone) and address any new issues promptly and introduce employee development plans, including feedback.

To summarize, in the current state of the labor market, because of COVID-19, organizations must:

- To give priority to enhancing the skills and abilities of all employees, regardless of their age, to fully adapt them to the digital environment.
- To develop cognitive skills and to increase employee responsiveness to the need for change and innovation.
- To develop social and emotional skills to ensure effective collaboration among all generations of employees.
- To develop employees in their skills, abilities, and resilience to the stress that COVID-19 has brought to a greater extent.

4. Discussion

For instance, as shown by the findings of Ayalon et al. (2020); Kooij (2020), the 50+ older workers may be more affected by the COVID-19 pandemic than younger ones. Higher mortality rates from COVID-19 among the elderly prompt some of them to retire early (Akkermans et al., 2020), and the number of employees reducing their working hours due to health problems after suffering from COVID-19 has also been increasing. In the surveyed organizations in the Czech Republic, work teams have been destabilized, and the organizations are understaffed, which threatens the continuity of processes. For younger people, the pandemic may be their first experience with a major global crisis, which can have long-term psychological impacts (Akkermans et al., 2020). In addition to certain serious

health risks, older employees have to work from home because of the measures, which often means using IT technology. The need to upgrade their skills and competencies, especially concerning the use of technology, is highlighted, for example, by Akkermans et al. (2020).

Age management practices were not found to be part of the systematic strategy of the surveyed companies, which is in line with the research of Fuertes et al. (2013); Egdell et al. (2020). Ciutiene & Railaite (2015) add to the above that health management and flexible working arrangements, although these are considered pivotal in human resource management with age diversity, rank among the weakest points in particular organizations. An interesting fact to note is that the age of HR managers does not play a unique role in the implementation of age management initiatives (Principi et al., 2015). Frerichs et al. (2012) did not reveal a general trend towards integrated age management in their analysis of 83 case studies on age management. This implies that the impact of the aging workforce is an international issue (Egdell et al., 2020) and needs to be further addressed at the organizational level.

Despite the worsening economic situation of organizations and the need for layoffs, it is necessary for the management of organizations to focus primarily on the possibility of optimizing the number of working hours (the preference for shared jobs, part-time jobs, etc.) without age discrimination (i.e., for example, the targeted layoffs of 50+ employees, where the risk of sick leave associated with the COVID-19 disease or long-term health consequences after contracting it is expected to be higher).

5. Conclusions

The results from the sample of organizations examined have shown that the factors (size, sector, turnover, etc.) do not influence the application of age management. The benefits of applying age management outweigh the risks. The most significant advantage of having all generations of employees collaborating in organizations is improving employee motivation and performance (67%) and improving performance (59%); however, the management of organizations must primarily concentrate on aligning the values of employees and employers. The risks include the need for increased communication and social interaction, the increased demands on knowledge transfer, or, in the COVID-19 era, the increased negative stereotyping of employees. It is necessary that the area of human resource management becomes an integral part of the strategic orientation of the organization and that individual HR activities are carried out not only at the sub-managerial level but with the comprehensive view of developing the entire organization in the years to come.

The theoretical contribution of the article lies in comparing the benefits and risks of age management identified in international research. The practical contribution of the article consists in presenting the results of age management application and the identification of benefits and risks in the studied Czech organizations. Further research will be aimed at the changes in career planning and management in the COVID-19 era.

Conflict of interest: none

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