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## Book Review

Hilsen, A. I. and Olsen, D. S. *The Importance and Value of Older Employees: Wise Workers in the Workplace*. 2021, Palgrave Macmillan, Pages: 104, Price: USD 49.99 (Pbk), ISBN 978-981-16-2860-3 (Hbk), ISBN 978-981-16-2861-0 (ebk)

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There is extensive literature on population ageing and older workers in both developed and developing economies, as well as in organisations. These writings mainly focus on demographic trends and projections, labour market dynamics, infrastructure developments for the elderly, and welfare costs (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific [ESCAP], 2017; United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2017); however, only a few address the strengths and the empowerment of older people (De Witte & Van Regenmortel, 2023). Thus, most of this literature tends to emphasise the economic burden and liabilities associated with an ageing population. The uniqueness of this book lies in its recognition and appreciation of older workers as assets rather than liabilities. This book presents a compelling argument for reevaluating the role of older employees in

contemporary workplaces, challenging stereotypes about ageing in the workplace, the learning capacities of older employees, and their potential and abilities.

Based on an empirical study, this book is organised into eight chapters, each featuring an abstract, keywords, main content presented under subheadings, and a list of references. This format is highly commendable, as it ensures that each chapter addresses a distinct aspect of the overall narrative.

Chapter 1 of the book outlines the purpose of the study, the authors' motivations, the research context, and the reasons behind the selection of this particular context. The authors state at the outset that the aim of the study is to provide "a better understanding of the value of older workers at work and the importance of their contributions" (p.3). The chapter addresses population ageing (a phenomenon previously well-explored in industrialised countries and is now increasingly discussed in developing nations) from a more positive perspective. While ageing populations are often framed as an economic burden or a strain on organisations, this study emphasises the potential benefits of ageing for individuals and workplaces. It highlights the concepts of lifelong careers and senior competence, focusing on how older employees leverage their knowledge and experience. Through two case studies set in the Norwegian context, the research explores the advantages that age and experience can offer while challenging common stereotypes about older workers. The participants of this study are public-sector employees aged between 50 and 70. The authors ground their work on the concepts of situated learning (learning that occurs outside formal classroom settings) and adult learning.

In Chapter 2, the authors focus on the conceptualisation of competence and work-related knowledge in the context of older employees. Thereby, the concepts of organisational knowledge, situated knowledge, professional knowledge and expertise are reviewed by referring to the existing literature with the hope of understanding late career competence of older employees. Drawing on the literature, the authors note that organisational knowledge leans more towards 'knowing' rather than 'knowledge' itself, and it is largely firm-specific rather than individually held. While situated knowledge means the knowledge specific to a particular situation, experience and professional knowledge is identified as a knowledge that can be learned or developed. In this review, the authors highlight the fundamental role of 'experience' in the concepts of knowledge theorised in the literature. They suggest that the experience accumulated by older employees throughout their careers should be valued and considered essential in defining the concept of senior competence.

Chapter 3 of the book, titled ‘What Do We Know About the Knowledge of Older Workers?’ examines past studies to explore the abilities and potential of older workers, methods for assessing them, and the advantages of retaining knowledgeable employees in organisations. Drawing from global and regional sources (e.g., The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies [PIAAC], Working Life Changes and Training of Older Workers Project [WORKTOW]), the authors identify various pathways through which older workers can acquire knowledge, including formal education, learning outside formal settings, formal training, informal and non-formal training, as well as certain physical, social, and mental activities aimed at reversing cognitive decline. In addressing the question, “Can Older Employees Learn New Things at Work?” the authors present arguments on both sides, acknowledging studies that support and refute this claim. However, their comprehensive review highlights a larger body of evidence suggesting that older workers can continue to engage in lifelong learning. To understand the concept of senior competence, the authors connect insights from several existing studies. They discuss a variety of competencies, such as theoretical knowledge (gained through books), skills (acquired through practical experience), practical knowledge, and knowledge of familiarity (integrated knowledge developed over time within a community). Additionally, the authors discuss the importance of competencies such as adapting to new technologies, collaborating with other generations, and navigating complex workplace situations. They conclude that both formal and informal learning are crucial for enhancing senior competence.

Chapter 4 is devoted to presenting the research methodology adopted in this empirical study. The authors clarify their exploratory approach, explaining how they adapted their assumptions within the interpretivist framework. While the justification for selecting the two case studies in the Norwegian context is introduced in the first chapter, here, the authors elaborate on how the selection of this context enhanced their access to a large number of employees with diverse experiences over an extended period. This access has allowed them to explore a variety of events and situations in depth. The chapter details the data sources and data collection methods used, with a particular focus on their operationalisation of the interview method. They have incorporated individual interviews, small-group discussions, and plenary discussions to collect rich data. The authors state that they were inspired by grounded theory and went out to listen to participants’ stories, thus avoiding the rigidity of structured interviews. After providing a description of the grounded theory concept, the authors explain the three stages of data analysis that they followed: grouping of

texts, testing and regrouping, and theory building. They describe how each of these stages was conducted utilising the grounded theory-driven methodology.

The next chapter (Chapter 5) presents the findings derived from the individual and group interviews conducted in the study. Here, the authors aim to elaborate on how individuals aged 50 and above perceive and reflect on their long career competence. They emphasise that a long career is not merely about time spent on the job but also encompasses the theoretical knowledge acquired and the practical experience gained through active engagement in work. The study reveals that long careers are enriched by employees' exposure to diverse experiences throughout their professional lives. Examples include connecting their contributions with those of others, developing workplace intuitions, recognising unique situations and determining appropriate actions, gaining insights through interactions with colleagues, managers, and trade union members, selecting and combining old and new skills to perform effectively in specific contexts, and navigating conflicting situations. The authors also highlight other significant factors contributing to long career competence, such as experiencing age diversity (working with different generations), achieving seniority or specialisation through prolonged job performance, and gaining diverse experiences by rotating between different roles. Additionally, they identify life course factors such as the evolving role of age at various career stages and understanding generational shifts in the workplace as further enrichments to a long career. Finally, the authors find that a feature of a long career is the openness to continuous and life-long learning.

Chapter 6 provides a comprehensive synthesis of the study's findings, focusing on the learnings, skills, and experiences of individuals aged 50 and above. The authors organise the findings into six key areas: communication, confidence, understanding of context, variety, seeing the big picture, and maturity. Communication, as a critical element of senior competence, is highlighted through the efforts of older employees to be effective communicators and to understand others. The authors identify confidence as another key aspect developed by older workers over the course of their careers through diverse experiences and interactions, enabling them to perform competently in their roles. The understanding of context is also linked to senior competence. The authors distinguish between 'context' and 'setting', defining 'setting' as the physical space where events occur and 'context' as a complex interplay of physical and psychological factors. In this study, understanding context is regarded as a foundational component of senior competence. The variety of experiences encompasses working with different employers, facing diverse

challenges, adopting varied approaches to tackle those challenges, and performing a wide range of tasks throughout one's career. Additionally, the ability to grasp the 'big picture' and establish 'relatedness' over the course of a career is recognised as another significant aspect of senior competence. Finally, maturity is identified as the sixth aspect of senior competence, characterised by possessing authority, earning respect in communication, and being perceived as important and significant by others. The authors further elaborate that openness to learning and self-reflection throughout one's career are additional features of maturity. These six aspects, communication, confidence, understanding of context, variety, seeing the big picture, and maturity, are identified as the foundational pillars upon which senior competence is built.

In Chapter 7, the authors develop the concept of the 'wise worker' linking senior competence to 'wisdom', which they regard as the essence of lifelong learning throughout a career. Drawing on existing theories, they highlight the features of wisdom, describing it as a combination of skills and expertise, a personal characteristic, and a composite of cognitive, reflective, and affective qualities. Overall, the authors view wisdom as the outcome of an individual's ability to cope with life. The authors emphasise that wise workers demonstrate life wisdom through their acceptance of their stage in life, compassion for younger colleagues, and willingness to share their knowledge, as reflected in the study's findings. They define the wise worker as "a mature, older worker who uses their age and many years of experience in working life to do their job in a way that benefits themselves, their co-workers, and the organisation where they work" (p. 90). They further explain that the wise worker exhibits competence in diverse ways, not necessarily aligning with previously theorised models. Wise workers possess certain personal characteristics, such as being more tolerant and accepting of others, learning from past mistakes, and sharing cultural and political insights. This way, authors introduce a broader view of wisdom to explain the senior competence than it has been documented in the past literature.

Chapter 8, the final chapter, presents the conclusion of the entire study. It asserts that 'senior competence' or 'long career competence' is individual (varying from person to person), relational (demonstrated in interactions with others), and contextual (dependent on the specific work setting). The chapter also discusses the concept of 'senior syndrome', where organisational management lacks confidence in or holds negative attitudes toward older workers. The authors argue that for organisations to benefit from senior competence, they must first define what senior

competence means and then integrate it into their human resource management systems.

### **Some Observations**

The empirical findings of this book are based on two case studies (one a large hospital and the other a government agency), both conducted in a single country (Norway). The selection of these two cases from this Nordic country is justified by the region's unique demographic characteristics, national policies, and organisational culture. While the subject matter is globally relevant, the socio-cultural and economic dynamics of the Nordic region differ significantly from those of other countries facing similar issues. Therefore, the narratives presented in this book may not be directly applicable to other contexts, although they provide useful insights for the global readership. However, further exploration of the concept of the 'wise worker' at different regional levels would be valuable.

It was noted that the authors use the terms 'employee' and 'worker' interchangeably. It would have been better if the authors had maintained consistency; if there is a specific reason for using both terms, this should have been clarified in the text. Additionally, since the subject matter encompasses a wide range of concepts such as elderly workers, work organisation, knowledge, competence, ageing, generativity, and more, it would have been beneficial to include both an Author Index and a Subject Index at the end of the book. Finally, from a scholarly point of view, it would have been immensely beneficial if the directions for future research emerging from this study were presented.

### **Conclusion**

*The Importance and Value of Older Employees: Wise Workers in the Workplace* makes a significant contribution to the existing knowledge base on ageing in the workplace. Its contribution goes beyond recognising the potential of older workers, thus offering valuable implications for human resource managers and organisational decision-makers on how to create workplaces that are conducive to older workers. This book is an excellent read for anyone interested in organisational development, age-inclusive policies, or the evolving dynamics of workforces.

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