



Conclusions

Abstract We will discuss how the concept of the wise worker can be used in the workplace and how a focus on late career competence can be of value to employers, employees and policymakers. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that age alone is not enough to ensure wisdom. We will set out some conditions to understanding and using the concept of the wise worker.

Keywords Wise worker · Late career competence

Over the last decades the expected life span has increased in most Western countries and the health of elders has improved significantly, opening up to the possibility of longer working careers. In recent years there has been a focus on increasing the actual retirement age among older employees, and many European countries, including Norway, have implemented extensive pension reforms. The advantage of having older workers in the workforce goes beyond the need for labour or the need for more people working and paying taxes and fewer people living on retirement benefits. The findings presented in this book, tell us about the advantages of having older workers in the labour market connected to the jobs they do and the competence and maturity they bring to those jobs.

When discussing late career competence in the workplace, it is important to acknowledge that not all older workers possess all these components. Age is no guarantee for wisdom and senior competence is *individual*, i.e. it differs from senior to senior. To develop wisdom, one needs to be constantly willing to learn and reflect on this learning. As several of our interviewees pointed out, reflection on action is a key to developing better practice, and being willing to challenge accepted practices and ways of working is a step towards developing improved practices. This is also one of the reasons why age diversity is useful. When older and experienced workers collaborate with younger colleagues fresh from the education system, experience-based knowledge has to be made explicit and explained to be shared. Building bridges between different types of knowledge and between younger and older workers help the older worker to recognise what they know and why they do things the way they do.

Another aspect of long career competence is that it is *relational*, i.e. it is demonstrated in interaction with others. Our wise workers are recognised as wise by their colleagues, managers and clients. The advantage to their organisations lies in the way they perform their work and share their knowledge in their daily work. Some of our interviewees worked as part of a team or a close-knit workgroup, such as in the hospital. Others did more solitary work, such as some of the inspectors. Although the Inspectorate had an ambition of always working in pairs when controlling an enterprise, in practice they told us that they often worked alone. Constrictions due to economy and staffing led to more solitary work than desired. In our interviews we noticed that the older employees who worked closely with colleagues could more easily describe what age and experience had taught them. They were used to having explain and share their competence, and this also promoted better recognition of this competence. The interviewees who worked alone needed more time and reflection to explain how age and experience had contributed to their competence. Working closely with colleagues enabled a better understanding of what they knew and why they performed their work the way they did.

A third important aspect of being a wise worker is that their competence is contextual, i.e. it is dependent upon the specific setting in which it is expressed. Settings are necessary to understand how the wisdom of older workers is expressed—nothing happens in a generic “workplace”, but in specific workplaces with specific people doing practical work. This implies that the context should be explored and identified in each new

workplace. What we have identified and described in this book is contingent on the specific workplaces we have studied. These workplaces were mainly public sector organisations and mainly large organisations and reflect the conditions there. Were we to do the same studies in different organisations, we would expect to find different examples and different stories. While the nurses talk about “the clinical eye”, being able to read the situation based on long experience, we might expect to find parallels in other types of work. Once in a production factory, someone described (personal communication) how the older operators could discover when something was wrong before the alarm went off by the sound in the production facility. This “experienced ear” is dependent on long experience, and is clearly a parallel to “the clinical eye”. Each type of workplace and type of work will be different. Further studies would be necessary to explore and illuminate the characteristics of the wise worker in other sectors and workplaces. Indeed, new studies might expand our concept of the wise worker.

Different workplaces can be influenced by managers and how they encourage or exclude the older employees from new ways of working and new learning. Not only can management behaviour reduce learning opportunities, but also signal a lack of confidence in older employees. The process of deskilling and demotivation has been described as a “senior syndrome” by The Centre for Senior Policy (www.seniorpolitikk.no). This process is characterised by managers who have declining expectations of their senior staff, leading to fewer challenges and professional offers for older employees. This in turn results in declining expectations and motivation among the employees themselves, thus leading to less renewal and professional development. This situation can then exacerbate the managers’ declining expectations. This is a negative spiral of expectations and development, which means that the older workers are neither seen as an asset to the organisation nor encouraged to develop and use their competence. There is no reason to believe that this senior syndrome is specific to Norway and we would expect to find similar situations in other countries.

For long career competence to be of use in the labour market and be an advantage to employers, there are some important considerations. We started this book with a story from one of our case organisations, the high-ranking manager who was challenged by the Board to define the value and potential of older employees and any particular knowledge or contributions they could make. This points to a major consideration:

Long career competence must be defined in relation to the workplace in which it is expressed, described in relation to the performance of the work operations interacting with colleagues, clients and others. When exploring this type of competence, one will find that not all older workers perform in the same way. The competence is individual, and some older workers will excel in some ways and others in other ways. Also not all older workers will be wise and mature. Age in itself is not a guarantee for wisdom. This means that an organisation that wants to explore the competence of their older employees must stop and ask how age and experience make these particular employees, in this particular workplace, more valuable. Our experiences showed us that the question of how age and experience contribute to the work performance of older workers, triggered engaging and positive discussions. Once a description of senior competence has been produced in a particular organisation, then the employer can take steps to support and encourage all its older employees to develop this kind of competence. Senior competence must be identified based on the specific work carried out and the groups of workers. When recognised, measures to support and develop such competence can then be incorporated in human resource management procedures of the organisation.

Having reached an understanding of the contribution of mature older workers, the organisation should strive to make sure this competence is being used and shared among employees. As pointed out, senior competence is relational, and it is in use one sees the value of the seniors' competence. Knowledge can be individual and passive, but competence is what is used to achieve results and solve tasks. Thus, seniors must be challenged, encouraged and involved in workplace activities. Although the situation in Norway, as described in the introduction, is fairly age positive with policy initiatives and incentives to promote longer careers, there are, as in other countries, still obstacles and negative attitudes to overcome.

When describing senior competence and its value, this has been done in relation to the local situation in the specific organisation. We have also highlighted the importance of viewing this competence as something closely bound to the organisation and situation in which it developed. This should not, however, limit the concept of the wise worker to these specific cases, or indeed to Norway. Any modern workplace with employees who have long experience will probably be able to find wise workers and examples of senior competence. The competence of these

workers and its value will be different due to differences in local and national conditions.

We argue that exploring what long career competence looks like in the individual workplace, is the foundation for recognition and further development of the employees' competence. Once managers and the organisations recognise and value long career competence, they need to organise work so that this competence can be shared. The value of age diversity lies in complementarity, that the elderly and experienced possess some types of expertise, while the young enter the workplace with their different skills. As one older interviewee said:

I also do not expect blind admiration from younger colleagues, but I will be happy if they value things that I have experienced and that can come in handy for them.

Senior competence must be shared to be valuable for the organisation as a whole, and facilitating collaboration and experience sharing across age groups supports this. It may be done through mentorship schemes, sponsorship and “shoulder-to-shoulder training”, but it is equally important to think about age diversity when assembling project teams, teams and work teams.

This book has explored and identified how the wise worker functions in an efficient way and how she or he utilises his or her knowledge and experience in an appropriate way. The practice of the wise worker deserves to be recognised and valued by employers and employees alike.

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