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Vivian W. Mott Ph.D.  
*East Carolina University*

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### Recommended Citation

Mott, Vivian W. Ph.D. (2006). "Working Late: Exploring the Workplaces, Motivations, and Barriers of Working Seniors," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2006/papers/44>

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# Working Late: Exploring the Workplaces, Motivations, and Barriers of Working Seniors

Vivian W. Mott, Ph.D.  
East Carolina University

Keywords: Older workers, Workplace, Motivations, Barriers, Phenomenological

**Abstract:** This phenomenological research explored the nature of seniors' employment. Findings focused on seniors' motivations for continuing employment, barriers and coping mechanisms, generational differences, the role of self-directed learning, and the effect of age, status, and experience on security and capital in the workplace.

## Introduction

While discrimination of older workers is illegal in the United States, seniors nonetheless frequently find themselves the target of more subtle forms of bias, discrimination, and inequity in the workplace. Seniors are often given more difficult or less advantageous work assignments or schedules, restricted from training that could lead to advancement, or terminated under the guise of economic downsizing. In other circumstances, seniors in today's workplaces experience resistance or out-right hostility from co-workers who feel their own advancement or security threatened by senior colleagues.

Other research has sought to understand seniors in the workplace – including what their training needs might be, seniors' ease (or difficulty) in learning new skills, the differential costs and return on investment in training older workers, or needed adaptation of training materials. In contrast, little has been written about the benefits to both organizations and employees who invest in training – benefits such as enhanced safety, increased quality assurance, greater employee loyalty, improved training and mentoring programs, and enhanced workplace satisfaction and quality of life. Most of the available research in either case reflects an organizational perspective. This study, on the other hand, sought to understand the nature of seniors' employment experiences from the perspectives of the older workers themselves.

## Conceptual Framework

The number of seniors in the workforce is substantial. In 2003, over 21 million workers 55 and older accounted for 15% percent of the total working population (Parker, 2005). That percentage is expected to increase to more than 20% by 2008 when more than 24 million workers will be over the age of 55 (Older Workers, 2001; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002). Seniors report several reasons for remaining in the workforce including financial concerns and the need for health care benefits, career changes, social interaction, and the desire to remain active (*Breaking the Silver Ceiling*, 2004; Parkinson, 2002). According to Noonan (2005), working in one's later years "provides opportunities to confirm one's identity after breaks in work relationships, to return to one's true identity, or to redefine oneself via the world of work" (p. 238).

Seniors experience a variety of barriers and discriminatory practices, however, as they continue to work. Even though discrimination on the basis of age is illegal, in 2000 more than 16,000 complaints of age discrimination were made, with more than \$45million awarded in damages (Older Workers, 2001). Age discrimination is subtle and reflects larger societal issues. According to Ken Dychtwald, "ours is a culture that glorifies youth, in our language, in the way

we talk to each other, in the models that we see on television.... It is so much a part of our society, we hardly even notice it" (*Breaking*, 2004, p. 17). Such unexamined attitudes and resulting human resource practices bias older workers, not only affecting those currently working but often keeping seniors from reentering the workforce. Older workers who lose jobs are less likely to return to full-time paid employment and post-displacement duration is much longer for seniors than any other age group (Chan & Stevens, 2001; Older Workers, 2001). Those who do return to work typically face larger losses in earnings and health benefits. Older and more experienced workers are also often denied raises and promotions, given more difficult or less advantageous work assignments or schedules, or restricted from training that could lead to advancement (Brooke & Taylor, 2005; Mott, 1998; Parker, 2005). Older women are especially disadvantaged in the workplace, with decreased opportunities for advancement or even informal training, with advancement-oriented training most often targeted to upper-level professional male employees (Beatty & Visser, 2005; Goldberg, 2000; Mott, 1998).

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this phenomenological research was to explore the nature of seniors' employment, including their motivations for continued employment, barriers encountered on the job in terms of training and advancement opportunities, and their means of coping with what they perceived as discriminatory practices in their workplaces. Phenomenological research utilizes the key principles of *epochè* (suspended personal judgment and the questioning of one's assumptions), reduction and bracketing of the data (removing the incidental in order to examine the essence of the experience being studied), and the creation of a structural synthesis of emerging themes, all of which allow for a deeper understanding of any human experience from the participants' perspective (Mott, 1994; Patton, 2002; van Manen, 1990).

A multi-site case study approach was conducted in an urban area of the southeastern United States. The participants included 12 senior women (7) and men (5), ages 59-80, whose average age was 68.9 years. Criteria for inclusion in the research included a minimum age of 55 years and full-time, long-term employment in organizations with a stated commitment to the training of their employees. Participants were technicians, held managerial or supervisory capacities, or worked in retail in a variety of paid positions in communications, retail and service industries, proprietary education and training, government, and social services. None of the participants was the owner of their organization or family member of the owner. All of the individuals had worked for their current employers for more than 10 years (one as long as 35 years); their average length of employment with their current employers was 18.6 years. Table 1, at the end of this section, depicts the demographics and relevant employment details of the participants.

Of particular interest in the inquiry were the nature of their positions (including specific tasks and related professional relationships), motivations for continued employment, training or continuing professional education opportunities, advancement prospects, and means of coping with what they perceived as discriminatory practices in their workplaces. Data to answer these queries were collected through conversational in-depth interviews (conducted either in person or by telephone) and focus groups. The interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes in length, were audio-taped, and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. Following the interviews, participants were invited to take part in one of three focus groups lasting approximately 2½ hours each, conducted within six weeks of the first interview and within one week of the last interview to ensure the participants' memory of their interviews would be as current as possible. Ten of the

12 participants attended at least one of the focus groups; four of them (three women and one male) attended two of the groups, and two women attended all three. The focus groups were led by the researcher, observed by a trained research assistant, and audio-taped for subsequent verbatim transcription. Each focus group began with a summary reminder of the purpose of the research project and an overview of emerging themes tentatively drawn from the interview data.

Beginning immediately after the first interview and continuing throughout data collection, data were analyzed using constant comparative methods with particular attention given phenomenological research strategies of suspended judgment and the reduction and bracketing of data. These strategies allowed for concurrent collection, categorization, and synthesis of data throughout the research process until a point of saturation was reached with no new themes or subcategories emerging, and all data fit well into existing categories.

Figure 1. Demographics of Study Participants.

NAME	GENDER	AGE	YRS EMPLOYED	BUSINESS/INDUSTRY	POSITION
Andy	M	66	22	Government	Technician
Bob	M	60	24	Social Services	Supervisor
Carol	F	71	35	Construction Equipment	Sales
Edward	M	59	12	Communications	Technician
Florence	F	79	16	Education & Training	Manager
Helen	F	80	12	Communications	Sales
Joan	F	68	12	Real Estate	Sales
Laura	F	66	26	Social Services	Supervisor
Mike	M	64	10	Communications	Technician
Pauline	F	74	18	Education & Training	Sales
Thomas	M	69	11	Communications	Supervisor
Wanda	F	71	25	Government	Manager

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### Discussion of Essential Themes

Findings focused on five major areas: (a) seniors' motivations for continuing employment; (b) barriers experienced in the workplace and coping mechanisms used; (c) generational differences in communication and interpersonal dynamics among seniors and their colleagues; (d) the role of self-directed learning by senior employees; and (e) the effect of age, status, and experience on security and capital in the workplace.

#### *Seniors' Motivations for Continuing Employment*

While there were common themes among them, the seniors' motivations for remaining in paid employment were as varied as they were. Only three among the 12 were financially secure enough to feel they didn't actually need to work. Even among these three, however, the health care and prescription drug benefits were important. As Thomas commented, "at my age, if I didn't have these health benefits, I couldn't get coverage; my prescriptions alone are reason enough for me to work!" Carol and Laura, both cancer survivors, shared the need to continue working in order to afford the expensive catastrophic illness coverage provided by their long-

<sup>6</sup> While participants were offered the use of pseudonyms, all of them preferred that their given names be used.

term employers. While not all of the 12 were covered by their employers' health care and prescription drug benefits, all of them stressed that the salaries, benefits, and (in some cases) continued retirement contributions were among the primary reasons they continued to work. The other uniformly significant benefit to working was the seniors' desire to remain active, both intellectually and physically. They spoke of "having someone to talk to about 'real' issues," the value of "getting up and doing something important each morning," and "exercising my brain on a daily basis."

#### *Barriers in the Workplace and Coping Mechanisms*

Each of the 12 felt he or she had been subjected to various forms of discrimination in the workplace. Generally, such biased behavior or attitude was subtle and "hard to document; they could always call it something else if you charged them with it." Carol gave one example related to her company's attempt to move her out of sales and into a lower-paying office job after knee replacement surgery. Bob, Joan, and Mike had all experienced lay-offs in their late 40s or 50s due to down-sizing in previous positions. One company actually changed its entire benefit package to avoid paying what was considered more expensive benefits to older workers. And, seven of the participants felt they had been denied equitable salary increases and bonuses due to their age. Andy and Wanda, both of whom worked in government service, tried "never to mention previous military service or my age" due to the bias against both in their working environments, but felt it was only a matter of time before some "they use some subtle, but unfair issue to force [us] out."

Since all of the seniors felt some degree of bias and prejudice in the workplace, each of them had devised a variety of coping mechanisms to deal with what they perceived as discrimination. Among their coping strategies were rigorous familiarity with company policy and regulatory statutes regarding equity in the workplace, networks and activist groups with whom they could consult and ask questions, support groups of friends and family, and the creation of a website where seniors could find links to helpful resources. While one participant suggested "do your job and don't let it get to you," others encouraged more activist approaches to challenging discriminatory practices. Carol maintained the more "vocal and active they know you are against age discrimination, the better. They know who they can mess with and who they can't."

#### *Generational Differences*

The theme of generational differences – particularly in terms of competition, interpersonal dynamics, and communication style – was first observed among the seniors in one of the focus groups. When I mentioned how collegial and supportive their group seemed to be, Edward noted that he saw their communication and relationships "as one of the best ways we cope with what we put up with in the workplace." Those in management or supervisory roles spoke of being more open about work-related issues with their subordinates than younger managers or supervisors; the four women in sales positions told of sharing customer leads, training information, inventory, and other resources with co-workers. So, while the generational differences might have been thought to merely reflect working style differences, they were perceived by the seniors as means of coping with the age discrimination.

#### *Role of Self-directed Learning*

Self-directed learning was lauded as an activity that not only made the seniors more valuable to their employers, but served distinct personal benefits to them as well. It was Pauline,

who had brokered educational programs and training for a proprietary continuing education firm for nearly 20 years, who first mentioned the importance of self-directed learning to working seniors. Pauline explained to others in the group what it meant to be self-directed learners and helped them see how the concept applied to them. Others in the group added that learning on their “own time and initiative should show our companies that we’re more valued, not less.”

### *Effect of Age, Status, and Experience*

While the seniors in this research project realized they were “frequently held back from training and moving up because of age,” all of them recognized the value of their age, status, and experience in the workplace. They understood these factors provided an additional degree of job security in some cases. Laura and Thomas, with their experience in supervision spoke of the various types of resources in any company and added, “we are part of that human resource, and part of our capital is that we’ve been here long enough and know enough to be too valuable to let go.” Florence and Wanda, the two female managers with greater leadership and authority in their organizations, also suggested that this “status may threaten some of our younger counterparts, but it can also protect us if we use it to our advantage.”

### **Conclusions and Implications for Theory and Practice**

The implications of this research are significant for both theory and practice in adult and continuing education, as well as training and human resource management. From a theoretical perspective, little has been written from the seniors’ perspectives about their reasons for remaining in the workplace, the training or other professional development opportunities received (or withheld), barriers perceived or coping mechanisms utilized while employed. Thus, the potential exists for contribution to the literature in human resources, adult learning and psycho-social development, and gerontology.

From a practical perspective, this research offers noteworthy, practical, and relevant suggestions for the use of workplace discussion centers, peer-instructed skills training, self-directed learning by all employees, and inter-generational work teams that can aid in mentoring younger employees, facilitating effective succession planning, and preserving the knowledge capital of their organizations. Comments of the participants in this research make clear the value of capitalizing on the significant numbers of skilled, experienced older workers in today’s dynamic and complex workplace. Further opportunities for research exist as well that may cast light on the significant issues raised by these and other seniors in the workplace.

Given the “rapidly changing nature of the workplace, increasing dependence on technology, and quickening obsolescence” (Mott, 1998, pp.28-29) of knowledge and skills in today’s workplace, organizations must make every effort to not only protect the knowledge capital of their senior workers, but find ways to share this form of human and organizational capital. In doing so, seniors in our workplaces will be honored and our workplaces will be more equitable and intellectually stimulating.

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