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Blended Working and the Employability of Older Workers, Retirement Timing, and Bridge Employment

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ABSTRACT

Blended working, a term we recently introduced, combines on-site and off-site working, enabled by the utilization of information and communications technologies (ICTs) that provides workers with almost constant access to job-relevant information and coworkers. In this commentary, we respond to three articles on blended work that appeared in the October 2016 issue of *Work, Aging and Retirement*. We agree that both characteristics of the worker and characteristics of the organization determine the effectiveness of blended working to the employability of older workers, retirement timing, and bridge employment. We conclude that blended work practices may suit any worker at any career stage and at the final stages of workers' career in particular.

We were pleased to see that three articles on blended working appeared in the October 2016 issue of *Work, Aging and Retirement* (i.e., Damman, 2016; Dropkin, Moline, Kim, & Gold, 2016; Zhan, 2016) and are happy to comment on these three important contributions. Blended working, a term we recently introduced (Van Yperen, Rietzschel, & De Jonge, 2014), combines on-site and off-site working, enabled by the utilization of information and communications technologies (ICTs) that provides workers with almost constant access to job-relevant information and coworkers. Blended working refers to smooth and seamless time-independent working (flexibility in when and how long workers engage in work-related tasks) and location-independent working (flexibility in where work gets done). Working from the office, having a business meeting with colleagues in a restaurant, preparing a meeting in the train, online file sharing, and work-related use of tablets and smartphones are examples of blended work practices (Van Yperen & Wörtler, in press).

Indeed, a pervasive and booming trend in modern societies is the increasing reliance on new and continuously improving ICT software, devices (computers, tablets, handheld and wearable devices, etc.), and infrastructure (i.e., increased availability of high-speed broadband connections). This development provides flexibility in where, when, and how long people work, learn, and care, referred to as blended working (e.g., Van Yperen et al., 2014), blended learning (e.g., Hew & Cheung, 2014; Owston, 2013), and blended care (e.g., Wilhelmsen et al., 2013). This, in turn, creates opportunities for improving individual, organizational, and societal outcomes in ways that were not previously possible. The three papers that appeared in the October 2016 issue of this

journal focused on the opportunities blended work offers with regard to extending employment of older workers and timing of retirement, including implications for the Age Discrimination in Employment Act and American with Disabilities Act (Dropkin et al., 2016). In their commentary articles, Damman (2016) discussed blended work in relation to the retirement literature, including a discussion of both characteristics of blended work and characteristics of older workers as an antecedent to the timing of retirement. Zhan (2016) discussed blended work in the context of the broader literature of bridge employment and provided a theoretical background to explain how blended work has an impact on older workers and retirees.

BLENDED WORKING AND OLDER WORKERS

In line with these three papers in *Work, Aging and Retirement*, in our work, we emphasize that blended working may be particularly suitable for specific groups of workers, including older workers (De Jonge, Van Yperen, & Rietzschel, 2015; Van Yperen & Wörtler, in press). Age is positively correlated with the need for autonomy (Kooij, de Lange, Jansen, Kanfer, & Dijkers, 2011) and the tendency to work from home (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Gibson, Blackwell, Dominicus, & Demerath, 2002; Lister & Harnish, 2011) and negatively related to work-home segmentation preference, need for structure, and need for relatedness (Van Yperen et al., 2014). Blended working fits these preferences and needs (Van Yperen et al., 2014) and, accordingly, allows older workers to (re)design their jobs in a way that suits them best and that appeals to their needs, including their need to avoid age-related stressors such as long commuting times, noise, and an overcrowded

environment (Cutler, 2006; Gibson et al., 2002; Hedge & Borman, 2012; Patrickson, 2002; Sharit, Czaja, Hernandez, & Nair, 2009), and their need for employment participation after their poststatutory retirement age (De Lange, Van Yperen, Van der Heijden, & Bal, 2010).

Additional reasons why blended working may work for older workers in particular is that they tend to thrive on their expertise and experience, they have had the time to earn the trust that is essential to working remotely and to self-managing their work, and they may wish to continue working after retirement (Damman, 2016; De Lange et al., 2010) or move slowly toward retirement by shifting their emphasis more toward leisure time and nonwork activities (West & Anderson, 2005). Older workers and their partners are also more likely to face age-related health issues and, accordingly, mobility limitations (Lister & Harnish, 2011; Thompson & Mayhorn, 2012). Blended work practices allow older workers to balance their work, needs, and family duties (Anderson, Bricout, & West, 2001; Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Hedge & Borman, 2012).

Conversely, older workers may be ill-suited for using new Internet-related technologies due to lack of skill and experience with the computer technologies required for blended work, or lack of confidence or anxiety to use these technologies, which may be fueled by negative stereotypes about older workers (De Jonge et al., 2015; Elias, Smith, & Barney, 2012; Hedge & Borman, 2012; Henkens, 2005; Hertel & Zacher, *in press*; Raiborn & Butler, 2009; Van Dalen, Henkens, & Schippers, 2010). For example, within cohorts of age 50 onwards, people are less likely to own a computer or to use the Internet or computers in general (Cutler, 2006; Hill, Ferris, & Mårtinson, 2003). Of those aged 65 years and older, only about 40% use the Internet (Charness, Fox, & Mitchum, 2010). These numbers are likely to increase rapidly in the near future because the next generations of older workers increasingly rely on ICTs (Thompson & Mayhorn, 2012). However, as older workers often face perceptual, physical, and cognitive declines, it may remain difficult for them to adopt rapidly to changing technological innovations (Thompson & Mayhorn, 2012).

Therefore, particularly for older workers, it is important to engage in ICTs training activities, which is advantageous to not only the individual worker but also the organization because (a) training investments tend to pay off within a few years (De Jonge et al., 2015; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Patrickson, 2002); (b) retaining older workers may avoid, or at least lower, the forecasted shortage of 20.8 million EU workers by 2030 (Dropkin et al., 2016; Hertel & Zacher, *in press*; Sharit et al., 2009); (c) it keeps workers with high levels of job expertise within the organization (Hedge & Borman, 2012); (d) an increasing number of older workers are delaying their retirement as a result of, among other things, improved education and health, economic conditions, and flexible retirement options (Elias et al., 2012; Hertel & Zacher, *in press*), but also with the intention to stay productive and mentally healthy (Lee, Czaja, & Sharit, 2009).

Relying on blended work practices may help to retain older workers (De Jonge et al., 2015; Van Yperen & Wörtler, *in press*). Older workers appear to be very willing to learn the technological knowledge and skills required for their job, and their experience of success when using new technologies results in favorable attitudes toward it (Cutler, 2006; Czaja & Moen, 2004; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Sharit et al., 2009). To enable these positive outcomes, it is important to give the right type of training (Cutler, 2006) and to include familiar tasks in the training program (Czaja & Moen, 2004). Possible physical and

cognitive declines need to be taken into account, and the training program should be aligned with the needs of older workers (Sharit & Czaja, 2012; Thompson & Mayhorn, 2012). When older workers have successful experiences with computer technologies, they tend to experience these technologies as reducing the effort and time required to fulfill job tasks and as increasing their job performance, enabling them to keep working effectively and productive (Mitzner et al., 2010).

Along these lines, Dropkin and colleagues (2016), Damman (2016), and Zhan (2016) raised theoretical accounts for why blended working is a particularly interesting concept for older workers in particular. Specifically, they discuss in-depth advantages (and risks) of blended work for older workers, they link blended work to established concepts such as bridge employment and retirement timing, and they provide suggestions for future research in the domain of blended work for older workers.

BLENDED WORKING AND EXTENDED EMPLOYABILITY

Dropkin and colleagues (2016) provided an interesting, comprehensive overview of factors facilitating and hindering blended working for older workers, including the opportunity to extend employability of older workers. This is a crucial consideration in light of the fact that the workforce is aging more rapidly than ever before, as post-World War II cohorts are passing the age 65, which is predicted to cause labor shortages of knowledge workers in industrialized countries (Hedge & Borman, 2012; Silverstein, 2008). We agree with Dropkin and colleagues (2016) that blended work is a work arrangement that potentially can bridge traditional employment and retirement.

In their review, Dropkin and colleagues (2016) pointed out benefits and risks associated with blended working, many of which may be applicable to workers of any age (Van Yperen et al., 2014; Van Yperen & Wörtler, *in press*). Dropkin and colleagues (2016) proposed that blended working may bring benefits to older employees in terms of comfort and autonomy, decreased psychosocial stress, lower exposure to travel, and access to personal assistance services, while employer-related benefits may include improved organizational image and lower costs.

Additionally, they identified individual- and organizational-level barriers to blended work. Working away from the office may result in low payment, monotonous jobs, work-life conflict, musculoskeletal strain (e.g., due to poor work station at home), and psychosocial effects (e.g., due to professional isolation). However, important to note is that blended working does not suggest that workers are exclusively remote workers (in contrast to office-based workers). Rather, the term blended working refers to a work arrangement in which workers alter between traditional office working and working from home or another location at any time (Van Yperen & Wörtler, *in press*).

The organizational-level barriers Dropkin and colleagues (2016) discussed include organizational inertia or the resistance to change. This may result in unwillingness to invest in ICTs training activities for older workers (i.e., resource rigidity) or unwillingness to change the patterns and logic that underlie those investments (i.e., routine rigidity), induced by, for example, concerns for organizational communication impairment, fear of loss of control, or lack of trust. While some of these risks and barriers have already been identified in other reviews (Van Yperen et al., 2014), Dropkin and colleagues (2016) discussed

promising organizational-level and governmental-level interventions and policies to counteract them.

Specifically, [Dropkin and colleagues \(2016\)](#) suggested that organizations should try to provide training early on while ensuring that training and instructions are tailored to the older worker, which may be advantageous for both the organization and the older worker. A second intervention [Dropkin and colleagues \(2016\)](#) proposed is the provision of assistive technology that helps them focus their attention on multiple work activities. According to [Dropkin and colleagues \(2016\)](#), it could also prove worthwhile to offer a specific career track for blended workers such that candidates could be selected based on ICTs skill level. Another critical intervention [Dropkin and colleagues \(2016\)](#) proposed is to educate managers about the capabilities and stereotypes of the older worker. Indeed, managers often have negative beliefs and stereotypes about the older worker as far as adaption skills are concerned. For example, in a large scale sample of 796 managers, [Henkens \(2005\)](#) found that managers typically associate older workers with a lack of adaptability and a resistance to technological innovations. Managers would need to become aware of such prevalent stereotypes which often are not evidence-based (e.g., [Cutler, 2006](#); [Czaja & Moen, 2004](#); [Ng & Feldman, 2012](#); [Sharit et al., 2009](#)). Interestingly, [Dropkin and colleagues \(2016\)](#) also discussed the consequences the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) and American with Disabilities Act (ADA) may have on blended work, which they characterized as an “evolving issue” (p. 8).

In sum, an important contribution of [Dropkin and colleagues \(2016\)](#) is that they illuminated a number of conditions that are likely to enhance successful blended working among older workers. These include federal or state standards, legislation and organizational support for blended work through incentives and policies, and at the management level, the willingness to employ older workers in such flexible work arrangement and to provide the accompanying facilities such as equipment and training.

BLENDING WORKING AND RETIREMENT TIMING

[Damman's \(2016\)](#) valuable contribution bridges the option of blended working to the retirement literature by focusing on how blended work relates to the relative point at which workers permanently leave their position or career path (i.e., retirement timing). Starting off with blended working characteristics, [Damman \(2016\)](#) illustrated that blended work can manifest in many different ways and thus may differentially impact on retirement timing. The differences include, for instance, full working hour scheduling flexibility versus boundaries, or regular blended working versus blended working on demand. Other considerations include the intensity of working at another location (see also [Golden & Veiga, 2005](#)) and the reasons for engaging in blended working (e.g., voluntarily versus enforced through financial concerns). As it has also been noted in other work (e.g., [Zhan & Wang, 2015](#)), [Damman \(2016\)](#) suspected that outcomes of blended working are a function of how it is motivated and how it manifests. Such factors affecting the outcomes of blended working would need to be heeded when making predictions about the presumed relationship between blended work and retirement timing.

After having acknowledged the importance of considering how blended working manifests with regard to its predicted relationship

with retirement timing, we were pleased to see that [Damman \(2016\)](#) shares our perspective by arguing that the effectiveness of blended working is likely to be a function of the characteristics of older workers as well, as this would shape the relationship between blended working and retirement timing (cf., [De Jonge et al., 2015](#); [Dropkin et al., 2016](#); [Van Yperen et al., 2014](#); [Van Yperen & Wörtler, in press](#)). Besides psychological needs ([Van Yperen et al., 2014](#)), [Damman \(2016\)](#) contended that the effectiveness of blended working depends upon characteristics of the worker such as workers' health condition and caregiving responsibilities. In other words, for predicting delaying transitions into retirement, it is important to acknowledge that older workers (as a subgroup of workers) are highly heterogeneous in terms of both structural characteristics and work situations, and psychological and social characteristics (cf., [Zhan & Wang, 2015](#)). Thus, [Damman \(2016\)](#) specified that differentiations must be made within the domain of older workers. For example, with regard to structural factors, older workers who would want to continue working because of social motives, those who suffer from a poor health condition, or those who are engaged in providing care to their close relatives, may benefit most from the flexibility inherent in blended work.

In our view, [Damman's \(2016\)](#) work contributes to the extant literature by its emphasis on the positive impact blended working might have on retirement timing, as a function of older workers' psychological and social characteristics. This provides an intriguing field for research which would contribute to expanding knowledge of the implication of blended working for a specific clientele of workers and our understanding of retirement timing.

BLENDING WORKING AND BRIDGE EMPLOYMENT

In her article, [Zhan \(2016\)](#) nicely illustrated how the concept of blended working fits in the broader literature of bridge employment and its outcomes. She argued that abundant flexibility in when and where to work may facilitate retirement adjustment of older workers because it could enable a smooth transition between work and nonwork domains. This would involve benefits in terms of a gradual decline of energy spent for work activities and an easier adjustment to the retiree identity as compared to abrupt withdrawal from work. In line with our findings ([Van Yperen et al., 2014](#)), she further acknowledged the role of autonomy as key characteristic of blended working. Indeed, in a recent study, we demonstrated that the perceived opportunity for blended working may be an effective, contemporary resource for workers to cope with increasing job demands ([Van Yperen, Wörtler, & De Jonge, 2016](#)). This finding is in line with research on both the job demands-control model ([Karasek, 1979](#)) and the job demands-resources model ([Bakker & Demerouti, 2007](#)) that showed similar effects of perceived autonomy (e.g., [Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2003](#)). Drawing on person-job fit theory ([Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005](#)), we also demonstrated that this was only true for workers high in need for autonomy ([Van Yperen et al., 2016](#)), which is a characteristic of older workers in particular ([Kooij et al., 2011](#)). Similarly, [Zhan \(2016\)](#) noted that especially among older workers, job autonomy is related to job satisfaction and job engagement ([Truxillo, Cadiz, Rineer, Zaniboni, & Fraccaroli, 2012](#)).

Another relevant model discussed by [Zhan \(2016\)](#) in the context of identifying retiree-related outcomes of blended working, is the

selection, optimization, and compensation (SOC) model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Moghimi, Zacher, Scheibe, & Van Yperen, 2016). This model states that individuals adopt the adaptive strategies of selection, optimization, and compensation when experiencing (aging-related) losses in their capabilities. Zhan (2016) argued that owing to the location and scheduling flexibility inherent in blended work, older workers may better engage in SOC strategies that help them respond functionally to aging-related changes and thereby maintain work capacity, motivation, and minimal changes in psychological well-being during the transition into retirement. Similar to Damman (2016), Zhan (2016) acknowledged the importance of the reasons for engaging in blended work. That is, intrinsic rather than extrinsic motives such as financial reasons may be essential for blended work to facilitate positive outcomes for older workers.

In our paper in which we introduced the concept of blended working (Van Yperen et al., 2014), we focused on the question for whom blended working may work best. As expected, we found that the stronger workers' need for autonomy, the more they felt that blended work works for them, because they get more discretion as to where and when to work. In contrast, workers' need for relatedness was negatively related to their perceived personal effectiveness of blended work. Our explanation is that blended working entails altering between on-site and off-site working, and having flexible hours, which may cause workers to feel disconnected from others and socially isolated (Bartel, Wrzesniewski, & Wiesenfeld, 2012; Cooper & Kurland, 2002; Maruyama & Tietze, 2012; O'Neill, Hambley, Greidanus, MacDonnell, & Kline, 2009), which then obviously interferes with workers' need for relatedness. Furthermore, possibly because blended working tends to create ambiguity (Slijkhuis, Rietzschel, & Van Yperen, 2013), workers' need for structure was inversely related to perceived personal effectiveness of time- and location-independent working. Thus, our findings indicated that the stronger their need for autonomy at work, and the weaker their needs for relatedness and structure at work, the more workers felt that blended working was effective for them. As noted earlier, this observed pattern strongly suggests that blended work is suitable for older workers in particular since age is positively correlated with the need for autonomy (Kooij et al., 2011) and negatively related to both the need for structure and the need for relatedness (Van Yperen et al., 2014).

Based on the observed links between openness to experience and adaptability, on the one hand, and work-related outcomes in transition stages, on the other hand, Zhan (2016) proposed these personality characteristics to be promising, additional candidates for explaining the effectiveness of blended working among older workers, particularly when used as a means of phased retirement. Furthermore, she suggested that especially older workers with disabilities or dependent family members may benefit from blended work because it eases demands associated with daily commuting and work speed, and it allows for breaks whenever needed (e.g., for caring responsibilities). We totally agree. In our recent review (Van Yperen & Wörtler, in press), we elaborately discuss the potential benefits of blended working for specific groups, including older workers, care givers, and workers with a physical disability. For example, the enablement of taking dependent family members to doctor appointments, keeping sick family members on regular medication, and providing general presence for those in need has been regarded as a key worker benefit commonly associated with flexible working practices (Major, Verive, & Joice, 2008). Also, for

(older) workers with a physical disability or other health issues, having control over when and where to work is a necessity for meeting instances such as fatigue, stamina, and pain, and it allows for access to personal medical-care services during the workday (Linden, 2014). Besides facilitating work-life balance for disabled individuals, blended working may also create working opportunities for individuals that may not be otherwise employable in the first place (Hesse, 1996).

FUTURE RESEARCH

The rapid advance of ever-improving computers and ICTs in modern societies provides a variety of opportunities for blended working (e.g., Van Yperen et al., 2014), but also for similar practices in other domains, including blended learning (e.g., Hew & Cheung, 2014; Owston, 2013) and blended care (e.g., Wilhelmsen et al., 2013). We agree with Damman (2016), Dropkin and colleagues (2016), and Zhan (2016) that blended working has the potential to provide considerable benefits to both organizations and older workers in particular, but it has been associated with serious drawbacks as well.

Whether blended working actually works for older workers seems to be a function of characteristics of both the older worker (e.g., psychological needs pattern, being a white-collar professionals with good ICT skills and the ability to work independently, past experience with remote work and ICTs, openness to experience and adaptability, and health condition) and the environment (e.g., existence of care-dependent relatives or family members at home, management support for time and location flexible work arrangements, and supervisors' trust). In particular with respect to prolonging employment, it is essential to account for the heterogeneity within the group of older workers (Damman, 2016). Hence, future studies may examine whether the link between psychological need fulfillment and retirement-related outcomes are a function of older workers' motives (e.g., intrinsic versus extrinsic) for being engaged in blended working. For example, in a recent study, Houliort and colleagues (2015) found that psychological need fulfillment through worker's passion for their work was related to healthy retirement adjustment. This finding would suggest that older workers' perception of blended work as "a passionate activity in harmony with other life spheres" should enhance healthy retirement.

Although older workers may benefit from blended working more than younger workers, a concern may be that older workers are ill-suited for using new Internet-related technologies due to lack of skill and experience with the computer technologies required for blended work. Some older workers may be anxious to use these technologies, which may be fueled by negative stereotypes about older workers (De Jonge et al., 2015; Elias et al., 2012; Hedge & Borman, 2012; Hertel & Zacher, in press; Raiborn & Butler, 2009; Van Dalen et al., 2010; Van Yperen & Wörtler, in press). Therefore, future studies may focus on how to successfully engage older workers in ICTs training activities. We suspect that learning success may vary as a function of workers' core assumptions about the malleability of personal qualities such as ICT skills (Dweck, 1986; Van Yperen & Wörtler, in press; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). These core assumptions range from viewing one's own personal qualities as fixed or stable (a fixed mindset) to malleable (a growth mindset). The stronger older workers' belief that skills necessary to use Internet-related technologies can be developed and acquired, the more they will be willing to engage in blended work practices.

In another recent work, Zhan and Wang (2015) emphasized that for gaining a solid understanding of retirement and bridge employment, people, context, and time should be considered. That is, rather than considering these elements separately, the research focus should be on the dynamics between individual difference variables (e.g., work motives and preferences) and contextual factors from different levels and domains, including company's attitudes toward older employees, characteristics of workers' occupation, interpersonal relationships at work and home, and the external environment. Furthermore, Zhan and Wang (2015) underscore that retirement is a process rather than a fixed occurrence, comprising different stages: retirement planning, retirement and bridge employment decision making, and retirement adjustment. Hence, to improve our understanding of the retirement process, the effects of the dynamics between older workers and their contexts should be examined within and across the different stages.

Similarly, Damman (2016) encouraged the use of multilevel studies to investigate the interaction of individual-level and organizational-level factors to determine retirement timing. Indeed, there is general agreement that both characteristics of the worker and characteristics of the organization determine the effectiveness of blended working to the employability of older workers (Dropkin et al., 2016), retirement timing (Damman, 2016), and bridge employment (Zhan, 2016). Damman (2016) also noted that future research should focus on actual blended working rather than the perceived opportunity for blended working (Van Yperen et al., 2014).

CONCLUSION

We conclude that both characteristics of the worker and characteristics of the organization determine the effectiveness of blended working to the employability of older workers (Dropkin et al., 2016), retirement timing (Damman, 2016), and bridge employment (Zhan, 2016). Because the rapid advance of ever-improving computers and ICTs in modern societies provides opportunities for improving individual, organizational, and societal outcomes in ways that were not previously possible, both researchers and practitioners should develop and examine strategies that can render blended work practices suitable for all workers at any stage of their career and the final stages of workers' career in particular.

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