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Two Older Workers' Adaptation to Physically Demanding Work

Abstract and Introduction

Little is known about how older workers adapt to physically demanding jobs as they age. Two qualitative case studies were conducted on 63 year old maintenance workers. Data were collected using document reviews, semi-structured interviews, observations, a Musculoskeletal Body map, and field notes. Findings indicated that older workers initiated job modifications themselves using ergonomic methods to minimize the loads and endurance needed for job tasks. Additional themes included the importance of coworker support, skill variety, and intergenerational conflict. The broader role of work in older workers' lives was explored.

Research Purpose

To understand how older blue collar workers perform physically demanding jobs as they age.

Research Question

How do older maintenance workers adapt to their job tasks given age-related changes in physical and psychosocial functioning?

Methods

Research Design: A multiple case study including one Custodian and one Mechanic.

Inclusion Criteria: 60 years or older, full time, significant medical history, no formal accommodations

Data Collection: Document Review, Body Map, Interview (2), Observation (2), Field Notes

Findings: Emergent Themes

Adaptations for Job Tasks

- ◆ Modified job tasks independently
- ◆ Think first
- ◆ Reduce the load
- ◆ Find help
- ◆ Pace one's self
- ◆ Others covered for older worker by completing harder tasks

Job Content: "What's important in a job"

- ◆ Skill variety- "an interesting job"
- ◆ Recognition for working hard
- ◆ Intergenerational respect from younger supervisors
- ◆ Social support from coworkers

I used to work with other cutterswe used to shoot the breeze, help solve others' problems. It makes the day go by. Now, I work by myself except breaks. I miss talking to people and seeing different people.

They treat you like little kids! Supervisors say, 'don't forget to mop the floor'- and I've been doing this for 14 years!

Broad Role of Work in Quality of Life

- ◆ **Home and work a continuum**
 - **For Tony- work helped to combat depression.**
 - **For Steve- work aggravated health**

When you're older you worry about retirement pay, medical, and a fair day's work. What's different? Everything is different- everything. At 63, you can't separate home and work... it's all part of the same life.

- ◆ **Work for retirement benefits**

Right now it (the medication) makes my legs swell up so I don't go as fast. My veins are sore so I keep my legs up on breaks. I didn't tell them (supervisors) because they would say, if you can't perform the work, then go!....And then who would hire me?

Discussion

- ❖ **Modified jobs themselves to accommodate age-related and medical conditions**
- ❖ **Workers used ergonomic principles**
- ❖ **Psychosocial aspects of work were important: variety, social support, control, and generational respect**
- ❖ **Work and home life mutually influenced each other.**
- ❖ **Work not intrinsically motivating, sometimes demeaning, boring, isolating**

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