The Meaning of Working for Older Workers: A Qualitative Study in the Italian Public Sector

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Abstract The main objective of this paper was to investigate how did older workers make meaning of their work and career with special reference to the approaching retirement experience. Participants were workers aged 45 years or more, with a medium-high educational level, employed in a public context – the University of Bari. Four focus groups were conducted with a total of 16 participants that is 4 participants for each focus, from all major work areas of the University of Bari. Subsequently, the information collected were subjected to computer aided content analysis. Results were discussed both with reference to human resource management practices and to further investigations of theoretical constructs such as employability and meaning of working of older workers.

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1. Defining the Concept of Age at Work

In studies concerning labor market participation, the term "older worker" usually refers to workers aged 50 or 55 and above. This threshold is chosen because in many countries this age range corresponds to a decline in the participation rate in the labor market [1]. Researchers examining older people in organizations, on the other hand, often put the threshold at 40 or 45, seeing "old" as referring to obsolete knowledge, skills, and attitudes [2]. However, a number of researchers have suggested that "chronological age" may be an insufficient operationalization of the factor age in the work setting [3,4,5,6,7].

Aging refers to changes that occur in biological, psychological, and social functioning over time and, therefore, affects each individual on the personal, organizational, and societal levels [4,6,8]. Individuals with the same chronological age may differ in terms of health, career stage, and family status. Chronological or calendar age may serve as a proxy for age-related processes that can influence work outcomes directly or indirectly [9] and, therefore, cannot be captured within one single definition or conceptualization. Lange et al. [10] have recently highlighted this complex operationalization of aging at work, and referred to the helpful approaches suggested by Sterns and Doverspike [9] to conceptualize age in the workplace.

The authors distinguished five different approaches to conceptualize aging of workers:

1. Chronological age which distinguishes older from younger workers using calendar age. As mentioned, the term "older worker" may refer to workers from the age of 40 to those aged over 75.
2. Functional or performance-based age which comparing older and younger workers' performances recognizes the great variation in individual abilities and functioning through different ages.
3. Psychosocial or subjective age which is based on the self and the social perception of age. Subjective age (or self perception) refers to how old an individual feels, looks and acts, with which age cohort the individual identifies, and how old the person desires to be [9].
4. Organizational age which refers to the aging of individuals in jobs and organizations in terms of seniority and job or organizational tenure.
5. The life span concept of age which borrows from a number of the above approaches, but advances the possibility for behavioral change at any point in the life cycle. This behavioral change may be affected by three sets of factors: normative, age-graded biological, and/or environmental determinants, which are strongly related to age; normative, history-graded influences, which are related to the age-cohort, and non-normative unique career and life changes [6,8,10].

However, the different conceptualizations of age have distinct effects on work-related attitudes. For example, Cleveland and McFarlane Shore [11] have found that the employee's chronological age, the employee's subjective age (self-perception), the employee's social age (others' perception), and the employee's relative age (compared with the employee's work group), differentially predicted job involvement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Employees who perceived themselves to be

older than most of the people in their work group, for example, exhibited more job involvement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.

Since the different conceptualizations of age have different effects on work-related outcomes, it is valuable to distinguish them. In this paper we will use the aforementioned five conceptualizations of age to distinguish age-related factors that influence a restructuration of the meaning attached to work by this special kind of target.

2. The Meaning of Working for Older Workers

Although the meaning of work has been largely studied by literature [12,13], limited research has been conducted into the meaning of working specifically to older workers. Several elements influence the meanings of work: the basic psychological processes of aging; the cohort or generation of the worker; the ecology of the work itself; and the larger social context of managing the risks of aging [14].

Despite the basic assumption that meaning of working varies between individuals, little research has been produced to try to explain if individual life stages could provide any explanation to this evidence. To this purpose, Loscocco and Kalleberg [15] argued that most research into the meaning of working "did not address the ways in which work attitudes differ at a various points in the life course" (p. 337).

Most research has not addressed the age norms at which workers choose to work or not to work, or other measures of the meaning of working that might apply as workers aged. Neither has the literature addressed the various levels of work commitment, as general orientation that reflects the importance of work role to identity. Within any one workforce, there is a mixture of ages; yet organizations tend to assume all workers have the same level of commitment and the same meaning of working. Friedmann and Havighurst [16], Erikson [17] and Levinson et al. [18] considered work an important task in adulthood and predicted particular stages to be reached as people aged. As summarized by Anderson and Hayes [19] traditional adult development theory identified three stages, namely early adulthood, mature adulthood and retirement. However these stages need re-examination, primarily because many social changes have took place including: the ageing of workforce in most industrialized countries, more women joining and rejoining the workforce, higher levels of unemployment, the ongoing trend of early retirement, the breaking down of the psychological contract, greater longevity, resulting in workers potentially having to support two other generations (their parents and children), organizational changes such as downsizing and rightsizing, resulting in many middle-aged workers losing their jobs and being unable to replace that job with another similar, etc.

Actually age has been found to be related to changes to the meaning of working on several bases, including types of job preferences [20], levels of skill and education [16], work centrality [12], birth cohort and associated socialization and work commitment [15].

Furthermore, very little research has been produced looking at the concerns of the combined areas of work meanings and age, even less using qualitative research methods. However Probert and MacDonald [21] conducted a significant study into the meaning of work for older workers using a qualitative approach. Overall, they found the paid work people do is important to their sense of identity and that unemployed were not valued by society. They found links between job satisfaction and working and included voluntary work in their study. However the meaning of working to older workers and why they choose to continue working or not was not the focus of their research.

In general, in the literature there are numerous studies on the meaning of work but there is still sufficient attention to the process by which it changes and evolves through the different stages of the career path for for a worker with professional experience. This would serve to encourage a better fit between worker and organization especially in the light of an exit from the labor market moved further and further in time.

It would be useful to explore this area of study taking into account the different levels of individual and professional growth. In this sense, the use of the qualitative method may serve to capture more specifically the individual shades of meaning related to the concept of work.

This area continues to be under-researched.

3. The Study

3.1. Method, Objectives and Participants

The research adopted a qualitative methodology. Data were gathered through 4 focus group discussions, during which participants were invited to tell their work experience, starting from the beginning of their career and focusing mostly on the turning points they believed important in the construction of their professional identity. This methodological option has been shown to be an effective tool, providing a rich source of data as individuals were invited to make sense together with their colleagues and to account for career choices and decisions, and for the implications and outcomes of those choices [22-27].

Focus group discussion are particularly useful because they allow to collect data in situations apparently natural such that the participants feel they can express their opinions without being judged and according to their own way of thinking. Moreover, the researcher has an important role but not so significant: it has the task of encouraging and supporting, where appropriate, the discussion among the participants letting mainly to them the necessary space to express themselves. In addition, for the objectives of this research, it appeared more functional methodology to capture the tight connection of older workers and their context and to understand what words and expressions they represent the concepts of interest of researchers.

The study was conducted at the University of Bari. This context was chosen as an example of a very formal public administration where tasks and roles are well defined and where any practice of flexibility and/or employability is

almost unknown. As a consequence, this context was thought to lead to the development of mostly extrinsic meaning of working patterns. Nonetheless, a recent restructuration of the rewarding systems as well as of job performance assessment procedures obliged employees to rethink about their "traditional" organizational behavior and to cope with new demands. Then, this study was also the chance to explore workers' coping strategies and attitude toward employability.

Moreover, by targeting administrative employees aged 45 years and above the study provided an opportunity to explore careers at a critical point, that is, during a period of career transition [18]. Indeed, Arnold [29] suggests that "transitions expose the fragility of subjective careers" (p. 594), thus forcing people to rethink their career histories, to re-evaluate their career success and to re-assess the meaning attached to work as well as their current employability. Then, in more detail, the main objectives of the study were:

- to explore the meaning older workers attribute to work and career;
- to investigate the representation that they have of the way it has evolved their career and relationship with their organization.

Special attention was dedicated to the sampling procedure as to ensure a relatively balanced sample in terms of age, gender, task, professional background and level of seniority. Then, the first focus group encompassed people aged between 46 – 49 years, representative of the "administrative area", the "technical – scientific area", the "libraries area" and the "socio – health area", with an average level of seniority of twenty years and mainly with subaltern tasks. The second one involved people aged between 52 – 62 years, representative of the "general services area", the "technical – scientific area", the "libraries area" and the "socio – health area", with an average level of seniority of twenty- seven years and essentially with leading tasks such as managing a library or a didactic secretariat for students. The third one was attended by people aged between 59 – 64 years, representative of the "administrative - management area", the "technical – scientific area", the "libraries area" with an average level of seniority of thirty years and mainly with leading tasks such as management of activities for teaching innovation for students. And finally the fourth one involved people aged between 48 – 49 years, principally representatives of the "technical – scientific area", the "libraries area" and "general services area", with an average level of seniority of twenty years and mainly with subaltern tasks. For the sake of analysis, the 4 groups were grouped into 2 subsamples: workers aged between 46 and 49 and workers aged between 52 and 64.

Each focus group session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and involved 4 people. Using a semi-structured interview guide participants began by talking about their career history from its beginning to date, then they were invited to discuss how careers had been managed, how their careers had changed over time, and to what extent they felt employability to be a priority in their current professional situation. The interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed as to allow content analysis, which was performed through T Lab [30], a software which helps researchers in coding and indexing discourses by producing statistical data on emergent themes and key words.

3.2. Results and Discussion

The first step in data analysis was to perform "word associations", that is to investigate the occurrence and co-occurrence of some targeted key words within the sub-corpora by assessing their reciprocal distance coefficient. More specifically, the key words selected with reference to the study aims were: "Work," "Career," "Retirement", "Younger Workers", "Skills".

The comparison between the subsamples highlighted some important differences. Taking the first targeted word, "Work" (lavoro), the first focus showed a representation of work experience based on extrinsic features highlighted by the co-occurrence of words such as "public competition/concorso" (*distance coefficient* = 0,29) "to recruit/assumere" (*distance coefficient* = 0,32) and "to acknowledge/riconoscere" (*distance coefficient* = 0,36). On the other hand, the second discussion shaped a meaning of working which was predominantly intrinsic showing the co-occurrence of words like "pleasure/piacere" (*distance coefficient* = 0,35), "autonomy/autonomia" (*distance coefficient* = 0,30) and "family/famiglia" (*distance coefficient* = 0,30). This different interpretation of working experience could be linked to the different personal conditions of those kind of workers. In the first case, the group of younger workers had a wider professional time perspective which was oriented toward the future, that is why they tended to make plans about their career while in the second case, older workers interpreted their work experience within a limited time perspective which was mainly focused on the pleasures granted by retirement such as to enjoy leisure time with the family.

Such interpretation was further confirmed by a more qualitative analysis of the extracts as shown above:

(1) We are always available to give our contribution, to face new adventures (...) the problem is that there is no official acknowledgement of our competence (...) there are no positive perspectives in the near future (...) at the beginning of my career I was really excited and full of energy, now I have lost my motivation because I do not see any concrete possibility of advancement of my organizational position (Female, cohort 46-49).

(2) When I will end up with my professional experience I will finally take care of myself, I hope I will soon become grandmother and take time for my family, I will enjoy the pleasure of doing nothing (Female, cohort 52-64).

The second targeted word "Career" (carriera) revealed also very significant associations. In line with the results previously discussed about the word "Work", in the first two focus groups the word "Career" is significantly linked to words evoking its extrinsic dimension as for instance "year two thousand/2000" (*distance coefficient* = 0,43), "competitive examination/concorso" (*distance coefficient* = 0,42), "organizational position/posizione" (*distance coefficient* = 0,38). In the case of the focus groups with older workers the most recurrent words associated with this term were "experience/esperienza" (*distance coefficien t* = 0,42), "retirement/pensione" (*distance coefficient* = 0,28) "university/università" (*distance*

coefficient = 0,25), "pleasure/piacere" (*distance coefficient* = 0,18) "colleague/collega" (*distance coefficient* = 0,16) "teacher/docente" (*distance coefficient* = 0,16). Then, younger workers described career as an extrinsic aspect of work, mostly centered on the possibility to advance and to grow up professionally through a competitive examination, even if any possibility has been blocked since 2000. On the other hand, older workers conceived career mostly focusing on its intrinsic features, thus they described their career as a pleasant experience, university was described as a pleasant context where they have had the chance to develop expertise but also significant relationships with teachers and colleagues.

(3) I entered this university in 2000 after 11 years of precariousness (...) I had to wait for so long and to pass many competitive exams that now I feel unconfident about any possibility of career growth (Male, cohort 46,49).

(4) Career means personal growth (...) it passes across many things, first of all across curiosity (...) most of these personal qualities would be never acknowledged by the institution (Male, cohort 52-64).
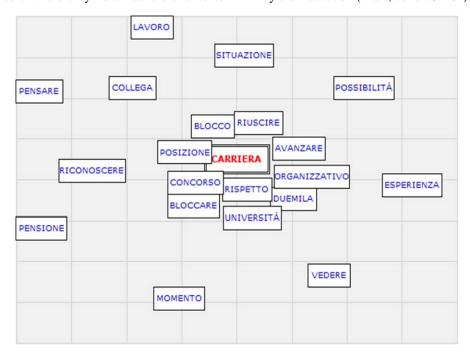

Figure 1. Map of Words Associations - Targeted word Career/Carriera (age range 46-49)
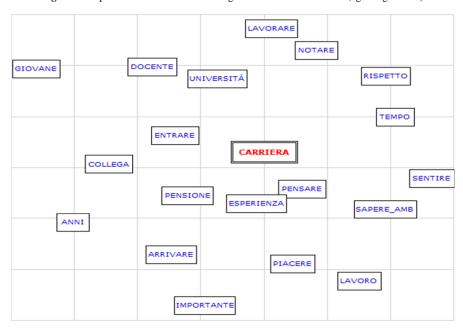

Figure 2. Map of Words Associations - Targeted word Career/Carriera (age range 52-64)

As for the word "Retirement" (pensione), the two focus groups conduced with younger workers showed significant associations. More specifically, interesting associations were fund with terms "to think/pensare" (*distance coefficient* = 0,42), "to work/lavorare" (*distance coefficient* = 0,42), "moment/momento" (*distance* coefficient = 0,37) and "to take care of one's self/dedicare" (*distance coefficient* = 0,27). On the other hand, older workers described retirement by making reference to terms such as "to hope/sperare" (*distance coefficient* = 0,47), "voluntary work/volontariato" (*distance coefficient* = 0,40), "time/tempo" (*distance*

coefficient=0,35). This thematic representation described retirement in similar terms as a life phase which allows to take care of one's self and to dedicate to the others. Anyway while older workers had specific plans about time management in this phase (as for instance engaging in voluntary work), younger workers had difficulties in imaging it concretely, since still faraway in time.

(5) I see retirement as a moment of liberation and rebirth (...) a phase where I can finally take the steer of my life (...) and dedicate to my hobbies and to everything that could make me feel good. (female, cohort 46-49).

(6) I cannot foresee the emotional impact, the detachment I would feel, I will miss many people and it would be difficult to get accustomed to the idea I could see them only outside the university (...) I hope I would continue giving my contribution to students also through voluntary work (female, cohort 52-64).
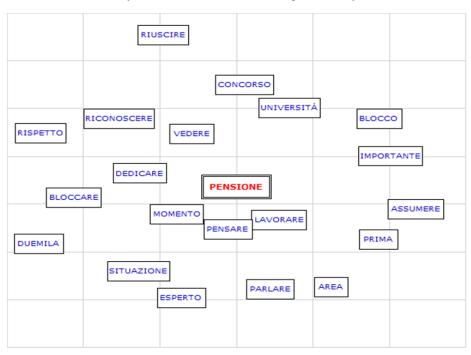

Figure 3. Map of Words Associations - Targeted word Retirement/Pensione (age range 46-49)
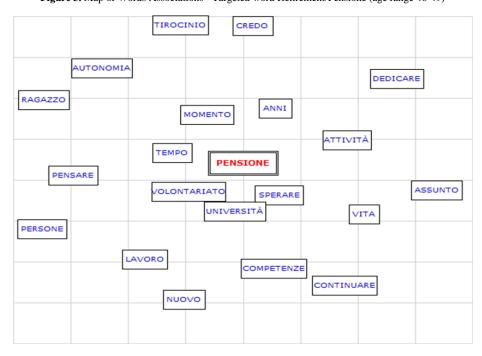

Figure 4. Map of Words Associations - Targeted word Retirement/Pensione (age range 52-64)

As to better investigate the representation older workers had of their professional identity it was decided to focus on their alter ego that is on "Younger Workers" (giovani). In the first two focus groups this term showed significant associations with the words "mature workers/maturi" (*distance coefficient* = 0,54), "colleague/collega" (*distance coefficient* = 0,44), "to talk/parlare" (distance coefficient = 0,22), "expert/esperto" (*distance coefficient* = 0,20) and "experience/esperienza" (*distance coefficient* = 0,18). The other two focus groups which have involved older workers, more recurrent was the association with words such as "colleagues/colleghi" (*distance coefficient* = 0,46),

"problems/problemi" (*distance coefficient* = 0,40), "relationship/rapporto" (distance coefficient = 0,36) and "availability/disponibilità" (*distance coefficient* = 0,20). In both cases, these data marked the importance of dialogue and collaboration between the two generations, which is functional not simply for a better integration and socialization of human resources but also for the development of the whole organization.

(7) I like to interact with younger colleagues (...) I am always available to speak with them and to help them (...) (male, cohort 46-49).

(8) Young workers lack humbleness (...) they think they can do better than we do (...) but I think experience is very importance (...) you can rely on it (...) that is why we should improve our relationship (male, cohort 52-64).

Finally, the focus on the word "Skills" (competenze) allowed to better investigate any representation about the possible development of employability skills in these groups of workers. In the first two focus groups the word "competence" recurred in association with words such as "years/anni" (*distance coefficient* = 0,33), "to acknowledge/riconoscere" (*distance coefficient* = 0,22) and "experience/esperienza" (*distance coefficient* = 0,18). In the two focus performed with older workers the terms "voluntary work/volontariato" (*distance coefficient* = 0,50), "institution/istituzione" (*distance coefficient* = 0,37), "retirement/pensione" (*distance coefficient* = 0,39) and "experience/esperienza" (*distance coefficient* = 0,23) recurred. These results highlighted how competencies were conceived as the most significant result of many years of work and experience and how important was its acknowledgement for younger workers while older workers were already oriented to reprogram their career and to use their competencies and skills in different working contexts as for instance in voluntary work.

(9) Mature workers are a precious resource for the organization (...) they have had many years of experience that should be acknowledged (...) (female, cohort 46-49).

(10) Expert workers are not allowed by the organization to transfer their competence and to enhance their skills (...) they often lose their motivation and dedicate to voluntary work even before retiring (male, cohort 52-64).

A second step in content analysis was accomplished through the focus on the specific words of each corpus of data (word specificity). Thanks to the software it was possible to trace back the words which are significantly recurrent in the discourses of younger and older workers 1.

The specific words recurrent in the focus group conducted with younger workers were "personal" (χ = 4.41), "worker" (χ = 12.88), "to achieve" (χ = 8.62), "competitive examination" (χ = 6.11) and "organizational" (χ = 5.60). On the other hand, the specific words recurrent in the focus with older workers were "work" (χ = 4.19), "to feel" (χ = 6.40) "relationship" (χ = 5.25), "colleague" (χ = 4.93) and "teacher" (χ = 4, 93). Then, similarly to what observed earlier in word associations analysis, the main difference between the two groups of participants was a quite different representation of work experience: for the group of younger employees work experience was strictly linked to career and thus to professional advancement, while for the older ones work experience had a more intrinsic meaning being connected with positive relationships with colleagues and teachers. This opposition was further confirmed by the specific verbs which characterized the two sub-corpora and which were opposite to each other in depicting the meaning of work: to achieve and to feel.

The final step of content analysis was fulfilled by correspondence analysis, that allowed to organize the thematic network of meanings according to two axes which have helped understanding differences and similarities between the focus group discussions (Figure 5). According to the distribution of words in the Cartesian space, the vertical axis was called "**Meaning of Work**" and the horizontal axes "**Meaning of Age**".
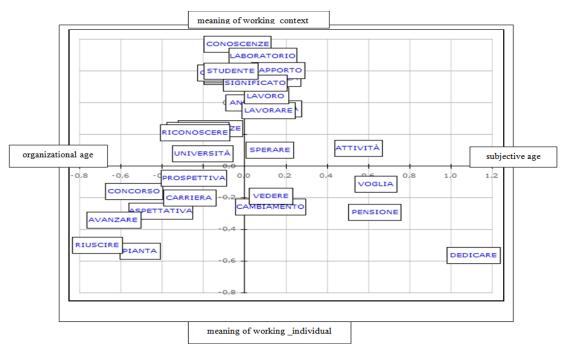

Figure 5. Map of Core Themes_ Correspondence Analysis

More specifically, the vertical axis defined "**Meaning of Work**" was articulated into two poles: an individual and a contextual meaning. Such option was intended to better distinguish the intrinsic and the extrinsic meanings [12,27] recurred in the discourses analyzed. Then the upper side of the graph was connected with a contextual meaning of working. It showed the recurrence of words describing the organizational context (as for instance laboratory, office, university, etc.) and the extrinsic features of such experience (career, advancement, competition, etc.).

The lower side of the graph was connected with an individual meaning of working mostly centered on intrinsic features of such experience.

With respect to the horizontal axis called "**Meaning of the Age**", it was articulated into organizational and subjective age [9]. Such option was intended to distinguish two different conceptions of older workers. The first one focused on experience and thus on aging of individuals in jobs and in organizations in terms of seniority and job and/or organizational tenure. Differently, the second one was a self perception which referred to how old individuals feel, look and act. In this sense, a very different discursive distribution was to be observed: in the first case words such as career, perspective, expectations and competition recurred while in the second case the most significantly recurrent words were change, retirement, to take care of one's self.

4. Conclusions

The main aim of the present study was to investigate the meaning attached to work and career in a sample of older workers approaching to retirement experience. The results gathered from the four focus groups granted several interesting considerations which encourage future research in the field.

Content analysis revealed that the older workers interviewed had a rather traditional concept of career, meant as a route toward personal and professional growth [31,32,33]. Nonetheless, some of features that recurred could be linked to the peculiar public context, target of the study. More specifically, career was mainly described in terms of its extrinsic features, that is as a linear progression made possible by competitive examinations, or in terms of its intrinsic features, that is as acquisition of expertise and public acknowledgment of competences. This was the main difference observed between the workers who were about to retire and those who were far off this experience.

Similarly, participants attributed a different meaning to work experience depending on how did they image themselves as retired people. Overall, retirement was considered in positive terms as a pleasant break from work experience, as a time for the self and for the family [34]. For participants under 50ies, retirement was difficult to imagine concretely, while for participants over 50ies it represented a time where skills and experience could be positively reinvented and re-engaged for instance in voluntary work. Anyway all participants had difficulty in considering the possibility to reintegrate back into the labor market after retirement.

With reference to the concept of work and, in particular, the enhancement of their own professional, results showed that all participants were not aware of the competencies and expertise developed over years of work. Therefore, they did not engage in any specific strategies to re-use these competencies in other profit contexts after retirement. However, almost each participant agreed about the importance of this heritage which could be fruitfully used in other non-working contexts such as voluntary work.

The results, relating to a sample of workers over 45, show how the concept of work and career turn out to be particularly related to the concept of retirement: in this sense, it would be useful to set, from the point of view of academic and career management, a serious reflection on the modalities through which effectively manage paths career extended over time so as to facilitate a more satisfying work life. In addition, specific attention would be placed on the approach to detachment from work. That stage may be traumatic or represent a moment of transition to a stage of life in which reuse the knowledge and skills developed.

Focusing on the conceptualization of aging at work [10], the analysis of core themes underlined the need to approach to the topic by adopting both an individual conception of age – "Subjective Age" [20] as well as an organizational conception focused on seniority and tenure - " Organizational Age" [9]. Such results confirmed that age is a composite construct which cannot be restricted to the concept of "getting older".

Finally, results highlighted the need to give further consideration to some key elements that have emerged predominantly in the results of this qualitative study as for instance the relevance of recognition of skills and knowledge of older workers by the management and by colleagues. Actually, this aspect deserves attention in terms of human resource management practices especially in the public sector, where motivation to work is rarely linked to intrinsic elements.

To this purpose, would be useful for organizations to concentrate more on effective management of workers over 45 in that:

• older workers, strongly identified with their career, if they perceive support from their organization in terms of, also, a certain autonomy in the professional "inside and outside" the organization would be considered to be always available workers "employable" by the organization.

• older workers, encouraged and motivated through supplementary benefits, and higher pay, will prove available for professional training aimed at increasing, as a result, organizational productivity. Thus, an individual path of constant updating and professional growth can be encouraged by a series of "incentives" linked, above all, a careful assessment of individual work performance.

Another important aspect is the focus on the relationship between older workers- younger workers, on the interpersonal dynamics created, in organizational contexts, between these two generations of workers.

As for limits and future perspectives, though the results gathered thanks to the adoption of a qualitative methodology could be referred strictly to the small sample of workers interviewed in the public context of the University of Bari, they encouraged further exploration of

the variables investigated through the integration of quantitative methodologies, for example by enlarging the examination of meaning of working, career and employability to the other workers of the university as well as to workers who recently retired from the same organization.

Notes

This kind of analysis was based on the comparison between the expected and observed frequencies of each word assessed through the chi squared test (degrees of freedom = 1 and $p<.05$).

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