Blended Work and Employment Participation of Older Workers: A Further Discussion

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ABSTRACT

In the context of population aging and related policy aims to prolong working lives, it is highly important to get a better understanding of factors that may stimulate or rather inhibit prolonged employment. Dropkin and colleagues (Dropkin, J., Moline, J., Kim, H., & Gold, J. E. (2016). Blended work as a bridge between traditional workplace employment and retirement: A conceptual review. *Work, Aging and Retirement*. doi:10.1093/workar/waw017) present blended work as a form of work that may help to extend the working lives of older workers, particularly among knowledge workers. Although the article provides a description of the literature on blended work and older workers, limited connection is made to the retirement literature. In this article, I describe theory and empirical findings on antecedents of retirement timing and link it to the notion of blended work. Furthermore, I argue that both characteristics of blended work and characteristics of older workers should be taken into account when formulating concrete predictions about its impact on the timing of retirement. I conclude this article by discussing potentially fruitful directions for future research.

In the context of population aging and its consequences for pension systems and labor markets, the issue of prolonged employment is placed high on the scientific and policy agendas. In the contribution “Blended work as a bridge between traditional workplace employment and retirement: A conceptual review” by Dropkin, Moline, Kim, and Gold (2016), the concept of blended work—which refers to “time-independent and location-independent working enabled through high-tech ICT [Information and Communication Technology] software, devices, and infrastructure” (Van Yperen, Rietzschel, & De Jonge, 2014, p. 1)—is presented as a form of work that may help to increase the employment participation of older workers, especially among knowledge workers. Employees who conduct blended work combine working on-site with working off-site, and are flexible in when and how long they work (Van Yperen et al., 2014). Dropkin and colleagues (2016) describe several aspects of blended work that may be particularly beneficial to older workers, as well as risks of blended work, and barriers for realizing it. Although the article provides a detailed description of the literature on blended work and older workers, the link to the literature on retirement is limited. In addition, limited attention is paid to various ways in which employees and organizations may shape the concept of blended work. There is also lack of discussion regarding the potential influences of blended work on prolonged employment for different types of workers.

The aim of the current article is to link the concept of blended work to the literature on retirement timing, which can be broadly defined

as “the age or relative point at which workers exit from their position or career path” (Fisher, Chaffee, & Sonnega, 2016, p. 230). Firstly, in this article I will describe theory and empirical findings on predictors of retirement timing and connect it to the concept of blended work. In this way, I try to gain a better understanding of the mechanisms via which blended work may (or may not) result in working until older ages. Secondly, I will pay attention to the fact that blended work can manifest in many different ways. I will argue that characteristics of blended work should be taken into account when formulating detailed predictions about its impact on the timing of retirement. Thirdly, I will argue that the impact of blended work on retirement timing may depend upon characteristics of the worker, such as the older worker’s health condition, caregiving responsibilities, and psychological needs. I conclude this article by discussing potentially fruitful directions for future research.

Whereas the term blended work has only been introduced relatively recently (Van Yperen et al., 2014), the concept is closely related to large existing literatures on telecommuting, scheduling flexibility, and flexible work arrangements. In a recent review telecommuting has been defined as “a work practice that involves members of an organization substituting a portion of their typical work hours (ranging from a few hours per week to nearly full-time) to work away from a central workplace—typically principally from home—using technology to interact with others as needed to conduct work tasks” (Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015, p. 44). Telecommuters therefore often naturally

“blend” work, by working both at the central workplace and from home (and occasionally at other locations), but do not necessarily have flexibility in terms of working hours (which is a defining feature of blended working). The term flexible work arrangements includes the work practices of telecommuting (Allen et al., 2015) and scheduling flexibility (Allen, Johnson, Kiburz, & Shockley, 2013), but refers in broader terms to a set of “policies or programs that give employees more control over where, when and how much to work” (Cahill, James, & Pitt-Catsouphes, 2015, p. 350). Blended work can be enabled by these kinds of policies and programs, and is also made possible by technological revolutions and the increasing adoption of ICTs in the domain of work (Van Yperen et al., 2014; Van Yperen, Wörtler, & De Jonge, 2016).

BLENDING WORK AND RETIREMENT TIMING

In the retirement literature, retirement timing is generally—either implicitly or explicitly—theorized as being the outcome of a rational decision-making process (Jex & Grosch, 2013). Feldman and Beehr (2011) describe in their review of the literature on the retirement decision-making process two theories that are central for understanding the actual transition into retirement: rational-economic, and motivational-instrumental theories. In these theories, it is assumed that individuals evaluate the costs and benefits, pros and cons, or push and pull factors of their present work situation and their expected future situation as a retiree. On the basis of “summed and/or multiplicative estimates of the ‘expected value’ of retirement relative to work, individuals make decisions about whether or not to retire” (Feldman & Beehr, 2011, p. 197). Rational-economic theories mainly focus on whether individuals can afford to retire financially. It is assumed that households weigh the benefits of increased earnings, against the benefits of more leisure time (Laitner & Sonnegra, 2013). In motivational-instrumental theories, the focus is not solely on financial rewards, but also on many other rewards individuals could get from work (e.g., time structure, social support) and from retirement (e.g., more time for hobbies). When retirement becomes more instrumental in meeting central needs than prolonged employment, individuals can be expected to decide to transition into retirement (Feldman & Beehr, 2011).

Different groups of factors can be assumed to shape the costs and benefits of prolonged employment versus retirement. One central guiding framework in this respect, which has become increasingly popular in the literature on retirement timing in recent years (e.g., see Damman, Henkens, & Kalmijn, 2011; Madero-Cabib, Gauthier, & Le Goff, 2016; Raymo, Warren, Sweeney, Hauser, & Ho, 2011; Szinovacz, DeViney, & Davey, 2001), is the life course perspective. This broad theoretical framework proposes that life transitions—such as the transition from work into retirement—should be understood by taking into account the experiences and contexts that surround it (Settersten, 2003). Historical time and place, social norms, the lives of close others (“linked lives”), and (earlier) life experiences in different life spheres (e.g., work, family, and leisure) are all assumed to be important contexts that shape the lives of individuals (Dykstra, Kraaykamp, Lippe, & Schippers, 2007). In line with the “multilevel” approach of the life course perspective (cf., Szinovacz, 2013), recent reviews of the literature on the retirement process (Wang & Shultz, 2010) and retirement timing (Fisher et al., 2016) have distinguished four main groups of predictors of retirement timing: individual factors, work/organization related factors, family factors, and macro level socioeconomic factors.

Work-related factors are thus found to be among the central predictors of retirement timing. This suggests that blended work, as a specific form of work, might also be a relevant predictor of the timing of retirement.

How can blended work be expected to affect retirement timing? In the review article by Dropkin and colleagues (2016), several benefits and risks of blended work for older workers have been listed. On the one hand, as compared to full-time workplace employment, blended work may offer more comfort (e.g., own environment, no commuting time, access to assistive technology), more autonomy (e.g., by having less direct face-to-face supervision), and more flexibility (e.g., control over work hours, work breaks). In this respect, blended work may result in less psychosocial stress, higher job satisfaction, and a better work-life balance (cf., Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). The characteristics of blended work may therefore be perceived as benefits that will make continued work a relatively attractive option for those older workers engaged in blended work. From this line of reasoning, older workers who engage in blended work can generally be expected to (intend to) retire later than those who are not working location- and time-independently. It should be noted, however, that blended work may create risks to older workers as well. It could, for instance, result in increased complexity, feelings of external control (because of the pressure to be always available), and role ambiguity resulting from increased work-home interference (De Jonge, Van Yperen, & Rietzschel, 2015). These types of consequences may rather weaken the expected positive effect of blended work on prolonged employment.

In existing empirical research on predictors of retirement timing, blended work has to my knowledge not been directly measured and tested as a predictor of retirement timing. Earlier studies have shown, however, that job characteristics such as job control and job autonomy—which are assumed to be associated with blended work—are positively related to the intention to retire late and actual late retirement (Carr et al., 2016; Van den Berg, Schuring, Avendano, Mackenbach, & Burdorf, 2010). Another branch of literature related to the notion of blended work focuses on the relationships between flexible work arrangements and retirement timing. In organizations that implement flexible work options (to all workers), managers have been found to believe that this flexibility promotes continued work during late careers and prevents early retirement (Earl & Taylor, 2015; Moen, Kojola, & Schaefer, 2016). Studies on the impact of flexible work options on retirement timing conducted among older workers, however, have shown mixed results.

On the one hand, several studies did not find the hypothesized positive effect of flexible work options on prolonged employment. Herrbach, Mignonac, Vandenberghe, and Negrini (2009), for instance, found on the basis of French data that flexible working conditions (referring to opportunities to work part-time, retire gradually, work from home, and have flexible work hours) had no statistically significant relationship with voluntary retirement. A similar finding is reported in a Canadian study by Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel (2009), which has shown that flexible work options (based on a combined measure including flexible work schedules, part-time employment, job sharing, and phased retirement options) were not significantly associated with perceived organizational support. In turn, these authors found perceived organizational support to be a central predictor of older workers’ intention to remain with their organization. Also in a Dutch study by Van Solinge and Henkens (2014) with a more

specific measure of flexible work options, no support was found for the hypothesis that having opportunities to work flexibly in terms of time and place is associated with later transitions into retirement. Working times/workplace flexibility was neither related to retirement intentions, nor to actual retirement timing.

On the other hand, a study by Cahill, James, and Pitt-Catsouphes (2015) in a regional hospital system in the United States suggests that “workplace flexibility could be one solution to promote continued work later in life” (p. 350). In their study, work units were randomly assigned to a management initiative that stimulated managers and employees to discuss time and place arrangements. The findings show that respondents in the treatment group were more likely to expect to remain with the organization until retirement (and less likely to consider bridge employment) as compared to the respondents in the control group. Similarly, a recent study by Moen, Kojola, Kelly, and Karakaya (2016) examined the impact of changing levels of flexibility in terms of when and where the work is done, on retirement timing expectations of Boomers working in an IT division of a Fortune 500 corporation. Work groups were randomly assigned to a flexibility/support intervention that was designed to allow “employee latitude regarding when and where work is done the *new norm* for all teams and team members” (p. 2). The results show that those in the treatment group expect to retire later from the organization than those in the control group. Moreover, a Dutch study by Bal, De Jong, Jansen, and Bakker (2012) has shown that flexibility I-deals (i.e., individual agreements that are made between an employee and the organization with regard to flexibility in work schedules and work-related tasks) were positively associated with the motivation to continue working after retirement.

Although the use of highly different samples, measures of flexible work, and dependent variables makes it difficult to draw general conclusions, these mixed findings may suggest that it is not the availability of flexible work options, but rather a change in flexible work options (and the accompanying increased use and support for flexibility by one’s supervisor and team), that helps extend working lives. In addition, the findings suggest that having flexible work options may be more beneficial for some workers than for others in terms of prolonging employment, because some workers are more in need of flexibility due to personal life circumstances than others (Moen, Kojola, Kelly, et al., 2016). When linking these notions to the concept of blended work, it suggests that the characteristics and context of blended work may be highly important for understanding its potential impact on retirement timing, as well as the characteristics of the older workers who conduct blended work. In the next sections, I will pay attention to the role of diversity in blended work, as well as diversity within the group of older workers.

BLENDING WORK: A DIVERSE PHENOMENON

Whereas in broad terms blended work refers to time-independent and location-independent working (Van Yperen et al., 2014), it can manifest in many different ways. Those who conduct blended work could spend the majority of their time in the workplace, or spend the majority of their working time off-site. They can be fully flexible in terms of work hours, or can be bound to a certain extent to office hours. Blended work can be a characteristic of work applying to all who do the work, or be the result of an individualized agreement between employee and employer. Workers may blend work regularly, or only in case this is needed due to specific circumstances. These characteristics of the

blended work may play a role in its potential impact on prolonging employment participation. The broad literature on telecommuting and flexible work arrangements may offer relevant insights in this respect, given that in this literature it is acknowledged that the characteristics of flexible work are central for understanding its outcomes (Allen et al., 2015; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007).

Two important distinctions that may be valuable to make are between flextime and flexplace, and between flexibility availability and flexibility use. Allen et al. (2013) argue in their meta-analysis on flexible work arrangements and work–family conflict, that flextime can be expected to be more beneficial in terms of reducing work–family conflict than flexplace arrangements, because flexplace arrangements may result in blurred boundaries between work and family roles. The results of the meta-analysis are in line with this expectation, showing that the negative effect of flextime on work interference with family was stronger than the negative effect of flexplace. Moreover, these authors expected that the use of flexible work arrangements—instead of just having the disposal of these options—may be especially protective against work–family conflict. In line with this expectation, the findings show that flexplace use was a stronger negative predictor of work interference with family than flexplace availability. For flextime, however, the availability was more negatively associated with work interference with family than flextime use. The authors argue that flextime availability may provide a sense of control to workers, whereas the actual use of it may indicate an involuntary situation (Allen et al., 2013).

When linking these findings to the notion of blended work and retirement timing, it suggests that it may be important to distinguish between the availability of the option to blend work (as determined by the type of work and HR policies), and the actual use of this option by the older worker. Furthermore it may be important—if older workers actually blend work—how the blending manifests, how it is experienced by the employee, and to what extent it is supported by the employer. In this respect, for instance, the intensity of working on-site versus off-site may be relevant. A meta-analysis of the telecommuting literature by Gajendran and Harrison (2007) has shown that among those who telecommute more than two and a half days a week, the beneficial effects of telecommuting in terms of decreasing work–family conflict are relatively strong. However, among these high-intensity telecommuters, relatively strong negative effects of telecommuting on relationships with coworkers are observed as well. These findings suggest that the intensity of work at another location may affect the outcomes of blended work and therefore, needs to be taken into account when formulating predictions about its impact on the timing of retirement.

Another issue that may be important to take into consideration is the reason why older individuals blend work. The impact of blended work may be highly dependent upon the voluntariness of the blending and the amount of control employees actually have over their time. For instance, if employees work at home in the evenings because there is so much work to be done that it cannot be completed at the workplace within office hours, it is questionable whether blended work will have positive implications in terms of prolonged employment. In this case, employers may give their employees more flexibility to make sure they will have the opportunity to finish their work. For employees this may result in a decrease in perceived control and the pressure to be always available. In the literature on telecommuting, working overtime hours at home after working a full day at the workplace is excluded from the

definition of telecommuting, as telecommuting focuses on *substituting* time at the office with time spend at another location (Allen et al., 2015). This may also be a relevant notion for measuring blended work in future studies.

With respect to late-career employment participation and retirement, the role that blended work plays in the retirement process may also be important to take into account. In the article Dropkin and colleagues (2016), blended work is presented as being a bridge between traditional workplace employment and full retirement. This might either suggest that blended work is the result of a late-career employment arrangement in the individual's career job (e.g., phased retirement), or that it may be a job characteristic that could attract older adults when deciding to take up a new job (e.g., bridge employment) versus retiring fully. However, it should also be acknowledged that it might be the case that older workers already work in a career job in which they blend work on- and off-site. Whether and how blended work will affect prolonged employment in these different retirement pathways might be a relevant topic for future studies. Moreover, in the article by Dropkin and colleagues (2016), it is mentioned that blended work might include a reduction of work activities. This is, however, not necessarily the case. Rather, it seems to be important for future studies to disentangle whether it is a reduction of hours, blended work locations, flexible working times, or combinations of these work practices that could prolong employment participation.

OLDER WORKERS: A DIVERSE GROUP

When thinking about prolonging employment participation and delaying transitions into retirement, it is important to take into account that older workers are a highly heterogeneous group of individuals in terms of both structural characteristics (e.g., their financial, health, family, and work situations) and psychological characteristics (e.g., psychological need strength). Whereas for some individuals blended work might offer an opportunity to be able to extend their working lives, for others the characteristics of blended work may not form a benefit.

Blended work might be especially beneficial to certain groups of older workers, who still would want to work because of financial or social motives, but are restricted to a certain extent in doing their jobs, for instance, due to health limitations, or care responsibilities. Older workers who have a poor health situation, which has often been found to be a central predictor of early retirement (Topa, Moriano, Depolo, Alcover, & Morales, 2009; Van Rijn, Robroek, Brouwer, & Burdorf, 2014), may benefit from the comfort and flexibility that blended work can offer (e.g., by limiting commuting time, being able to take work breaks if necessary, having the opportunity to visit a doctor during regular working hours). Also those older workers who are engaged in providing care to their close others—which has been found to result in earlier retirement for women (Dentinger & Clarkberg, 2002)—may benefit from the flexibility offered by blended work. As mentioned in the qualitative quotes in the recent article by Moen, Kojola, Kelly, and colleagues (2016), some workers would have already left the organization if the studied intervention had not taken place. The intervention provided them “flexibility and the ability to navigate their changing life circumstances” (p. 14).

Next to structural factors, older workers may vary in terms of their psychological characteristics, such as their psychological need strength and preferences for work–home segmentation. The studies by Van Yperen and colleagues have shown that blended work may

be particularly beneficial for those workers that have a high need for autonomy at work, and for those who have a weak need for structure and for relatedness at work (Van Yperen et al., 2014, 2016). In general, older workers have been found to be higher in need for autonomy than younger workers (Van Yperen et al., 2016), and to be lower in need for structure, in need for relatedness, and in their preference for work–home segmentation (Van Yperen et al., 2014). This suggests that blended work generally suits the needs of older workers better than of younger workers. However, within the group of older workers, heterogeneity is likely to exist as well. For older workers who have a strong need for autonomy, blended work may serve as a benefit that could make continued work a relatively attractive option. For older workers that have a strong need for structure or relatedness, however, blended work may not have these positive implications.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Given the increasing reliance on ICTs for conducting work in current societies and the opportunities this offers to work location- and time-independent, it becomes an increasingly important question how blended work—and related concepts such as telecommuting and scheduling flexibility—affect work outcomes. For older workers, Dropkin and colleagues (2016) argue that blended work may be a form of work that helps to increase the employment participation of older workers and to delay retirement. Of course, the option to blend work is not available in all jobs (Van Yperen et al., 2014). Many types of work can only be done on-site, or at specific times, such as the work done by teachers, nurses, and factory workers (although even in some of these occupations aspects of the job could also be carried out off-site and at irregular hours, e.g., answering e-mails). If the option of blended work is available, the question is: What will work and for whom?

In this article, I have tried to add to this discussion by linking the concept of blended work to the literature on retirement timing. I have described theory and empirical findings on antecedents of retirement timing, and have argued that characteristics of blended work, as well as characteristics of older workers could impact the effectiveness of blended work for prolonging working lives. Generally, it can be expected that blended work may positively affect prolonged employment if the way it is designed results in a good fit between the older worker and his or her job. In this respect, person–environment fit (PE fit) theory (e.g., Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005) may offer relevant insights for explaining retirement decisions, which was also highlighted as a potentially fruitful new theoretical direction in retirement research by Wang and Shultz (2010). Similarly, Fisher and colleagues (2016) argue in their recent review of the literature on retirement timing that a good fit may be related to continued employment and later retirement.

For future studies, a first challenge is to further develop the conceptualization and measurement of blended work. In the studies by Van Yperen and colleagues, measurements of perceived opportunities for blended work (as measured by statements such as “The nature of my job is well-suited to location-independent working”; Van Yperen et al., 2016, p. 180), and perceived personal effectiveness of blended work (as measured by statements such as “Also if I am not working at the office (but elsewhere), I can be very productive”; Van Yperen et al., 2014, p. 4) have been developed. These measures do not capture, however, the extent to which employees actually blend work. A direction for future research is to develop such a measure and to both conceptually

and empirically link it to the broad literature on telecommuting, scheduling flexibility, and flexible work arrangements.

Secondly, it may be important to improve our understanding of the extent to which older workers have the opportunity to blend work and actually blend work, in different types of jobs, occupations, and sectors. This may give insights about whether blended work is an option many older workers have access to, and which workers are most likely to (have the opportunity to) blend. It may be the case that blended work is a form of work that is especially available to workers in relatively attractive jobs, occupations, or sectors where individuals already retire relatively late. For instance, perceived opportunities for blended work have been found to be positively correlated with educational level (Van Yperen et al., 2016), which in turn has been found to be negatively associated with early labor force exit (Visser, Gesthuizen, Kraaykamp, & Wolbers, 2016). A relevant question therefore is whether the notion of blended work can add to our understanding of retirement timing if various other structural and attitudinal factors are taken into account.

Thirdly, in line with the central focus of this article, a fruitful direction for future research is to further disentangle for which older workers, and in which types of organizational settings, blended work may or may not result in prolonged working lives. For testing these notions, it might be informative to take a multilevel approach, by acknowledging that both organizational, and individual level factors may be important for understanding the impact of blended work on retirement timing. Moreover, it may be relevant to take an interdisciplinary approach, which implies that both structural factors (e.g., one's health situation and family context) that are often central in economic and sociological studies and individual differences in terms of psychological needs and preferences (e.g., for work-home segmentation) are taken into account.

In light of population aging and the associated policy aims to "live longer, work longer" (OECD, 2006), the notion of blended work is a timely and societally relevant issue to examine as a potential form of work that may help to prolong work careers. The decreasing boundaries between work and private life among knowledge workers are a relatively recent development, which still needs to be understood more in depth. Although for older workers blended work may offer clear benefits in terms of comfort, autonomy, and flexibility, it also has several risks that need to be taken into account, as described in Dropkin and colleagues (2016), as well as in the recent article by De Jonge and colleagues (2015). These studies offer important first insights by reviewing the existing literature on blended work and older workers. My current article aimed to add to these discussions and insights, by making the link to the literature on retirement timing. It is time for empirical studies to take over and put these theoretical considerations to a test.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank Valeria Alterman for proofreading the manuscript. This work was supported by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research NWO [VICI Grant 453-14-001 to K.H.] and Netspar.

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