



## Exploring the training needs of older workers in the foodservice industry



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### ABSTRACT

The current study explored older workers' perceptions of the training they receive in foodservice establishments, including perceptions of training methods, pace, and the use of technology in training. Data for this study were collected through two focus groups of foodservice employees 55 and older, where participants responded to semi-structured questions about their training experiences. Analysis of the focus group data revealed three overarching themes: (1) need for better leadership, (2) training structure, and (3) pride and enjoyment at work. Respondents emphasized the importance of managerial support, were eager for continued training, perceived the greatest benefit to on-the-job training, and appreciated the use of technology in training but were frustrated with the short time allocated to learning new technologies. Recommendations are made for training practices endorsed by older workers that organizations could adopt to improve the retention and performance of older workers, who are increasingly becoming important to the hospitality industry.

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### 1. Introduction

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 12 million of the 12.6 million jobs projected to be added during 2008–2018 will be in the 55-and-older age group (Toosie, 2009). Workers in this age group are projected to make up 24% of the labor force by 2018 (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2008). The hospitality industry, particularly, could benefit from developing strategies to recruit and retain older workers because of a projected decline of 6.9% in the 16–24 age group during 2006–2016; the group most heavily relied upon to satisfy labor needs (BLS, 2008). During the same time period, the number of workers aged 55–64 is expected to increase by 36.5%. Throughout this study the term “older worker” refers to those 55 and over who are in the workforce.

Older workers seek hospitality jobs for a variety of reasons including flexible hours, a desire to continue to contribute to

society by working with people, and the need to alleviate financial stress (Feuer, 2013). Over a third of retirees aged 65 and older receive 90% or more of their retirement income from Social Security; however, monthly Social Security benefits averaging \$1178.80 are not sufficient to meet their needs, and so many are seeking additional employment (Brandon, 2011). Older workers possess several desirable job-related attributes that include: fewer accidents, generating a positive image, the ability to learn as much as younger workers, self-motivated, disciplined, have a respect for authority, and are happier or more satisfied on the job (Magd, 2003). Older workers also excel in customer relations and bring an extensive knowledge base to their job (McNaught and Barth, 1992) along with the capacity to serve as mentors for younger employees (Potochny, 2005). Despite the well documented benefits to organizations of hiring and retaining older workers, few attempts have been made to implement policies and procedures to retain older workers (Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel, 2009), and compared to younger workers, older workers are less likely to have access to training opportunities (Taylor and Urwin, 2001) or are presented with inappropriate training methods (Farr et al., 1998). Although critical to attracting and retaining the 55-plus workforce (Koc-Menard, 2009), very little is known about training techniques that would be most effective for older workers within specific contexts, such as foodservice.

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## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Benefits of employing and training older workers

Upon completing a review of studies profiling older workers, O'Reilly and Caro (1994) concluded that there was more job satisfaction, better attendance, a smaller number of accidents, and less illness and turnover among older workers compared to younger workers. Previous studies also suggest that older workers are more reliable, loyal, and dependable compared to younger workers (Hayward et al., 1997; Steinberg et al., 1994), are relatively productive, and offer a good return on investment (Hayward et al., 1997). In a case study of a UK food retailer, Arrowsmith and McGoldrick (1996) concluded that older workers possessed more motivational attributes including pride in the job, cheerfulness, and reliability. However, some studies have reported a general bias that supervisors have against older workers. For example, Waldman and Avolio (1986) reported an increase in performance with age when measured objectively by productivity, whereas supervisor reported data suggested a decline in performance with age, which may be exacerbated by the fact that age awareness training for managers of older employees is rare (Armstrong-Stassen and Templer, 2005).

Herrbach et al. (2009) stated that the typical smaller amount of training offered to workers 55 and over may decrease commitment, whereas the opportunity to develop new skills and competencies may be viewed by older workers as a sign that their organization is willing to invest in them. Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser (2008) concluded that employees aged 50–70 who perceived their job as providing them with more development opportunities were more committed to the organization and intended to remain with their company compared to older workers whose organizations did not provide them with development opportunities.

Still, compared to younger workers, older workers are less likely to agree that training improved their skills and working practices (Felstead, 2011). This finding, however, underscores the current disconnect between the training older workers receive and older workers' training needs and preferences. Further, a great deal of training and development occurs through informal learning or "on the job" training, however, much less is known about older workers' preferences and experiences with both formal as well as these informal learning opportunities (Felstead, 2011).

### 2.2. Definition and benefits of training in the foodservice industry

Training in the hospitality industry can be defined as, "a process that provides new and currently employed staff with the short- and longer-term knowledge and skills required to perform successfully on the job" (Hayes and Ninemeier, 2009, p. 172). Eaglen et al. (2000) found that training, when executed properly, can be considered a competitive strategic advantage for restaurants to use to increase customer and employee satisfaction while also improving the productivity of employees.

Previous research reveals multiple benefits to training that include: improved performance, reduced operating costs, more satisfied guests, reduced work stress, increased job advancement opportunities, improved staff relationships, more professional staff, fewer operating problems, lower turnover rates, increased morale, higher levels of work quality, improved ability to recruit new staff, and increased profits (Acton and Golden, 2003; Hayes and Ninemeier, 2009). Based on data collected from one of Australia's largest bakery retail franchises, Choo and Bowley (2007) recommended that job satisfaction of employees can be enhanced through the provision of effective training and development programs. Poulston (2008) also stated in a study involving employees from 27 Auckland-based hospitality businesses that inadequate

training may lead to high staff turnover and other workplace problems that could exacerbate turnover.

Sommerville (2007) identified several additional benefits from training foodservice workers that include: greater ability to reach personal goals, increased self-confidence and self-development, improved ability to become problem solvers, higher productivity levels, reduced accidents and safety violations, enhanced employee development, and a sustained positive attitude toward customer service. Further, Pearlman and Schaffer (2013) identified possible benefits such as higher employee retention and engagement and reduced training costs associated with incumbent worker training programs.

### 2.3. Training methods used in the foodservice industry

Several training methods have been used and found useful throughout the foodservice industry. Harris and Bonn (2000) found that on-the-job training was the most frequently applied method followed by: classroom instruction, textbooks and manuals, case studies, and simulations. Training tools that were used the most included texts and manuals followed by: transparencies and flip charts, teleconferencing, computers, and audio-videotapes. Other foodservice training methods include: discussions, demonstrations, practice, skills rehearsals, case studies, guest speakers, role-play, simulations, dramatization, instructional games, brainstorming, and field trips (Hayes and Ninemeier, 2009). Foodservice training methods have also kept up with technological advancements. In a more recent study, Medeiros et al. (2011) found that the most commonly used resources for training foodservice workers were: interactive media, audiovisual materials, videos, lectures, and recreational activities. Studies suggest that interactive media and hands-on activities are among the most accepted training activities by employees and are cost effective and viable options (DiPietro, 2005; Medeiros et al., 2011). Interactive computer-based training also has been found to be an effective retraining tool by improving work practices without management reinforcement of those changes (Eckerman et al., 2004), particularly for workers with limited education and English-language skills.

Another modern form of training that is predicted to gain popularity is internet-based training. Singh et al. (2011) found that only 40% of multi-unit restaurants use internet-based training. However, they predicted an increase in internet usage for employee training in multi-unit restaurant companies generating between \$50 million and \$99 million annually. Some examples where online training is implemented include: ServSafe®, NFSMI, AIB Intl., Training Achievement Programs (TAPs Series), Alchemy systems, and FMI Super Safe Mark Program, among others (Neal et al., 2011). Internet-based training allows employees to train at their own pace and at a time and place that is convenient for them. For example, graduate students in hotel and restaurant management rating online training modules indicated the objectives of the program were clear, concise, and relevant and responded positively to the program's content, instruction, design, and packaging (Neal et al., 2011).

### 2.4. Training older workers

Training design and methods must be tailored to allow for the learning styles and experience of older employees (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Armstrong-Stassen and Templer, 2005) and attuned to workers' age and experience levels (Doeringer et al., 2002). However, after interviewing hospitality managers, Furunes and Mykletun (2005) concluded that training programs were not designed specifically for older workers. There is some disagreement as to the training methods and instructional factors most suitable for older workers. Callahan et al. (2003) concluded that three

instructional methods including traditional classroom lecture, modeling, and active participation were associated with higher observed training performance among older workers. Newton (2006) also suggested that older workers may prefer group learning opportunities, whereas McLaughlin (1989) stated that traditional large group classroom instruction has been found ineffective in this population. Prior studies also recommend smaller group settings or one-on-one trainings, which allow for more interaction between the older trainees and the instructor and alleviate older workers' fear and anxiety (Baracat et al., 1994; Sterns and Doverspike, 1989).

Previous researchers do agree that self-paced training programs (e.g., computer-assisted instruction) are ideal for older employees (Callahan et al., 2003; Sterns and Doverspike, 1989). McLaughlin (1989) added that older workers take longer to learn a task but learn effectively. Older workers could benefit from clearly written instructions, slower training pace, and quicker feedback (Sullivan and Duplaga, 1997). Using prior work experience as a reference point, encouraging trainee participation in training design and evaluation, incorporating repetitive practice, and scheduling shorter training segments have all been suggested as viable tactics for training older workers (Fyock, 1991; Newton, 2006).

### 2.5. Corporate resistance to training older workers

Older workers are less likely than younger workers to receive training even though they actively seek to develop their skills and knowledge base (Armstrong-Stassen and Templer, 2005). Frazis et al. (1998) found in a nationwide survey of nearly 1500 private establishments comprising a variety of industry segments with 50 or more employees that while 70% of all employees had received some formal training during the previous year, only 51% of employees aged 55 and above had received such training. In addition, little of the training received by the older workers was occupation-related. Past research also suggests that older employees are less likely to participate in training activities compared to younger workers (Brooke, 2003; Newton, 2006) and research attributes this lack of desire to participate in training to embedded ageism in the workplace (Greller and Stroh, 2003). For example, Furunes and Mykletun (2007) found through analyses of metaphorical images that age discrimination toward seniors existed in the hospitality workforce in Norway. They attributed the underlying prejudice against older workers to the lack of age diversity in the Norwegian hospitality industry. In a study involving the British hotel industry, Jenkins and Poulston (2014) also found that some managers did engage in age-stereotyping of certain jobs as not being suitable for older workers.

Although increasing the participation levels of older workers is one of the key objectives of policy makers in many Western countries (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001), Conen et al. (2011) found that corporate policies that focused on retaining and retraining older workers were rare. Armstrong-Stassen and Templer (2005) found that organizations were less likely to adjust training methods to accommodate the needs of older employees and suggest that organizations have a long way to go in providing access to training and making customized training available for older workers. Armstrong-Stassen (2008) concluded that the majority of the mature workers felt human resources practices including training were not tailored to older employees and it was not a priority for their organization.

Studies researching managers' unwillingness to invest in the training of older workers have uncovered several reasons including: (a) older workers' perceived resistance to change; (b) lack of return on investment given the shorter duration of continued employment compared to younger workers; and (c) older workers' perceived lower receptiveness to new technology and training efforts (American Association of Retired Persons [AARP],

2000; Elliott, 1995). Research finds, however, that older workers retain skills learned and are thorough in putting it into practice (Brooke, 2003). Further, the classic Days Inn call center study found that although the costs of recruiting and hiring were the same for every employee, the costs were lower for older workers when annualized because older workers stay longer (McNaught and Barth, 1992), invalidating employers' concerns about the lack of return on investment from training older workers.

Employees in the Days Inn study were older workers who had to operate a state-of-the-art reservation system that required substantial knowledge of the software. Although older workers have been criticized for their inability to keep up with new technology, prior studies have concluded that mature employees learned just as rapidly as younger workers if appropriate strategies were utilized to train them (McNaught and Barth, 1992; Stoltz-Loike et al., 2005). Cau-Bareille et al. (2012) also found that the difficulties encountered by older workers were indicative of organizational problems (pedagogy and time allotted) as opposed to training problems due to age.

### 2.6. Research questions

Although they are aware of the numerous tangible benefits of employing older workers, many employers have not made efforts to establish age-friendly workplaces. Brooke and Taylor (2005) agreed that organizations should not ignore age dynamics and must adopt "age aware" as opposed to "age free" workplace practices.

Griffiths (1997) called for more research on the availability of training and training methods for older workers. Although older workers have been criticized regarding their interest in training (Brooke, 2003), ability to grasp new ideas and adapt to change, and willingness to accept new technology, Griffiths (1997) argues that these perceived difficulties are precisely those that can be addressed with suitable training. Using meta-analytic data integration that included both past lab and field studies, Callahan et al. (2003) found that training significantly improved older workers' performance. However, prior to designing training programs, knowledge of current training methods used and older workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of these methods is essential. Training methods also need to be designed to address age-related changes in order to facilitate learning (Baracat et al., 1994; Griffiths, 1997).

An extensive literature search revealed a dearth of empirical research that involved primary data collection on older workers' perceptions of training received. Given the call for more research on training received by older workers and the current lack of research on the topic, specifically in the service context and more precisely, in the foodservice context, the following research questions are explored in this study:

1. What methods are used to train older foodservice workers and how are these methods perceived?
2. What are older foodservice workers' perceptions of training pace, the benefits of training, and the use of technology in training?
3. Do older foodservice workers' enjoy their current job and do they intend to stay at their jobs long term?

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Focus group recruitment and administration

Brooke and Taylor (2005) endorsed a qualitative approach as opposed to the abundantly available survey research when

studying employment practices related to older workers. Data for this study were collected through two focus groups of foodservice employees 55 and older using purposive sampling. Recruitment flyers were posted in various commercial and non-commercial foodservice facilities (e.g., restaurants, hospital cafeterias). The study and questions were approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Focus group questions were developed based on a review of current literature on training methods, older employee traits, and training in the foodservice context. These questions only served as a guide so as to allow for exploration of areas that the researchers may not have anticipated (Arendt et al., 2011). Sample focus group questions include:

1. What type/method of training did you receive? Remember that training can be formal, informal, or incidental.
2. How did you feel about the time allocated for training?
3. What type of feedback was provided upon completion of the training?
4. Can you describe your thoughts toward use of technology in training?

The focus groups were administered in a conference room on campus. Questions were asked in a semi-structured manner and both groups were facilitated by the same moderator while two recorders took field notes. Participants were encouraged to speak until all views were expressed. Additional questions needed to clarify or probe a certain issue were asked (McGee et al., 2008). Based on the recommendations of Morgan (1996), interaction was encouraged among participants; however, to ensure anonymity, all participants were advised to utilize their assigned pseudonyms when referring to each other's responses. Participants received \$75 gift cards to compensate for their time and effort. No new themes emerged after the second focus group; therefore, data collection concluded (Arendt et al., 2011).

### 3.2. Participant profile

The first focus group consisted of nine participants and the second consisted of 10, which is consistent with recommendations to keep group size to 6–12 to allow for more-in-depth discussion than would be possible with larger groups (Hatch, 2002). Participants in both focus groups represented independent and chain restaurants, schools, hospitals, and retail foodservice in the northeast Ohio area. Eleven participants worked full-time while nine worked part-time, experience in foodservice ranged from 3 to 39 years, and five participants held supervisory responsibilities. Seventeen out of 19 participants were female.

### 3.3. Focus group data analysis

The focus groups were audio-recorded (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006) and later transcribed. The transcripts from each focus group resulted in 31 pages of typed, single-spaced text with 12-point font. As recommended by Song and Cheung (2010), to ensure credibility of the study, an independent researcher who was not involved with the study design and did not participate in the focus groups determined themes after reviewing each transcript, abstracting data, and developing matrices to organize themes generated from the focus group questions (Fulkerson et al., 2011). Three other members of the research team met to discuss the major themes; 100% agreement was reached on themes and related quotes.

## 4. Results

Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) recommended working with homogenous groups because people tend to feel more comfortable speaking with others whom they share common experiences or interests. In this study, it was evident from the transcripts that there were common themes connecting the older workers' individual experiences in thirteen different places of employment.

### 4.1. Main themes

Three themes were evident from the participant discussions: need for better leadership, training structure and pride and enjoyment at work. The focus group members suggested working in the foodservice industry was rewarding. All of the participants reported that they were happy with their working conditions including the social aspects, and enjoyed the responsibilities associated with their particular job function, pay, and the flexible hours. Motivations for joining the foodservice industry were diverse with reasons such as switching from another line of work, life change (e.g., divorce), financial reasons, need for social interaction, and a desire to get out of the house. While the participants in the focus groups expressed general satisfaction with their jobs, there was an overall feeling that the leadership and training structure could be improved.

#### 4.1.1. Need for better leadership

Focus group members expressed a need for better leadership when it came to training substitute (subs) workers when a regular employee is absent. For example, one participant spoke about the frustration she faced while training a new employee, "don't expect me to be in the labor force when I'm the trainer. . . I cannot be your worker and trainer at the same time." Comments like this expressed the mutual feeling for the need to clarify their roles when taking on the responsibility to train a new employee.

To substantiate the feelings of these participants the focus group members discussed other frustrations grown from deficient management skills. Some workers felt unsupported while participating in training programs because the managers were sometimes younger than the employees and did not execute patient delivery of training material preferred by older workers; input related to training delivery was not sought either. While the foodservice workers understood the role of training in providing them with opportunities to move up the ladder, they felt relatively unsupported by their superiors when it came to training delivery.

#### 4.1.2. Training structure

The focus group discussion was heavily centered on training; hence, five nuanced sub-themes emerged that were worthy of separation and discussion from the main theme (Rubin and Rubin, 2012), including training method, training pace, training feedback, training benefits, and use of technology in training. In this study, the words "themes" and "sub-themes" have been used rather than concepts and themes as a way of clarifying the direct connections the sub-themes have to the main theme of training structure.

**4.1.2.1. Training method.** Most of the employees received what was widely perceived to be insufficient on-the-job training in the form of working with another more experienced employee for a specific time period, called shadowing; while others working in specialized areas received a time bound apprenticeship. Employees were often given a quick demonstration of how to do their job by a manager and were then integrated into the work force. "There wasn't really any orientation. . . they just basically show you how to run the register, and do different things for different like credit cards and gift cards. . . they would [put] somebody with you for a while"



explained one participant. A participant who was a manager at a retail foodservice outlet associated with a gas station explained the lengthy training process associated with new hires:

You have three weeks of intense training, they let you know what each day is going to entail. How much time you're going to be on the computer, how much time you will be with an associate to go over those parts of your training. They also let you know that there's always a sit down and talk session with whichever manager is on duty at that time so you can go over what you have learned off the computer.

This participant discussed a combination of an interactive process of learning through use of technology (the computer simulated training) and face-to-face formal discussions for clarification and deepening and expanding knowledge with a manager.

Role-playing was used to help participants develop patient skills in hospital foodservice. Some participants discussed use of classroom training with demonstrations. Participants found this method of training very useful and stated that it should be reinstated in their places of employment. Documentation related to workplace policies, code of conduct, and standard operating procedures handbooks were given to employees to go through in their own time. Participants strongly felt that just providing documentation was not sufficient.

Use of computerized training programs that lasted from a few hours to a few weeks was discussed. When discussing this method, participants were frustrated with the lack of structure; "you learned by the seat of your pants," "it's a self-taught thing" were typical comments. When asked to describe their ideal training method, most participants endorsed the on-the-job training and apprenticeships (for more specialized employment) as the best ways for new employees to learn the necessary skills. As one participant stated, "training is something that you do throughout the course of everyday on your job and the best supervisors will give you an ear and explain a situation with you." Breaking training down into smaller more manageable chunks, as opposed to lengthy continuous training followed by assessment was deemed more practical for helping new employees learn the job. The need to accommodate the diverse learning styles of older workers was also mentioned repeatedly. As one participant explained, "Whoever's training them has to be flexible. . .you have to take them through every little step and go back and make sure." "Everyone doesn't learn the same way", was a comment clarifying the need to take different learning styles into account when designing training programs.

Participants preferred to have one-on-one instruction when technology was involved, "I rather have it one on one. It's easier this way if you have questions you don't feel like a fool in front of somebody else." Participants also suggested that cross training would be beneficial and that training should be continuous with feedback given regularly. In the opinion of the focus group members training the substitute and permanent employees together would greatly reduce the amount of time the full time employees would have to spend on the job training subs.

**4.1.2.2. Training pace.** When participants were asked about the pace of training, it was clear that the time allocated for training is much shorter in recent years compared to the past. As one participant expressed, "when I started, an apprenticeship was three years. Apprenticeship program now is six months. . .and they're not learning all the stuff."

Participants' comments suggest that a good trainer is attuned to her employees' needs and adjusts the training program accordingly. The consensus related to training pace was that participants desired more time in training to work out any kinks and questions before joining the full labor force.

**4.1.2.3. Training feedback.** Feedback was found in different forms: assessments, comment cards, mystery shoppers, bi-yearly evaluations with a manager and surveys completed by patients and customers. Much of the training required some sort of assessment. The focus groups reported technology as central to the assessment process. "After watching the computer, computerized videos for training, the end of it is a quiz and you actually have to answer questions about the program."

When asked if the focus group members wanted feedback, the unanimous response was in the affirmative. All focus group participants felt the training programs, including the assessments, helped improve their performance.

**4.1.2.4. Training benefits.** Participants were in agreement that training benefited their job performance. When asked if they felt the goal of training was achieved, in that the participants could see an improvement in their job performance, all the members unanimously agreed. Participants identified the following specific benefits to training: higher efficiency, better understanding of how to perform tasks, an opportunity to move into a higher position, reinvigorated appreciation of the job, and increased finances.

Participants in both focus groups expressed an appreciation for training because it kept their jobs interesting while creating personal benefits, such as bigger tips or being able to "move up the ladder." Another participant expressed regret related to recent reductions in training opportunities, "I miss it [training] cause it's an opportunity to learn something new. . ." Training is advantageous to both the company and the employee as described by several participants, "you don't know what you are doing if you don't have the proper training." "Training is essential."

The participants suggested that they wanted to learn management's expectations of the trainees upon completion of the training session and the benefits that the trainees will reap upon participation. As one participant expressed, "If you are going to train me on something, prove to me it's better than what I'm doing right now. . .if you're gonna show me something new the end result should be better than what I am doing now."

Participants felt that training improved their peace of mind because they understood the job better and felt more comfortable in the work place when starting the job. As one participant stated, "if you're a new hire that's on there you're not gonna have the rest of the employees yelling at you because you don't know what you are doing if you have the proper training."

**4.1.2.5. Use of technology in training.** Technology was commonly used in the training programs with different levels of acceptance including conflicting feelings at times within individuals. As one participant stated, "Now, that we we're using a computer, it certainly makes it a lot easier, it makes it faster. . .but sometimes the computer is scary."

Other participants discussed the usefulness of technology, but acknowledged the need to be trained on the various features of the technology until proficiency was achieved. Representative quotes include: "I wish that I could get more training on it. . .many of us older uh employees, we are struggling because they have not offered the training to us".

#### 4.1.3. Pride and enjoyment at work

Pride and enjoyment at work was a theme woven throughout the discussions on training. It emerged as participants discussed the reasons or motivations for working in the foodservice industry, perceptions of training and its benefits, the difference between training received by older versus younger workers, and their level of job satisfaction.

When asked about their motivation or reasons for working in the food industry participants overwhelmingly answered that they feel

a sense of enjoyment while at work. “I like taking care of people and making sure their food is right for them, and I love to cook” stated one participant. Others agreed stating, “I truly enjoy my job,” “I like the customers we have, they’re like family,” “I’m very happy in my job and I am grateful to be where I’m at.”

Internal motivation was expressed as a means to job satisfaction. Together with internal motivation the group members noted that the executive management should support the employees in order to maintain their positive attitudes and commitment. “You gotta have the top management working with you too not just looking at you going well I don’t care, I can replace you tomorrow” stated one participant. In connection to management support the focus groups discussed the importance of attitude, “Stress. . . all starts at the top,” verbalized one participant. Having high quality, understanding managers is crucial to encourage employee pride, as this participant voiced, “somebody you feel you can go talk to, that really makes a difference in your job attitude.” It was clear that proper training led to enjoyment from work and enhanced job productivity and vice versa.

Finally when the focus groups were asked how long they intend to stay at their current job all the members unanimously agreed they would work in the same job until retirement: “My plans are to stick around for a while, why – because I like it,” and “I’m dying there.”

#### 4.1.4. *Divergent themes*

Majority of the responses given by one focus group participant differed from those of the group resulting in divergent themes (O’Neill, 2012). It was evident from the discussions that this particular participant believed her place of work fostered an environment for learning through various methods that accommodated individual learning styles. Throughout the course of the discussion it became evident that the style of management and training at a retail foodservice establishment associated with a gas station chain created a positive work environment, energized employees, and fostered loyalty. When discussing whether or not the reasons for training were expressed to employees this participant was the only one who stated, “we always know, I mean it’s always posted.” “They give you the time to read that [the employee handbook] so that you know exactly what you can expect. . . they make sure you understand each and every aspect of your job” sheds light on the feeling of security that employees have. This experience was different from the rest of the members who felt their training was lacking in one way or another. As a way to corroborate this employee’s responses, it was found that this company is on Fortune’s “100 best companies to work for” list for 2014 (CNNMoney, 2014).

## 5. Discussion

The current study contributes to the call in the literature to develop “age aware” workplace policies (Brooke and Taylor, 2005) by using focus groups to comprehensively assess older foodservice workers’ perceptions of the training they receive. Findings revealed three overarching themes: (1) need for better leadership; (2) training structure comprising training methods, pace of training, use of technology in training, training feedback and benefits of training; and (3) pride and enjoyment at work, which have important implications for training and retaining older adult workers in the foodservice industry. Overall, findings provide information on how organizations can begin to meet the unmet training needs of their older employees in order to establish age-friendly workplaces.

### 5.1. *Need for better leadership*

Although the majority of the older workers felt satisfied and rewarded by their jobs, many of them still identified a number

of areas where their training experiences could be improved. One overarching theme that was shared by participants across a range of different foodservice employment settings was related to the need for better leadership. The older workers indicated that they often felt unsupported by their own supervisors when it came to their own training and that their supervisors rarely sought their input on the training methods used. Further, respondents felt strongly that their managers needed to either take on responsibility for training new employees themselves or to provide leadership and clarification about the roles they as employees needed to play in training new employees. The majority of the respondents were willing and committed to training new employees, consistent with the recommendation of Felstead (2011) that managers should take advantage of older worker’s willingness to “teach” younger workers; however, respondents felt strongly that there needed to be separation between training and serving customers. Together the findings for this theme indicate that older workers want a voice in how training is delivered to them and their employees. Previous research suggests that older workers view training as evidence of their organization’s commitment to them (Herrbach et al., 2009), and our findings suggest that managers at all levels have an important role to play in illustrating this commitment.

### 5.2. *Training structure*

In addition to the need for better leadership, the older workers also provided detailed feedback on training structure, including thoughts on the training method, training pace, training feedback, training benefits, and use of technology in training. Consistent with previous research (Harris and Bonn, 2000), the majority of respondents indicated that their training largely consisted of on-the-job training and expressed a clear preference for continuous on-the-job training that could accommodate a range of diverse learning styles (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Armstrong-Stassen and Templer, 2005). Our findings related to training method also clarify the equivocal findings of previous research by indicating that older workers value classroom training with demonstrations (Newton, 2006) at the same time that they have a clear preference for one-on-one instruction specific to the use of technology (McLaughlin, 1989; Sterns and Doverspike, 1989).

Consistent with previous research, older workers also expressed the desire to have more training and more time for training (Callahan et al., 2003; Sterns and Doverspike, 1989) for themselves and for their new employees. These findings suggest that not only do older workers benefit from a slower training pace when learning new job skills (Sullivan and Duplaga, 1997), but they may also be able to deliver more effective training to their new employees if the time allocated to training was increased. In addition to the pacing of training, the focus group respondents unanimously agreed that feedback was a necessary and essential component of training and that training improved their job performance provided that the benefits of the training are clearly explained. Older workers were also not opposed to using new technologies (Elliott, 1995), especially when one-on-one training was provided, suggesting that the issue was not with use of technology in training, but rather with strategies utilized to train older workers on using new technologies (McNaught and Barth, 1992).

### 5.3. *Pride and enjoyment at work*

Finally, throughout their discussion of their training needs and preferences, the older workers repeatedly cited the pride and enjoyment they derive from their work. Although many retired adults are returning to the workforce due to financial factors (Templer et al., 2010), this theme highlights the other less tangible rewards associated with continued employment, such as

enjoyment, fulfillment, and satisfaction (Feuer, 2013). Although the majority of focus group respondents indicated that their training preferences were unacknowledged and their unique training needs were largely unmet, there was one focus group participant who expressed strong satisfaction with her training experiences. Her responses often described the clearly defined, structured, diverse, self-paced training opportunities desired by the other focus group participants. This divergent perspective provides a further illustration that when companies adopt the training policies older workers prefer and that meet their unique needs, there are rewards for both the employee and the organization (Pearlman and Schaffer, 2013; Sommerville, 2007).

## 6. Managerial implications

The findings from the current study have a number of managerial implications. Several of the themes that emerged from the focus groups emphasized the importance of managerial support for recruiting and retaining older workers. Further, the beliefs and priorities expressed by the older workers repeatedly contradicted the age-related biases that managers often cite when describing older workers, such as being uninterested in training (Brooke, 2003) or resistant to new technology (Elliott, 1995). In particular, the findings from the current study indicate that older workers are not only interested in continued training opportunities, but they see it as essential to their job performance. Therefore, an important implication of the current study is that efforts to establish age-friendly workplaces in the foodservice industry will need to begin with approaches to eliminate managers' biases about older workers' capabilities (Loretto and White, 2006). For example, training programs could be implemented to help managers to recognize and refute ageist stereotypes, which will allow managers to recognize their biases and avoid relying on stereotypes when making employment decisions (Posthuma and Campion, 2009). Age stereotypes are also reduced when job relevant information is considered rather than focusing on age, suggesting that managers' biased views of older workers could be reduced by focusing on individual workers' knowledge, skills, and capabilities when making decisions regarding training and development (Posthuma and Campion, 2009). In addition, to get older workers to commit to the training program, it is recommended that managers communicate the benefits that trainees will reap by participating and management's expectations of the trainees upon completion of the training.

Findings from this study indicate that older workers appreciate the benefits associated with incorporating technology into training but are frustrated with the short time allocated to learning new technologies. Managers are advised to use self-paced computer-assisted instruction such as online videos and online simulation exercises where the opportunity to complete a quiz at the end of the module is available so instant feedback on learning is received. In addition, to address any potential intimidation related to use of technology, managers should allow older workers to have face-to-face discussions for clarifications.

This study's results revealed a variety of training methods currently utilized to train older foodservice workers; however, respondents felt they benefited most from the on-the-job training they most often received (Harris and Bonn, 2000), indicating that some training methods currently used by foodservice managers are preferred by older workers. Apprenticeships were preferred for more specialized back-of-house job positions. Even though participants expressed a positive attitude toward on-the-job training, it is advisable that managers break training components down into smaller, more manageable units, as opposed to lengthy continuous training for new employees. Managers are also advised to be flexible and to tailor the training method for each worker to accommodate the diverse learning styles and former experiences of older

workers (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008). This can be made possible by seeking employees' input on the training method used and the effectiveness of the method.

The focus group findings indicate that older workers are committed and motivated to not only improving their own skills and job performance, but that they are also committed to providing mentorship and training for new employees of younger ages. It is important however, that time is set aside for mentoring, rather than requiring older employees to simultaneously meet the needs of new employees and their customers. In addition, study participants also requested training the trainer programs so they can be effective in their role as a trainer and mentor. Unfortunately, formal train the trainer programs are rare in the hospitality industry (Woods et al., 2012).

## 7. Limitations

Despite the strengths and contributions, the current study is not without limitations. Although every effort was made to recruit participants across a diverse set of foodservice settings, the experiences and perceptions captured by the focus groups may not generalize to older workers in other geographic regions or foodservice settings. Although the homogeneity of the focus groups was by design, homogenous groups minimize the exploration of different perspectives (Patton, 2002). Further, the current study relied exclusively on older workers' self-reports of the training they received and the training methods utilized. It is possible that the questions posed during the focus groups did not completely capture all of the formal and informal training the older workers received. Arguably, the focus group format may have discouraged some participants from sharing their experiences, which could have resulted in an underestimation of the training opportunities available for older workers.

## 8. Future research

Future research should expand upon the current study by utilizing questionnaire approaches to assess the training opportunities available for older workers in diverse foodservice settings. In addition, future studies should also measure supervisors' and younger co-workers' perceptions of training opportunities for older workers. This seems especially important because our findings emphasize the significant role these other parties play in older workers' satisfaction and job performance. Finally, a priority for future research should be to develop workplace training programs that address the unique needs of older workers. The current study represents an important first step by identifying specific training practices endorsed by older workers that foodservice organizations could easily adopt that have the potential to improve the retention and performance of older workers, who are increasingly becoming more important to the hospitality industry.

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