

Meaning Construction and Emotional Buffering: The Mediating Mechanism of Reemployment Motivation on Thriving at Work Among Silver Workers

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Abstract

In the context of active aging, the labor participation of silver workers has become a critical pathway to unleash the “silver dividend.” However, whether these silver workers can achieve “thriving at work” exhibits significant individual heterogeneity. Existing literature predominantly focuses on macro-level labor supply factors, leaving the micro-level mechanisms through which re-employment motivation translates into positive workplace experiences underexplored. Drawing on Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST), this study deconstructs silver workers’ reemployment motivation into two dimensions: meaning construction (approach-oriented) and emotional buffering (defensive-oriented), thereby constructing a competitive pathway model of how dual motivations influence thriving at work. An exploratory sequential mixed-methods design was employed. First, semi-structured interviews with 30 silver workers were conducted to identify the localized manifestations of these two motivations and their potential mediating pathways. Subsequently, based on the qualitative findings, a measurement scale was developed and refined, and 462 valid questionnaire responses were collected for hypothesis testing. The findings reveal an asymmetric effect: meaning construction motivation positively fosters thriving at work by stimulating job crafting, whereas emotional buffering motivation exerts a negative effect by exacerbating emotional exhaustion. Future time perspective serves as a boundary condition, amplifying the positive impact of the former while mitigating the negative impact of the latter. Cross-validation of the mixed methods indicates that the differentiated effects of these two motivations are rooted in the “limited time horizon” characteristic of the silver population. This study breaks away from the theoretical preset of re-employment motivation as a single continuum, reveals its “double-edged sword” effect and asymmetric pathways, and provides differentiated intervention targets for the development of the silver workforce.

Keywords

Silver Workers, Work Motivation, Thriving at Work, Socioemotional Selectivity Theory