

# Organizational learning programs to fulfilling basic needs at work: significance for work attractiveness and turnover in strained sectors

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to explore whether participation in employer-provided skills and learning programs can strengthen older workers' abilities to carry out their work in a meaningful way so that it increases work attractiveness and a willingness to remain in the current job position.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A survey was distributed to assistance nurses, nurses and teachers, aged 55 years and older in a Swedish City ( $n = 1,342$ ), analyzed descriptively and with structural equation modeling.

**Findings** – This paper showed positive relationships between active participation in organizational learning programs (OLPs) and autonomy, relatedness, competence and also attractive work. Associations are observed between participation in learning programs, e.g. mentorship, through the strengthened basic needs at work with work attractiveness and lower intention to leave, but not prolonged retirement preference.

**Research limitations/implications** – The cross-sectional quantitative design restricts drawing causal conclusions about associations.

**Practical implications** – OLPs at work may be seen as potential measures to strengthen work conditions, fulfilling basic psychological needs at work and increase work attractiveness in strained welfare sectors.

**Social implications** – There are some welfare sectors that – more than others – are strained by challenges to maintain, sustain and develop quality, knowledge and staff due to poor economic and social resources with regard to sustainability, e.g. in the educational and caring sectors. Strengthening organizational measures is needed to support sustainable development.

**Originality/value** – This study applies advanced statistical methods, in a large empirical sample, and shows the importance of skills and learning programs for job attractiveness among older workers in female-dominated, strained welfare sectors.

**Keywords** Motivation (psychology), Organizational learning, Sustainable development, Knowledge retention, Life-long learning, Female-dominated job

**Paper type** Research paper



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## Introduction

There are some welfare sectors that – more than others – are strained by challenges to maintain, sustain and develop quality, knowledge and staff due to poor economic and social resources with regard to sustainability (Kadefors, Nilsson, Rylander, Östergren, & Albin, 2018; Sconfienza, Lindfors, Friedrich, & Sverke, 2019). Two of these sectors are the female-dominated care and education sectors, where professionals and semiprofessionals such as nurses, and assistant nurses, as well as preschool and primary school teachers, are hard to recruit and retain (Blomberg et al., 2016; Hultell & Gustavsson, 2011). In Sweden, the efforts to improve working conditions in these sectors have so far been disappointing (Aronsson, Marklund, Leinweber, & Helgesson, 2021; Cerdas, Härenstam, Johansson, & Nyberg, 2019) partly due to persistent staff shortages, which have a negative impact on the work environment, job quality and fulfilling employees' basic psychological needs at work (Landsbergis et al., 2018). Basic psychological needs at work may be fundamental for employees' motivation and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Van den Broeck, Ferris, Chang, & Rosen, 2016), which, in turn, is important for remaining in jobs and contributing to improvements (Gagne, 2017; Van den Broeck et al., 2016). This is true, even in a country such as Sweden, with large public social service organizations and with comparatively high access to employer-provided development of skill, career and working conditions (Eurofound, 2017).

In this study, we explore whether participation in employer-provided skills and learning programs can strengthen senior employees' abilities to carry out their work in a meaningful way so that it increases work attractiveness and a willingness to remain in the current job position. This is truly needed in public care sectors where employee turnover constitutes a major challenge. While almost all other sectors in Sweden have experienced a decline in job demands over the last decades (Corin et al., 2021), the opposite developments are evident in the female-dominated jobs in elder care and education sector. Jobs in these female-dominated sectors have, compared to jobs in other sectors, experienced higher quantitative, emotional and physical demands (Cerdas et al., 2020; Aronsson et al., 2021; Marklund, Gustafsson, & Aronsson, 2019), lower decision authority (Marklund et al., 2019; Cerdas et al., 2020; Aronsson et al., 2021) and lower social support (Cerdas et al., 2020; Aronsson et al., 2021). Furthermore, trends of higher sickness absence rates have been associated with these poor working conditions (Marklund et al., 2019; Aronsson et al., 2021; Leinweber, Marklund, Gustafsson, & Helgesson, 2020) and the comparatively poor organizational support conditions (Dellve, Fallman, & Ahlstrom, 2016).

These issues are related to organizational conditions that go beyond the control of the individual, why organizational programs should primarily focus on strengthening structural work conditions. Nevertheless, studies indicate wider importance of learning initiatives in terms of coping with working conditions, workplace learning, management of poor working conditions and individuals' view of their work (Andersson, 2015; Dellve, Jonsson, Flisbäck, & Bengtsson, 2022; 2012). Thus, organizational learning programs (OLPs) to increasing employees' abilities and opportunities in terms of career and skill development, mentoring and development of group skills in collaboration and decision-making could be a complementary approach for organizations. Workplace learning initiatives and organizational programs can also be a way to strengthen older employees' motivation and abilities to continue working (Hultell & Gustavsson, 2011; Kadefors, Wikström, & Arman, 2020). To illustrate, mentor programs are an organizational method to support employees who are new to the profession, as well as to provide attractive and meaningful jobs for employees who have been in the job for a long time.

This study focuses on the earlier identified strained jobs in female-dominated sector, and contributes with knowledge about the importance of OLPs for fulfilling older workers' basic psychological needs at work and influencing their perceptions of work attractiveness and turnover or retirement. Thus, the self-determination theory framework, specifically basic psychological needs at work defined as autonomy, competence and relatedness is used to explore how perception of job attractiveness and turnover is interlinked with active participation in OLP in Swedish public social care, preschool, and primary schools.

### **Strengthening individual and organizational learning in strained sectors**

#### *Strengthening individual conditions to fulfill basic psychological needs at work*

The workplace is an arena that can clearly both support and challenge individuals' ability to contribute and stay. Motivation at work is an important piece of the puzzle with regard to healthy aging in the workplace (Kooij, et al., 2011). Self-determination theory assumes a multidimensional perspective on motivation, including inner motivation and individuals' basic psychological needs satisfaction at work (Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017; Gagne, 2017). When we act based on motivation, we feel fully autonomous and authentic (Deci et al., 2017). A basic assumption is that workers, as active beings oriented toward human growth, are motivated by universal needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness at work (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The satisfaction of these needs is also seen as necessary for health and performance through optimal development and learning integrated into a unified sense of self and into larger societal structures (Gagne, 2017). The most central need is *autonomy* to learn and become a causal agent, meaning that you stand behind your actions (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Autonomy may also be experienced in mandatory work when we understand and accept the reasons for acting (Rigby & Ryan, 2018). *Competence* concerns being able to interact effectively in the organization with the experience needed to manage problems and perform the work at hand (Rigby & Ryan, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2017). *Relatedness* is about belonging and feeling that we matter to others, and that we are connected to others in meaningful ways (Rigby & Ryan, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Numerous studies have demonstrated that addressing employees' basic psychological needs is associated with decreased levels of strain, burnout, lack of motivation and intentions to leave their jobs (Coxen, van der Vaart, Van den Broeck, & Rothmann, 2021; Van den Broeck et al., 2016) as well as increased job satisfaction, commitment and staying at work (Gagne, 2017). These outcomes are widely recognized as significant factors influencing individuals' retirement preferences and the timing of their actual retirement (Browne, Carr, Fleischmann, Xue, & Stansfeld, 2019; Fisher, Chaffee, & Sonnega, 2016). Thus, organizational measures increasing the satisfaction of these basic psychological needs may lead to improvements in relation to strained conditions in strained sectors and in the long run also to organizational capability through a stable supply of human resources. Improvements may concern learning opportunities, participating in meaningful competence exchanges and developments (e.g. mentoring) or strengthening the learning climate and socialization.

#### *Fulfilling basic psychological needs through organizational learning programs*

Given the growing demands for welfare services and persistent recruitment problems in these female-dominated jobs, Swedish municipalities need to strive toward being an attractive employer for young people newly trained in these occupations and contribute to sustainable conditions. However, the great loss of workforce due to, oftentimes early, retirement, is equally important to address (SKR, 2020).

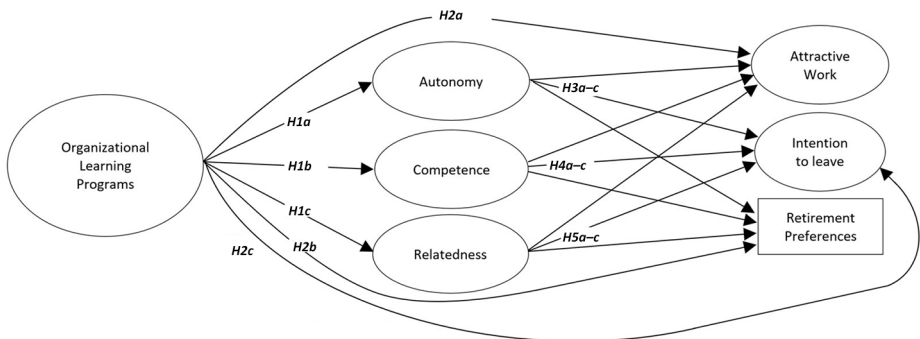
Previous studies have shown that a low degree of socialization, organizational cohesion and meaningful work has contributed to both turnover (Anell, Sverke, Gustavsson, & Lindfors, 2019)

and earlier retirement (Browne et al., 2019). Studies have shown that mentoring programs may offer social support, reduce stress and help younger employees develop in their new professional roles (Landsbergis et al., 2018; Naim & Lenka, 2016). Other studies indicate that opportunities to learn and work with meaningful and developing tasks may delay retirement (Jonsson et al., 2021; Liff & Wikström, 2022; Wikström, Eriksson, Karamehmedovic, & Liff, 2018). One reason may be a shift in motivations, to more emphasis on inner motivation with increasing age (Kooij, et al., 2011). This is one reason why engaging older workers in mentoring may be an effective approach to support older workers in prolonging their working life. However, more knowledge is needed as to whether and how OLPs such as mentoring may be important for older employees' work attractiveness, and prolonged working life. One hypothesis is that actively participating in learning exchange programs can help maintain the basic psychological needs and willingness of older employees to continue working. In sum, these three basic psychological needs may determine how older employees, choose to stay or leave their current job for another position or retire, perceive their work as attractive and find compensatory strategies that matter for work motivation.

**Aim and hypothesis**

This study aims to identify the importance of OLPs in terms of fulfilling basic psychological needs at work and their significance for work attractiveness, intention to leave (ITL) work and retirement preferences. The following hypotheses are outlined and illustrated graphically (Figure 1):

- OLP is positively related to (H1a) autonomy, (H1b) competence and (H1c) relatedness.
- OLP is positively related to (H2a) work attractiveness and (H2b) retirement preferences, but negatively associated with (H2c) ITL.
- Autonomy is positively related to (H3a) work attractiveness and (H3b) retirement preferences, but negatively associated with (H3c) ITL.
- Competence is positively related to (H4a) work attractiveness and (H4b) retirement preferences, but negatively associated with (H4c) ITL.
- Relatedness is positively related to (H5a) work attractiveness and (H5b) retirement preferences, but negatively associated with (H5c) ITL.



Source: Authors' own work

**Figure 1.** The conceptual model and hypothesis

## Method

### *Research design, sample and data-collection*

This study focuses significance of OLP in strained, female-dominated public sectors. A questionnaire was distributed to older front-line employees in eldercare and preschools and primary schools, employed in the largest Swedish public employer, the city of Gothenburg. Between November and December 2021, the online survey was distributed to all employees aged 55 or above with temporary or permanent employment contracts in the municipality (N = 10,849). After the first invitation, two reminders were sent out to employees not answering the survey. The employer also informed about the study on their website and encouraged the employees to participate.

This study focuses on the 1,330 assistant nurses, 260 nurses and 2,437 teachers who received and answered the survey. The response rate varied among these three occupational groups. Approximately 30% of the assistant nurses ( $n = 396$ ), 45% of the nurses ( $n = 117$ ) and 34% of the teachers ( $n = 829$ ) responded the survey. 87% were women. The assistant nurses primarily worked at elder care or home care units, and some were specialists. The nurses have different backgrounds and specializations, such as school nurses, nurses at elder care units and district nurses. The teachers were from preschool and primary schools as well as specialist teachers in the municipality organization (Jonsson, Dellve, & Hasselgren, 2022). Ethical approval has been granted by the Ethical Committee of Gothenburg (Dnr: 2019-02934).

## Measures

Survey items and index were developed in Sweden and the online questionnaire was in Swedish. All independent and dependent variables are latent factors, except retirement preferences and the covariates. Below, we present each of the latent constructs and their questions. Full details on the questions and wording of each latent factor are presented in Table 3.

### *Organizational learning programs*

The OLPs were based on seven manifest indicators concerning competence exchange and development, strengthening learning climate and socialization (e.g. through mentoring or supervision programs) (Dellve et al., 2022). Participants were asked, “In the past year, have you participated in initiatives or development work planned and initiated by the employer?” Responses were given on a four-point ordinal scale from 1 (“No, not at all”) to 4 (“Yes, to a high degree”).

### *Basic psychological needs satisfaction at work*

We used Tafvelin and Stenling (2018) validated scale of basic psychological needs satisfaction at work, which is based on the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2011). Basic psychological needs at work are measured using 13 items relating to autonomy (four items), competence (four items) and relatedness (five items). The answers were given on a five-point ordinal scale from 1 (“Not true at all”) to 5 (“Completely true”).

### *Intention to leave*

ITL consists of three manifest indicators. ITL captures an individual’s willingness to leave his or her current position for another job (Sjöberg & Sverke, 2000), which may be compared to retirement preferences, which reflect an individual’s desire to permanently leave the workforce. Responses were given on scales ranging from 1 “Not true at all” to 5 “Completely true.”

*Attractive work*

Attractive work is based on three statements of employees' attachment to and identification with their workplace, including: "I enjoy talking about my work with people outside it"; "My workplace is very important to me"; "I would recommend others to apply for a job at my workplace." Responses were given on scales ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree."

*Retirement preferences*

Retirement preferences were measured using the following question: "Today, you have certain opportunities to choose when you want to retire. It can be both before and after the age of 65. If you consider how you are doing today, at what age do you want to retire (altogether)?" Responses were given on a restricted continuous scale: <60, 61 ... 69, >70 years.

*Covariates*

To control for potential confounding effects and examine the prevalence across different groups, we included a number of covariates in the structural models, such as age, sex (male = 1, female = 2) and self-rated health (dichotomized from a six-point Likert scale). Work-related factors were also included, such as organizational tenure (<5, 5–10, ≥11 years). *Demanding work* was measured using three questions. Respondents were asked, "How well do the following statements fit your work and your work situation?" and demanding work comprises of the following questions: My work is physically demanding, I must be able to attend to many things at the same time, My work is emotionally demanding. Demanding work was constructed into an index with the same scale as the original questions. Furthermore, *energy and endurance* were measured using a single item. Respondents were asked, "How do you feel about your stamina and energy at the moment?" and answers were given on a six-point ordinal scale from 1 ("very bad") to 6 ("very good").

**Analysis**

First, we examine who participated in OLPs, after which we examine associations with attractive work, ITL and retirement preferences. Correlations were categorized as follows: very strong ( $r = 0.81-1.00$ ), strong ( $r = 0.61-0.80$ ), moderate ( $r = 0.40-0.60$ ), fair ( $r = 0.21-0.40$ ) and weak ( $r \leq 0.20$ ) (Altman, 1999). We used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) with Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) estimation to test the hypothesized relationships between OLP, autonomy, competence, relatedness, attractive work, ITL and retirement preferences. The latent constructs comprise the covariance between the manifest indicator variables, which means that "[they represent] what the indicators share" (Little, 2013).

The analysis was carried out in two steps. First, we estimated a measurement model using CFA to establish the factor structure (i.e. to confirm that the manifest indicator variables were related to the expected underlying latent constructs). We then estimated the full structural models and specified the relationships between the latent constructs and retirement preferences and all hypothesized associations with potential confounders (age, sex, health conditions, demanding work and energy and endurance). Following standard CFA/SEM procedures, we relied on the following fit indices and cutoff criteria to evaluate the model fit: the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) close to 0.06 or below, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) close to 0.95 or greater and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) <0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999).  $\chi^2$  is also reported, but since it is known to be inflated with large Ns (Browne & Cudeck, 1993;

Byrne, 2013), significant values were not considered significant. The CFA/SEM analyses were estimated in Mplus version 8.1, while data management, data cleaning and descriptive statistics were conducted in SAS 9.4.

## Results

### *Descriptive statistics*

Among the workers in the studied workplaces, 27% participated more actively in at least one of the OLPs. For example, participating actively as mentors at the workplace was assessed by 18%, while 50% had not participated at all in OLP as mentors. Active participation in general career development was experienced by 21% while 39% had not been part of any such OLPs at all.

The descriptive presentation of data and mean comparisons between the covariates and the indices are presented in Table 1. Teachers and nurses generally rated higher basic psychological needs satisfaction at work, attractive work and later retirement preferences compared to assistant nurses. Differences in OLPs concerned the fact that employees with higher endurance and energy were the only variable that differed significantly regarding participating in the OLP. At the same time, retirement preferences differed in all groups. Attractive work differed according to occupation, health, energy and demanding work.

Table 2 presents bivariate correlations between studied variables. Most variables were statistically significantly correlated, but no one was strongly correlated. OLP, autonomy and attractive work were all moderately correlated. Attractive work was also fairly correlated with relatedness and competence. ITL was negatively moderately correlated with attractive work and fairly correlated with retirement preferences and relatedness. retirement preferences were only weakly correlated with other variables.

### *Measurement models*

The measurement model was estimated using CFA to confirm that the manifest indicators are related to the six latent factors (Table 3). The factor loadings were generally high for all factors ( $>0.60$ ), ranging from 0.605 to 0.923. Using the fit indices, we found that the first model has a good fit as indicated by the following fit indices  $\chi^2$  (df) = 816.3 (284), RMSEA (90% CI) = 0.041 (0.038 to 0.044), CFI = 0.952, TLI = 0.945, SRMR = 0.039 (Table 3).

### *Structural models*

In the structural model, we tested the hypothesis concerning the relationship between OLPs and basic psychological needs satisfaction at work, retirement preferences, attractive work and ITL (Table 4, Figure 2). The structural model indicated an acceptable fit to the data:  $\chi^2$  (df) = 1,230 (514), RMSEA (90% CI) = 0.039 (0.036 to 0.042), CFI = 0.939, TLI = 0.926, SRMR = 0.045 (Table 4). To control for potentially confounding effects, direct paths between each latent factor and retirement preferences are also specified together with our demographic variables (i.e. occupational group, age, sex, organizational tenure, self-rated health, demanding work and energy and endurance).

Starting with *H1* (*H1a-c*), OLP was positively related to autonomy [ $\beta = 0.356$  (0.275–0.436)], competence [ $\beta = 0.190$  (0.109–0.271)], and relatedness [ $\beta = 0.110$  (0.033–0.188)]. With respect to *H2* (*H2a-c*), OLP was found to be positively related to attractive work [ $\beta = 0.142$  (0.058–0.226)] while being insignificant in relation to ITL [ $\beta = -0.081$  (–0.073 to 0.010)] and retirement preferences [ $\beta = -0.021$  (–0.095 to 0.052)]. As to *H3* (*H3a-c*), autonomy was shown to be positively related to attractive work [ $\beta = 0.491$  (0.363 to 0.620)] and negatively related to



**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and mean differences

Variables	All N (%)	Organizational learning program		Attractive work		Intention to leave		Retirement preferences		Autonomy		Competence		Relatedness	
		Mean (std)	Mean (std)	Mean (std)	Mean (std)	Mean (std)	Mean (std)	Mean (std)	Mean (std)	Mean (std)	Mean (std)	Mean (std)	Mean (std)	Mean (std)	
<i>Occupation</i>															
Assistance nurses	396 (29)	2.0 (1.0)	3.2 (1.1)	1.8 (1.1)	64.7 (2.4)	3.3 (0.8)	4.0 (0.6)	3.7 (0.8)							
Nurses	117 (9)	1.8 (0.8)	3.6 (0.9)	1.7 (1.1)	65.3 (2.0)	3.6 (0.7)	4.1 (0.6)	4.0 (0.8)							
Teachers	829 (62)	2.0 (0.8)	3.4 (1.0)	1.7 (1.0)	65.2 (2.4)	3.5 (0.7)	3.9 (0.7)	3.8 (0.8)							
<i>Age</i>															
55–61	892 (59)	1.9 (0.8)	3.4 (1.0)	1.9 (1.1)	64.3 (2.3)	3.4 (0.7)	3.9 (0.6)	3.8 (0.8)							
62–67	399 (30)	2.0 (0.9)	3.4 (1.0)	1.7 (1.0)	65.4 (1.9)	3.4 (0.8)	3.9 (0.6)	3.8 (0.8)							
68–79	151 (11)	2.1 (0.8)	3.5 (1.0)	1.3 (0.7)	68.0 (1.5)	3.5 (0.7)	4.1 (0.6)	3.9 (0.8)							
<i>Sex</i>															
Male	116 (13)	2.0 (0.8)	3.2 (1.0)	1.7 (1.0)	65.8 (2.8)	3.4 (0.8)	4.0 (0.6)	3.7 (0.8)							
Female	1,112 (87)	2.0 (0.8)	3.4 (1.0)	1.7 (1.1)	65.0 (2.3)	3.4 (0.7)	3.9 (0.6)	3.8 (0.8)							
<i>Health condition</i>															
Good	146 (13)	2.0 (0.8)	3.5 (1.0)	1.7 (1.0)	65.3 (2.3)	3.5 (0.7)	4.0 (0.6)	3.9 (0.8)							
Poor	961 (87)	1.8 (0.7)	2.9 (0.9)	2.3 (1.2)	63.7 (2.5)	3.0 (0.8)	3.5 (0.8)	3.4 (0.9)							
<i>Organizational tenure</i>															
<5 years	426 (33)	1.9 (0.8)	3.4 (1.0)	1.8 (1.1)	64.9 (2.4)	3.4 (0.8)	3.9 (0.6)	3.7 (0.9)							
5–10 years	346 (27)	1.9 (0.8)	3.3 (1.0)	1.8 (1.1)	65.3 (2.3)	3.3 (0.7)	3.9 (0.6)	3.8 (0.8)							
≥11 years	520 (40)	2.1 (0.8)	3.4 (1.0)	1.6 (0.9)	65.1 (2.4)	3.5 (0.7)	4.0 (0.7)	3.9 (0.8)							
<i>Endurance and energy</i>															
High	466 (35)	2.0 (0.8)	3.5 (1.0)	1.6 (1.0)	65.3 (2.4)	3.5 (0.7)	3.9 (0.6)	3.9 (0.8)							
Low	876 (65)	1.9 (0.8)	3.3 (1.0)	1.9 (1.1)	64.6 (2.4)	3.4 (0.8)	4.0 (0.7)	3.8 (0.9)							
<i>Demanding work</i>															
High	384 (29)	1.9 (0.8)	3.2 (1.0)	1.9 (1.1)	64.7 (2.3)	3.3 (0.7)	3.8 (0.7)	3.7 (0.8)							
Low	958 (71)	2.2 (0.9)	3.7 (1.0)	1.5 (0.9)	65.8 (2.3)	3.7 (0.7)	4.1 (0.6)	3.9 (0.8)							

**Notes:** Mean values refer to the average score measured for all indices. Group differences were assessed using the Kruskal–Wallis *H* test (>two groups) and the Wilcoxon signed-rank test (two groups). Estimates in italic indicate statistical significance *p*-values <0.05

**Source:** Authors' own work



**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics, reliability and bivariate correlations between variables

Variables	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Cronbach's $\alpha$	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(1) Organizational learning programs	2.0 (0.8)	0.90	1.00						
(2) Attractive work	3.4 (1.0)	0.79	<i>0.40</i>	1.00					
(3) Intention to leave	1.7 (1.1)	0.86	<i>-0.23</i>	<i>-0.42</i>	1.00				
(4) Retirement preferences	65.1 (2.4)	–	<i>0.13</i>	<i>0.20</i>	<i>-0.26</i>	1.00			
(5) Autonomy	3.4 (0.7)	0.82	<i>0.43</i>	<i>0.58</i>	<i>-0.37</i>	<i>0.18</i>	1.00		
(6) Competence	3.9 (0.6)	0.81	<i>0.20</i>	<i>0.37</i>	<i>-0.16</i>	<i>0.16</i>	<i>0.48</i>	1.00	
(7) Relatedness	3.8 (0.8)	0.94	<i>0.20</i>	<i>0.44</i>	<i>-0.33</i>	<i>0.08</i>	<i>0.51</i>	<i>0.31</i>	1.00

**Note:** Significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) Spearman's rank correlations are indicated by italic estimates

**Source:** Authors' own work

ITL [ $\beta = -0.316$  ( $-0.458$  to  $0.175$ )]. The relationship between autonomy and retirement preferences was insignificant [ $\beta = 0.107$  ( $-0.009$  to  $0.222$ )]. In *H4* (*H4a-c*), the relationship between competence and attractive work [ $\beta = 0.038$  ( $-0.064$  to  $0.140$ )] and retirement preferences [ $\beta = 0.038$  ( $-0.052$  to  $0.127$ )] was found to be insignificant. Competence was positively related to ITL [ $\beta = 0.145$  ( $0.034$  to  $0.257$ )]. In the last *H5* (*H5a-c*), finally, relatedness was shown to be positively related to attractive work [ $\beta = 0.156$  ( $0.072$  to  $0.241$ )] and negatively associated with ITL [ $\beta = -0.189$  ( $-0.285$  to  $0.093$ )]. There was no significant relationship between relatedness and retirement preferences.

## Discussion

This study has identified the importance of OLPs in terms of fulfilling basic psychological needs at work and their significance for work attractiveness, turnover and retirement preferences among older workers. The results showed associations between OLPs, improved basic psychological needs at work and outcomes related to motivation to stay in the sector. Specifically, the analysis confirmed *H1*: OLPs were positively related to basic psychological needs at work (i.e. autonomy, competence and relatedness). This implies a wider importance of continuous learning for work environment measures. The provision of specific and concrete activities such as mentoring programs are thus important and worthwhile measures. This relates to earlier studies of mentoring, organizational learning (Allen, Eby, Chao, & Bauer, 2017) and increased autonomy (Håkansson, Hasselgren, & Dellve, 2024). The implications for practice are clear: The investment of resources into different kinds of OLPs is important for employees and is a vital part of human resource management, even if this might be difficult for each organization to measure this in terms of cost-savings.

*H2* was confirmed in that OLPs were positively related to attractive work but not to ITL. This adds that organizational measures for continuous learning support the general perception of a job as being attractive, but good learning opportunities are not sufficient to prevent the ITL. Many employers, particularly in the public sector, are struggling and putting measures into place to be perceived as more attractive. Our study adds knowledge to their work. At the same time, OLPs is not enough to keep current employees whose intentions to leave are impacted by many other factors, for example the psychophysical burden and poor supervisor support (Van Aerschoot, Mathew Puthenparambil, Olakivi, & Kröger, 2022).

**Table 3.** Measurement models

Latent factors	Measurement model		
	Factor loading <sup>a</sup>	95% CI	<i>p</i>
<i>Organizational learning programs</i>			
ODP-1 To strengthen collaborations or prevent conflicts at work	0.737	0.691–0.784	***
ODP-2 Career or skill development	0.726	0.678–0.774	***
ODP-3 Supervision or mentorship of newly employed	0.630	0.569–0.692	***
ODP-4 To increase security and trust between employees	0.767	0.719–0.816	***
ODP-5 Increased participation for employees in decisions concerning work	0.861	0.825–0.897	***
ODP-6 Strengthen and train skills to use digital tools at work	0.820	0.778–0.862	***
<i>Autonomy</i>			
A-1I can make meaningful choices in my job	0.764	0.726–0.802	***
A-2I can express who I am at my job	0.753	0.714–0.792	***
A-3I have the possibility to influence my situation at work	0.686	0.638–0.734	***
A-4 What I do at my job is in line with who I am	0.730	0.686–0.774	***
<i>Competence</i>			
C-1I can handle the challenges I face in my job	0.772	0.725–0.819	***
C-2I constantly improve at dealing with my job tasks	0.750	0.701–0.799	***
C-3I feel effective at my job	0.753	0.707–0.800	***
C-4I really feel skilled at my job	0.605	0.531–0.679	
<i>Relatedness</i>			
R-1I feel that I can trust the people I work with	0.818	0.787–0.849	***
R-2I feel close to the people I work with	0.843	0.815–0.872	***
R-3I enjoy being with the people I work with	0.911	0.891–0.931	***
R-4I experience that the people I work with really care about me	0.892	0.862–0.922	***
R-5I feel safe with the people I work with	0.923	0.903–0.943	***
<i>Intention to leave</i>			
ITL-1I feel like quitting my current job	0.786	0.731–0.842	***
ITL-2I am searching/will start searching for a new job	0.823	0.778–0.868	***
ITL-3 If I find a new job, I will end my current employment	0.882	0.850–0.914	***
<i>Attractive work</i>			
AW-1 My workplace is very important to me	0.745	0.698–0.793	***
AW-2I would recommend others to apply for employment at my workplace	0.829	0.793–0.866	***
AW-3I enjoy talking about my work with others	0.680	0.630–0.729	***
<i>n</i>	1,120		
$\chi^2$ (df)	816 (284)		
CFI/TLI	0.952/0.945		
RMSEA [90% CI]	0.041 [0.038–0.044]		
SRMR	0.039		

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup>Standardized coefficients. \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01; \*\*\**p* < 0.001  
**Source:** Authors' own work

H3 was confirmed in that autonomy was positively related to attractive work and negatively related to ITL. This adds to the above-described implications that specifically autonomy stands out as important for attractiveness and for staying in a job. The practical implications are measures to increase autonomy and especially among groups where autonomy is reduced, i.e. among assistant nurses, demanding jobs and among those with poor health conditions (Håkansson et al., 2024). However, current trends in the organization

**Table 4.** Structural model

Variables	Coef. <sup>c</sup>	Structural model <sup>a,b</sup> 95% CI	<i>p</i> <sup>c</sup>
<i>Organizational learning programs</i> →			
Autonomy	0.356	0.275–0.436	***
Competence	0.190	0.109–0.271	***
Relatedness	0.110	0.033–0.188	**
Attractive work	0.142	0.058–0.226	**
Intention to leave	–0.081	–0.073 to 0.010	NS
Retirement preferences	–0.021	–0.095 to 0.052	NS
<i>Autonomy</i> →			
Attractive work	0.491	0.363–0.620	***
Intention to leave	–0.316	–0.458 to –0.175	***
Retirement preferences	0.107	–0.009 to 0.222	NS
<i>Competence</i> →			
Attractive work	0.038	–0.064 to 0.140	NS
Intention to leave	0.145	0.034–0.257	*
Retirement preferences	0.038	–0.052 to 0.127	NS
<i>Relatedness</i> →			
Attractive work	0.156	0.072–0.241	***
Intention to leave	–0.189	–0.285 to –0.093	***
Retirement preferences	–0.065	–0.140 to 0.011	NS
<i>n</i>	911		
$\chi^2$ (df)	1,230 (514)		
CFI/TLI	0.939/0.926		
RMSEA [90 CI]	0.039 [0.036–0.042]		
SRMR	0.045		

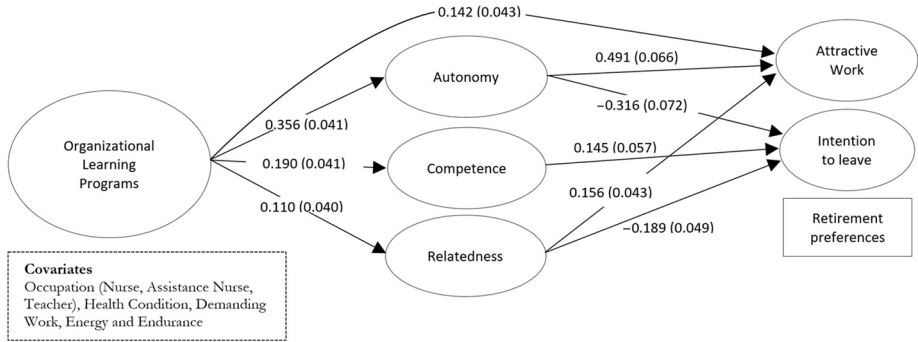
**Notes:** <sup>a</sup>Adjusted for: gender, age, occupational group (nurse, assistance nurse, teacher), health condition, organizational tenure, endurance and energy and demanding work. <sup>b</sup>fully standardized coefficients. <sup>c</sup>\**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01; \*\*\**p* < 0.001

**Source:** Authors' own work

of for example assistant nurses in the elderly care, are showing the opposite effect in Sweden: increased control and decreased autonomy through surveillance and documentation of each minute of work (Erlandsson & Szebehely, 2023). This is a troubling trend when the need to increase employee retention is proposed by many stakeholders.

H4 was not confirmed, i.e. competence was not statistically associated with neither work attractiveness nor retirement preferences, but indicated (*p* = 0.057) positively associated with ITL. This implies that those who perceive themselves as competent, are also aware of their attractiveness on the labor market. It is easier for them to choose to leave, and thus the importance of the work environment and other factors that impact ITL increase in this group.

H5 was confirmed in that relatedness was positively related to attractive work and negatively associated with ITL. This implies the need to support trusted collaborations and relations at work. Not at least where the relatedness is lower, e.g. among assistant nurses, in demanding jobs and among less experienced workers. It is also possible that support from colleagues is a replacement for support from supervisors (Van Aerschot et al., 2022). No hypothesis regarding associations with retirement preferences was confirmed. This implies that if a prolonged working-life is the goal, there are other factors that are important and they



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 2. Model with significant paths presented (standardized coefficients)

were not measured in this study. Previous studies have shown that retirement decisions are impacted for instance by the person's partner and health (Jonsson, 2021). These factors are more difficult to pay attention to at the workplace, or they require more long-term work environment measures, even from the early stages of a person's work life. Thus, the results show that OLPs may be seen as potential measures to strengthen work conditions and meet basic psychological needs in the strained sectors. However, an increased sense of competence also increased intentions to leave the job in the strained sector. In the sections below, we discuss the benefits of OLPs in relation to motivation and retention and the potential underlying mechanisms supported through such a program.

### Significance of organizational learning programs

#### Supporting longer working life and work attractiveness?

The present study makes contributions to the SDT in the research field focusing on older workers in female-dominated sectors, retirement and organizational efforts. The results are in line with theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and with previous indications of associations between improved basic psychological needs at work, job satisfaction and less turnover (Coxen et al., 2021; Gagne, 2017; Van den Broeck et al., 2016). Earlier studies of reasonable nearby outcomes (e.g. Browne et al., 2019; Fisher et al., 2016), also showed that the most central need for increased perception of job attractiveness and intention to not leave was autonomy.

However, most earlier research has involved young and middle-aged adults and less is known about the role of work motivation at the end of one's working life and its association with intentions to leave. This study showed no statistically significant associations with later retirement preferences. This is also in line with some previous Swedish studies that have highlighted the difficulties of supporting prolonged working life by strengthening work conditions in female-dominated, strained sectors. Few organizational measures have been associated with preferences for a later retirement age (Jonsson, 2021; Jonsson et al., 2022). This may be due to the complex drivers and resources shaping retirements (e.g. the benefits of living in a welfare society with the right to retirement benefits) as well as individual and organizational factors (Dellve et al., 2022; Jonsson et al., 2021). Thus, more studies are needed about conditions and motivations for delayed retirement in female-dominated and strained sectors.

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### *Supporting motivation and development?*

The result also contributes to research on organizational efforts for older workers. The study indicates improvements in needed working conditions that support the motivation and perception of work attractiveness of older workers by actively participating in OLPs. The important mechanism indicated in the results was increased autonomy, which improved the meaningfulness of work tasks and conditions to better correspond with their individual values, needs and motivations. This is an example of creating measures that support older employees in actualizing meaningful work (Kadefors et al., 2020). Active engagement in OLPs may contribute to being assigned tasks that better correspond with skills and contribute to further developing knowledge, to interact effectively within the organization (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Rigby & Ryan, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The wider importance of autonomy for older workers in strained welfare sectors has previously been shown in studies on job control and job strain (Aronsson et al., 2021), influence (Cerdas et al., 2019), adjustment latitude (Dellve et al., 2016) and distributed leadership (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

The next important mechanism was that participating in OLPs increased relatedness, which, in turn, strengthened motivation. Mentoring and supervision groups may support feeling that we matter to others and are connected in meaningful ways. For example, in a supportive relationship with colleagues, through a strengthened work climate, and in distributing knowledge and engagement in development processes. Relatedness includes trust, communication and creative co-creation in an inclusive social climate that may support mobilizing skills and engagement when working with others to make progress in relation to shared concerns. Thus, this study advances previous studies on organizational capabilities (Jonsson, 2021; Kadefors et al., 2020; Wikström et al., 2022), thereby contributing to a more detailed understanding of the importance of how organizational practices, such as OLPs that support relatedness, increase attractiveness and retention of workers.

The third assessed important mechanism supported by OLPs was increased capabilities achieved via increased *competence*, tools and experience needed to perform the work, which was here associated with higher intentions to leave the job. An earlier meta-analysis showed similar unexpected positive associations between competence and turnover intentions (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). Reasons can be methodological (the variance associated with autonomy and relatedness needs to be accounted for). Or, improved conditions to search for other jobs (e.g. increased self-esteem and labor market due to increased competence) (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004). This may also be due to that the study group was older workers, already experienced and in more need of autonomy to find their job more attractive to stay in Håkansson et al. (2024).

### **Practical implications**

The study indicates the potential for improvements in practice, especially where these kinds of programs are only experienced by a few employees, in strained and female-dominated sectors. We have discussed how qualities may be supported by means of organizational learning processes. The results show implications for the practices of age management (Liff & Wikström, 2020) related to job satisfaction and turnover (Gagne, 2017), which become more important with increasing age (Kooij, et al., 2011). Thus, the satisfaction of basic psychological needs at work for employees in strained sectors in terms of autonomy, competence and relatedness may create conditions for older employees to better contribute with their motivation and knowledge [also indicated by Gagne (2017)]. Such improvements should increase learning opportunities and meaningful competence exchanges, e.g. in terms

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of mentoring. This may strengthen the learning climate and socialization into strained occupations. Hence, strengthening the organizational capabilities and conditions of older workers' motivation is interlinked with necessary developments regarding staffing, knowledge development and to some extent also with the intention to continue working in the same occupation.

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### **Methodological strengths and limitations**

This study has some strengths and limitations. First and foremost, the quantitative cross-sectional design restricts us from making any causal conclusions regarding associations. Or deeper meaning about important mechanisms. However, we argue that some findings support the theorized/hypothesized causal chain or associations. In comparison to the traditional approach of additive indices, the use of SEM reduces measurement errors. Furthermore, the validated questionnaires (e.g. basic psychological needs satisfaction at work) used in this study strengthen the measurement validity. In terms of generalizability, another strength is the relatively large sample of three occupational groups in a Swedish public sector organization. However, a limitation is the response rate in the overall survey (30%–45%) and internal dropouts in specific questions/questionnaires. We used FIML to estimate models using the complete sample to manage missing data. Also, using robust estimates in the SEM (REF) reduces some of the potential skewness of the sample. It is also worth pointing out that there is a risk that the sample may consist of a stronger group of “survivors” who may, for example, work despite having poor health, known as the “healthy worker effect” (McMichael, 1976).

Despite controlling for occupations, patterns regarding the importance of OLPs may vary among the studied occupations. Here, future studies are needed to elaborate on how occupational and sectorial work dynamics may be involved. The strategic implementation of OLP is also important to consider in further analysis. These and many other unexplored questions remain to be analyzed further.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the study identified that OLPs were somewhat important for older professionals' active engagement in knowledge exchanges that increased employees' needs satisfaction at work; for example, by being a mentor and exchanging knowledge on how to approach complex tasks. Thus, participating in learning programs at work indicates weak but promising values in terms of autonomy, competence and collaboration opportunities to support further knowledge exchanges and contribute to developing quality and competence in strained sectors. There was a decreased ITL, but no significant associations regarding individuals' retirement preferences were observed.

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**Further reading**

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