




Aging as Online Faculty: Attitudes Toward Work and Retirement


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Abstract

Aging, an often-neglected aspect of diversity in universities, is an important issue, as the rate of people working who are 75 and older is growing faster than the rate for any other age group. The present sequential explanatory mixed-method study explored 129 older online faculty's attitudes and opinions on work and retirement in an online survey and in 13 faculty interviews. Data were examined cross-sectionally to assess differences by decade: 50s, 60s, and 70s and above. The results indicated that while older faculty were collecting some form of retirement payment, money was not a primary motivator for working. These individuals enjoyed their work and saw it as providing mental stimulation and giving their lives meaning. Older faculty indicated they did not want traditional retirement, but instead planned to work part time as long as they physically and cognitively were capable. Further, they indicated that online faculty's retirement should be based on their own judgment of their mental and physical capability to do the job adequately. Results may be used by academic institutions to better serve their aging faculty.

Keywords: *primary-to-secondary school transition, intersecting identities, adjustment, mental health, and well-being*

Date Submitted: February 27, 2024 | **Date Published:** July 20, 2024

Recommended Citation

Stadtlander, L., & Sickel, A. (2024). Aging as online faculty: Attitudes toward work and retirement. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 14, 228–244. <https://doi.org/10.5590/JERAP.2024.14.1.15>

Introduction

Aging is an oftentimes neglected aspect of diversity in universities. How faculty successfully age at work and how academic leadership and human resources can meet the needs of aging faculty are important issues in academic employment (Zacher & Rudolph, 2017). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018) indicated that, by 2024, women 65 and older will comprise 25.3% of the female labor force and older men will comprise 21% of the male labor force. The rate of people working who are 75 and older is growing faster than the rate for any other age group (Fideler, 2021). Very few studies have sought to understand the expectations of workers and

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Our thanks to Martha Giles, Nina McCune, and Carolyn Roney for their assistance with the study. This research was funded by Walden University's Research & Applications for Social Change Grant.

organizational actions likely to influence attitudes and plans for retirement (e.g., DuFour et al., 2021). In the current sequential explanatory mixed methods study, we explored the attitudes of online faculty in their 50s, 60s, and 70s and above through surveys and interviews examining attitudes toward work and retirement. The results of the study provide a cross-sectional examination of age-related differences experienced by online faculty.

Literature Review

Until 1982, U.S. colleges and universities could mandate the retirement of faculty at age 65, and, until 1994, they could mandate retirement at age 70. Since 1994, however, federal legislation has prevented academic institutions from setting any mandatory retirement age (Frasch et al., 2019). Unsurprisingly, the average age of faculty at most institutions of higher education has subsequently increased, with many faculty members now working actively into their seventies and even eighties. Academic administrators around the country, worried about demographic and intellectual diversity, as well as their budgets, have responded largely by creating financial incentives to encourage older faculty members to retire, with some attendant programs to ease their transition away from the institution (Frasch et al., 2019).

While there has been previous research on older faculty in brick-and-mortar institutions (e.g., Clark et al., 2017; Van der Kaay, 2007), there have been no identified studies examining older online faculty. A variety of researchers examined various topics about older faculty in brick-and-mortar institutions, such as mandatory retirement no longer being required and faculty demographics (Ho et al., 2021), factors influencing retirement (Clark et al., 2017), obligatory retirement in Israel (Eckhaus & Davidovitch, 2019), and the concern of younger faculty for older faculty remaining in the workforce (Paganelli & Cangemi, 2019). The attitudes of online faculty toward work and retirement, both in general and relative to the individual, have not been previously explored.

Work During the Retirement Years

Early studies of age and job satisfaction by McNeely (1988) and Eichar et al. (1991) found that older workers were more satisfied than younger workers and that intrinsic rewards, not extrinsic, had the greatest effect on job satisfaction. Soldo et al. (1997) clarified why the elderly continued to work, specifically out of financial necessity, and how job characteristics influenced the propensity to work at older ages. A nationally representative sample of more than 7000 individuals aged 70 and above was used in this study. The researchers identified “stayers” in the labor force and “leavers.” Stayers, who did not retire and held the same job for at least 10 years, compared to individuals working but not in their longest-held job, were more educated, wealthier, and physically healthier, and the reasons for working were largely non-financial. Their jobs offered flexible working arrangements and a level of responsibility the stayers desired, even when the jobs paid less. Longer-term stayers worked more hours, were more likely to be in a professional occupation, and somewhat more likely to be self-employed, ultimately benefiting organizations. They tended to be younger (still in their 70s) than leavers and still married. Deteriorating health or mortality accounted for most of the reasons for leaving employment (Halder & Loughran, 2001).

In a recent study, Fidelel (2021) examined the top five reasons older men and women gave for continuing to work in their retirement years. Participants identified satisfaction, finding meaning in work; using their abilities, skills, and training; helping others, contributing, making a difference; enjoying clients, patients, students, or customers; and loving the work. This focus will also be addressed in the current study's qualitative questions.

Attitude Toward Work

Attitude is a positive or negative feeling or mental state of readiness, learned and organized through experience, which gives special attention to a person's response to people, objects, and situations

(Hettiararchchi & Jayarathna, 2014). Attitude toward work in the context of the current research means one's feelings toward activities, roles, duties, tasks, and the job one performs in the workplace. This can be thought of as a mature way of thinking about one's job; for example, work attitude can be thought of as the evaluation of or personal interest in job-related tasks (Riketta, 2008). Employees' attitudes toward work play a significant role in organizations. It has been shown that employees who consider work as a source of learning are more committed and satisfied with their jobs (Lin & Huang, 2021). In the present study, attitude toward work was measured using two questions on a scale developed by Siddle (1995). In addition, researcher-designed statements about online faculty work were ranked in importance by participants.

Technology

An integral part of the online faculty's work is the use of the computer. When analyzing the changes on working practices produced by the technological revolution, Gonzales Vazquez and colleagues (2019) pointed out that technological change required new skills. Further, they underlined the increasing relevance of both digital and non-cognitive skills to effective navigation of the technological environment. The term digital skills refers to individual competencies required to use technology to learn and work (Goenaga et al., 2019; Vuorikari et al., 2016). Non-cognitive skills are a broad range of soft competencies related to individual differences, as well as to emotional and social regulation (Goenaga et al., 2019). These non-cognitive soft skills are expected to become increasingly important because they cannot be replaced by digital technology and because they better enable employees to deal with dynamic and unpredictable environments (Goenaga et al., 2019; Harari, 2018; World Economic Forum Boston Consulting Group, 2018). By acquiring and developing resources (competencies), individuals become more resilient (Grant & Clarke, 2020; Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). Organizations and managers need to be able to monitor and assess their employees for both types of skills, ensuring that necessary support is provided and that tailored interventions can be put in place to enable benefits to be realized. To examine this aspect of the online workplace, we utilized the E-Work Self-Efficacy Scale (Tramontano et al., 2021), providing a comprehensive assessment of remote working competencies.

Attitude Toward Retirement

According to Kanfer et al. (2013), retiring or continuing to work is often viewed as a dichotomous choice. This perception must, however, be put into perspective, since the intention to continue working does not necessarily mean the intention not to retire. This relates to what the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (Clemens & Parvani, 2017) referred to as flexible retirement, sought by many workers nearing the end of their careers, who wish to be able to decide when and how to retire.

Purpose of the Study, Research Questions

Few previous studies have explored the expectations of online workers and actions on the part of organizations that are likely to influence attitudes and plans for retirement (e.g., Dufour et al., 2021). In the current study we examined online faculty's views on the gains and losses they perceived in work versus retirement through the Attitude Toward Retirement Scale (Anson et al., 1989), as well as through interview questions exploring their responses. Our samples were online faculty in their 60s and 70s and above, with the addition of some faculty in their 50s as a comparison group. Research questions for the sequential explanatory mixed methods study were:

RQ1, quantitative: How do online faculty aged 50–70 and above differ by decade on attitude toward work, gains and losses in retirement, e-work self-efficacy and attitude toward retirement?

RQ2, qualitative: What is the lived experience of being an older online faculty member at an online university?

Methods

The current data were part of a larger study exploring aging and faculty. This sequential explanatory mixed methods study consisted of online faculty in their 60s and 70s and above, with the addition of some faculty in their 50s as a comparison group. The sequential approach is used when the researcher is interested in following up the quantitative results with qualitative data (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). The qualitative data are thus used in the subsequent interpretation and clarification of the results from the quantitative data analysis. In many instances, because the quantitative portion of the design is the emphasis, a generic qualitative design is used in the qualitative portion, as we did in the current study.

Quantitative Surveys

The quantitative surveys were open to all online university-level faculty who fit the age requirement of 50 and above. Survey participants were recruited through an advertisement in the university’s weekly newsletter, online education organizations (e.g., online learning consortium), and through snowball sampling (including social media). Survey participants received a \$10 Starbucks gift card as an incentive.

Qualitative Interviews

Participants who had completed the quantitative survey and were interested in a follow-up interview (via email, Zoom, or phone), provided their email addresses at the end of the survey. The first five in each age group were contacted; 13 agreed to complete the interview and received a \$50 Amazon gift card.

Quantitative Participants

A total of 129 online faculty participated in the online survey: 46 (35.7%) participants indicated they were in their 50s; 53 (41.1%) were in their 60s; 25 (19.4%) were over 70; five did not provide their age and were excluded from age-related analyses. The participants were predominantly White ($n = 108$; 83.7%); 10 (7.8%) identified as Black, four (3.1%) as Asian, and seven (5.4%) as American Indian or Alaska Native. A total of 38 (29.5%) participants were men, 90 (69.8%) were women, with one (0.8%) not responding to the question. The majority (89; 63.9%) of the participants indicated they worked part time for their primary university, while 40 (36.1%) indicated they worked full time.

Qualitative Participants

We interviewed 13 of the online survey participants (see Table 1) in follow-up email or Zoom interviews. Three of the interviewed individuals were in their 50s, five were in their 60s, and five were 70 or above.

Table 1. *Demographics of Participants Interviewed*

Subject number	Gender	Age	Race/ethnicity	Terminal degree
1	F	81	White or Caucasian	Doctorate
2	F	76	White or Caucasian	Doctorate
3	M	76	White or Caucasian	Master’s
4	M	74	White or Caucasian	Doctorate
5	F	73	White or Caucasian	Doctorate
6	M	67	White or Caucasian	Doctorate
7	F	66	White or Caucasian	Doctorate

Subject number	Gender	Age	Race/ethnicity	Terminal degree
8	F	66	White or Caucasian	Doctorate
9	F	65	White or Caucasian	Doctorate
10	F	65	White or Caucasian	Doctorate
11	F	53	White or Caucasian	Doctorate
12	F	52	White or Caucasian	Doctorate
13	M	52	Black or African American	Master's

Interviews

We conducted interactive e-mail interviews (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015; Hawkins, 2018; Ratislavová & Ratislav, 2014). Similar to more traditional methods of interviewing, which involve the researcher asking a question and the participant responding, e-mail interviews are also interactive, but all the questions are presented at one time, and the participant can answer them at his or her own pace. In an interactive e-mail interview, the researcher and the study participant exchange information over the internet using the participant's and the researcher's e-mail. The researcher presents a series of open-ended questions that the participant answers and sends to the researcher. The participant can ask for clarification and the researcher will respond. The researcher can also ask questions in the form of probes to ask for additional information or clarification. Qualitative researchers using e-mail interviews for data collection have reported that the scheduling advantages of the e-mail interview increase access to participants and encourage greater participation of working adults (Fritz & Vandermause, 2017). For participants who preferred to do a Zoom or telephone interview (four of the 13 interviewees), the interview was recorded on a separate audio recorder and transcribed using Word 365's transcription feature.

Instrumentation

Five scales were used in the quantitative portion of the study. Three scales explored aspects of work, while two others examined thoughts about retirement.

Attitude Toward Work

The Attitude Toward Work scale (Siddle, 1995) measures responses to two statements, which are summed to yield a score reflecting the individual's attitude toward work: "Work is the most meaningful part of life," and, "Most people think more of someone who works than they do of someone who doesn't work." Each question is scored on a four-point Likert scale as follows: strongly disagree = 1, somewhat disagree = 2, somewhat agree = 3, and strongly agree = 4. As recommended by Eisinga et al. (2013), we used a Spearman-Brown coefficient to explore consistency (coefficient = .335; a further discussion of this scale will be provided in the results).

Work Importance Statements

A researcher-designed list of statements as to why participants continued to work was provided to participants, and they were asked to rank them by order of importance. Some examples include: "I continue to work because I am too young to collect retirement," and, "I continue to work because I enjoy my work and teaching." (The full list and rankings are provided in the results section.)

E-Work Self-Efficacy Scale (EWL)

The EWL (Tramontano et al., 2021) consists of 15 questions and was developed to assess theoretically relevant aspects of the remote e-working experience on five subscales: 1) E-skills Self-Efficacy (e.g., "How well can you organize your activities, despite any distractions in your surroundings?"), 2) Trust Building Self-Efficacy (e.g.,

“How well can you complete your tasks, even with minimal supervision?”), 3) Self-Care Self-Efficacy (e.g., “How well can you take actions if you realize that being ‘always on’ is becoming too much?”), 4) Remote Social Self-Efficacy (e.g., “How well do you utilize a range of social networking tools to maximize your work relationships?”), and 5) Remote Emotional Self-Efficacy (e.g., “How well do you not worry that your colleagues will doubt you are actually working?”). Each question is scored on a five-point Likert scale as follows: 1 = not at all; 2 = slightly; 3 = somewhat; 4 = very well; 5 = completely. In the current study, Cronbach’s alpha for the subscales were as follows: E-skills Self-Efficacy (0.871), Trust Building Self-Efficacy (0.707), Self-Care Self-Efficacy (0.830), Remote Social Self-Efficacy (0.848), and Remote Emotional Self-Efficacy (0.817).

Gains and Losses in Retirement

The Gains and Losses in Retirement Scale (Anson et al., 1989) consists of 20 items developed to tap the dimensions of gain and loss associated with work and retirement. Respondents are asked to agree or disagree, on a 4-point Likert scale, to statements such as the following: “It is good to retire, because one is freed from everything bad about one’s job” (gains in leaving work); “Retirement gives more leisure time to do what one wants” (gains in entering retirement); “Retirement means that time drags, weighs on one’s hands” (losses of leaving work). The survey results in three subscales: a Losses score (11 items, Cronbach’s alpha of 0.86) and two Gains scores (Gains in Retirement, four items, Cronbach’s alpha of 0.60; Gains in Leaving Work, four items, Cronbach’s alpha of 0.62).

Attitude Toward Retirement

The Attitude Toward Retirement scale (Siddle, 1995) collects responses to three statements that are summed to yield a score reflecting the individual’s attitude toward retirement. The statements are: “Retirement is a pleasant time of life,” “People who don’t retire when they are finally able to are foolish,” and, “Older workers should retire when they can so as to give younger people more of a chance on the job.” Each item is scored on a 4-point Likert scale as follows: strongly disagree = 1, somewhat disagree = 2, somewhat agree = 3, and strongly agree = 4. As recommended by Eisinga et al. (2013) a Spearman-Brown coefficient was used to explore consistency (coefficient = .219; a further discussion of this scale is provided in the results).

Qualitative Interviews

The qualitative interviews were based on issues identified in the literature and topics that arose in the quantitative portion that we wanted to pursue in greater depth. The interviews included 10 questions eliciting participants’ thoughts about work and their thoughts and feelings about retirement. The interview questions are listed in the Appendix.

Results

The results for the sequential explanatory mixed-methods study are organized by topic area, with quantitative results followed by relevant qualitative results.

Work: Quantitative

Attitude Toward Work

Siddle’s (1995) Attitude Toward Work scale consists of two statements concerning attitude toward work; responses to those statements were summed to yield a score. Items were scored on a 4-point scale; thus, the possible range for the two items was 2–8. There was not a significant difference between the age groups for the summed score ($p > .05$). A Spearman-Brown coefficient was used to explore consistency of the summed two items, which indicated poor internal consistency (coefficient = .335; as recommended by Eisinga et al., 2013), so the two items were also examined individually (score range 1–4 for each item). No differences were present in responses to the statement, “Work is the most meaningful part of life.” However, a difference

between the age groups was evident in responses to the statement, “Most people think more of someone who works than they do of someone who doesn’t work.” For the 50-year-olds group, $M = 3.22$; for the 60-year-olds group, $M = 2.85$; and for the 70 and over group, $M = 2.96$ ($F(2, 123) = 3.18, p = .04$). This indicates that younger participants thought more highly of someone who works than the older groups did.

Work Importance Statements

A researcher-designed list of work-related statements indicated some ranking differences based on age (see Table 2). Rankings are based on lower numbers (e.g., a 1 or 2) being a stronger endorsement of the statement than higher numbers (e.g., 8 or 9). Chi squares (as per Finch, 2022) were conducted to explore whether there was a difference in ranking by decade. The greatest difference in ranking was for the statement “I am too young to collect retirement”: Not surprisingly, faculty in their 50s endorsed this statement more strongly than did the older faculty. Younger faculty (in their 50s) endorsed, “It keeps me from being socially isolated,” more strongly than the older faculty did. Faculty in their 70s and beyond showed a stronger endorsement of, “I feel I am contributing to my students and the university,” than the two younger groups. Older faculty (60s and 70s) ranked the statement, “I would be bored without my work,” more strongly than the younger faculty did. The statement, “It gives me things to talk about with younger people,” was more strongly endorsed by faculty in their 70s than by the younger groups.

Table 2. Mean Rankings by Decade

I continue to work because:	M Ranking		
I am too young to collect retirement.			$X^2(df = 22) = 57.7, p = .001$
	50s	5.9	
	60s	8.2	
	70s+	11.4	
I enjoy my work and teaching.			$X^2(df = 18) = 24.5, p = ns$
	50s	3.1	
	60s	2.9	
	70s+	2.8	
It provides mental stimulation.			$X^2(df = 22) = 28.6, p = ns$
	50s	5.0	
	60s	4.2	
	70s+	3.7	
It keeps me from being socially isolated.			$X^2(df = 20) = 35.1, p = .02$
	50s	5.9	
	60s	7.8	
	70s+	8.1	
It gives my life meaning.			$X^2(df = 22) = 31.6, p = ns$
	50s	6.4	
	60s	5.5	
	70s+	4.4	

I continue to work because:	<i>M</i> Ranking		
I need the money.			$X^2 (df = 22) = 31.1, p = ns$
	50s	6.4	
	60s	5.7	
	70s+	7.4	
It provides a creative outlet.			$X^2 (df = 20) = 24.03, p = ns$
	50s	6.7	
	60s	6.7	
	70s+	5.6	
I feel I am contributing to my students and university.			$X^2 (df = 20) = 36.7, p = .013$
	50s	4.9	
	60s	4.1	
	70s+	3.7	
I would be bored without my work			$X^2 (df = 20) = 36.7, p = .013$
	50s	7.4	
	60s	7.3	
	70s+	6.8	
The college/university needs me.			$X^2 (df = 22) = 24.09, p = ns$
	50s	9.1	
	60s	8.4	
	70s+	8.4	
It gives me credibility.			$X^2 (df = 20) = 27.9, p = ns$
	50s	8.4	
	60s	7.7	
	70s+	7.6	
It gives me things to talk about with younger people.			$X^2 (df = 22) = 36.2, p = .03$
	50s	8.7	
	60s	9.4	
	70s+	8.0	

A lower score indicates more support for the statement; Chi Square: Ranking by decade

E-Work Self-Efficacy Scale

The items on the E-Work Self-Efficacy Scale (Tramontano et al., 2021) were measured on a 5-point scale, with three items per subscale, with a range per subscale of 3–15. The only difference evident by age for the five subscales was for Self-Care Self-Efficacy (50-year-olds: $M = 12.19$; 60-year-olds: $M = 11.51$; 70 years and above: $M = 13.04$; $F(2,120) = 4.8, p = .01$). Post hoc Bonferroni comparisons indicated the difference was between 60-year-olds and 70 years and above ($p = .008$). This finding suggests that older workers were better

able to monitor and self-manage the boundaries between personal and working life, as well as to know when “always on” becomes too much and what interventions can be applied (Tramontano et al., 2021).

Work: Qualitative

The research question for the qualitative portion of the study was: What is the lived experience of being an older faculty member at an online university? Data were coded and themes identified, which included positive and negative aspects of work, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, work’s role in the individual’s life, and the impact of participants’ age on receiving assignments.

Aspects of Work

Positive: An interview question asked: What are the positive aspects of your work? Consistently, faculty mentioned their love of learning and teaching in responses such as these: “I really enjoy mentoring adult learners” (female, age 76). “I like learning, stimulation, working with students—seeing them learn, bringing out the best. I like doing a good job” (male, age 74). “Work is a major component of my life. I organize my travel and my days around it. It’s very important to continue to use my brain” (female, age 65).

Negative: We also asked about the negative aspects of work. Consistent themes were that pay for contributing or adjunct faculty was low and that there was a felt demand to work constantly embedded in the nature of online teaching, as can be seen in the responses that follow. “Working from home feels like I live at work. If I go to my computer without opening my work systems, I tend to feel guilty” (female, age 66). “Constant demands, it would be nice to have more time off” (male, age 74). “Someone always wants a piece of me. Constant emails and deadlines. Never a true vacation, always have work to do” (female, age 65).

Motivation

Extrinsic: Participants were asked: How has your personal extrinsic motivation changed with age (e.g., pay, schedule/hours, title)? The majority (10 of 13) of the interviewees mentioned a lack of sufficient pay. Some examples: “I am more concerned about pay now, since I am recently separated from my husband” (female, age 73). “I used to chase the title. Now I just want to make enough money to pay my bills and live a comfortable life” (female, age 66). “It is only about the money these days” (female, age 52).

Intrinsic: A similar question to the above was asked about intrinsic motivation: How has your personal intrinsic motivation changed with age (e.g., accomplishment, curiosity)? Seven (54%) of the individuals mentioned maintaining their curiosity: “My accomplishments and curiosity have only deepened” (female, age 81). “I believe that personal intrinsic motivation always has been a factor in what I choose to do professionally” (female, age 76). “I have an inquiring mind. I’m always looking to learn something new” (female, age 66).

Work’s Role in Life

Participants were asked: How does your work fit in your life right now? How important is it to you? Ten (77%) indicated that work was central to their lives in statements such as these: “My work is my sustenance right now, both emotionally satisfying and financially necessary” (female, age 81). “My work has in the past, as it does now, kept me sane during these high stressful times in my life. It is very important to me” (female, age 73). “I almost consider my work my hobby! I like the mental stimulation of teaching and I thrive on mentoring students” (female, age 66).

Four participants (31%, three men and one woman) mentioned the need for money to maintain quality of life: “The extra income helps us pay for my stepdaughter’s college” (male, age 76). “The money keeps me in burritos, so I can stay in my house” (male, age 67). “It’s important because it provides a paycheck. I don’t think I’d work as hard if I didn’t need the money” (female, age 66).

Age and Assignments

Interviewees were asked: Do you feel that your age is a factor in your assignments? All participants indicated that they felt age was not an influencing factor: “No, I don’t think my age enters into my assignments” (female, age 76). “Assignments are made by my department head, but feel I have input into what I want” (male, age 76).

Retirement: Quantitative

Gains and Losses in Retirement

Anson et al.’s (1989) scale on Gains and Losses in Retirement consists of three subscales. All items were scored (range per item was 1-4) so that a high score expresses a high perception of gains and a high perception of losses. No differences by decade were evident for the subscales Losses in Retirement, Gains in Entering Retirement. A difference was evident between decades for Gains in Leaving Work (four questions, range for subscale = 4–16): 50s = 8.7; 60s = 8.25; 70s and above 10.21; $F(2,119) = 3.79, p = .025$). This finding indicates older workers see greater incentives for leaving work.

Attitude Toward Retirement

Siddle’s (1995) original instructions were to sum the three statements (4-point scale, range for the three questions = 3–12) to yield a score reflecting the individual’s attitude toward retirement, which in our study was significant by decade ($F(2,120) = 9.79, p < .001$). However, a Spearman-Brown coefficient was used to explore the consistency of the summed three items that indicated poor internal consistency (coefficient = .219; as recommended by Eisinga et al., 2013). Therefore, the three statements were also examined individually. One-way ANOVAs indicated that the difference for one statement, “People who don’t retire when they are finally able to are foolish,” was not statistically significant. However, two of the items differed significantly by decade (possible range per question = 1–4). The first, “Retirement is a pleasant time of life,” differed by decade (50s = 3.5; 60s = 3.15; 70s and above = 3.29; $F(2, 120) = 3.82, p = .025$). Post hoc Bonferroni tests indicated the difference was between those in their 50s and those in their 60s: participants in their fifties had a more positive view of retirement than the two older groups. Second, the statement, “Older workers should retire when they can so as to give younger people more of a chance on the job,” also differed by decade (50s = 2.6; 60s = 1.86; 70s and above = 1.7; $F(2, 120) = 8.7, p < .001$). Post hoc Bonferroni tests indicated that those in their 50s differed significantly from both other age groups: the younger individuals were more accepting of older people being required to retire.

Retirement: Qualitative

The retirement portion of the interviews resulted in themes concerning participants’ definitions of and reactions to retirement, when faculty should retire, and self-reflection on their own retirement.

Definitions and Reactions

Interview participants were asked what retirement would look like for them. The oldest participants differed in their responses from the younger ones. Older individuals (aged 67–81) indicated that, for them, retirement would be working part time and that traditional retirement was not appealing. This is shown in the following: “I am not a good candidate for retirement. I still would be looking for work” (female, age 81). “Part time [work] would be good” (male, 74). “I think I will have too much time on my hands” (female, 73).

Younger respondents mentioned more traditional views of retirement in responses such as these: “Having the time to create, visit new places, feel like I don’t have work responsibilities on my mind, reconnect with friends, experience new things” (female, age 66). “Time to golf, relax, go out to dinner and travel” (female, age 53).

When Online Faculty Should Retire

All participants indicated that retirement for online faculty should be an individual decision, contingent on their cognitive abilities, in responses such as these: “When they are no longer interested in and/or capable of

expected contributions” (female, age 76). “When they can no longer cognitively handle the work” (female, age 66). “I think that online faculty should retire when they are no longer deriving any benefits from it and when they feel that they are losing their mental acuity” (female, age 65).

These points were emphasized further in this question: There are online faculty who contemplate whether to stop working due to their age. What would you tell them? Participants said: “As long as [they] can function and deliver value—keep going. If notice starting to space out, or too stressed, maybe time to do something different” (male, age 67). “If they are cognitively and physically capable of the work, they should work if that brings them joy” (female, age 66). “If they can still perform, they should keep working” (male, age 52).

Retirement Self-Reflection

Participants were asked to reflect on how they will feel about themselves in retirement. Four indicated that if it was their choice, it would be an acceptable life choice in responses such as these: “This depends on why I retire; if it is my choice, I would be fine with the decision. If I had to retire for medical or other reasons, I would be upset with myself” (female, age 73). “If I am able to make that choice, I will feel OK. If it is not my choice, then that could be a challenge” (female, age 76). Some responses were positive: “I think I will feel accomplished” (female, age 65). “I would think that if I were able to retire in the future, I would see that as the ultimate achievement and that I ‘got something right’ between now and then” (female, age 52). Others emphasized negative consequences: “I would miss the students and routine” (female, age 65). “Probably not [feel about myself] as good as I feel now” (female, age 65).

Faculty were also asked: How will you know when it is time to retire? Eight (62%) indicated that retirement would be dependent on their physical or mental health. Some examples on this theme: “When I can’t perform as well and/or have something that is more interesting to focus on” (female, age 76). “When I can’t get out of bed, when I can’t do it physically” (male, age 76). “When I no longer have the energy to do the work I do. Then I’ll have to consider how I will pay my bills and live” (female, age 66). The second theme was related to no longer enjoying the work: “I will retire when I no longer enjoy what I am doing and it takes time away from what I want to do” (female, age 65). “When I don’t like what I do. When the ‘hassle factor’ has become too high” (female, age 65).

Discussion

The present mixed-method study explored 129 older online faculty’s attitudes and opinions on work and retirement in an online survey and in 13 faculty interviews. Our first research question asked: How do faculty age 50–70 and above differ by decade on attitude toward work, gains, and losses in retirement, e-work self-efficacy, and attitude toward retirement? Results were examined cross-sectionally by decade—50s, 60s, and 70s and above; of interest was whether differences would be evident by decade. Overall, all participants felt positive about their online work. This finding is consistent with previous research (e.g., Fideler, 2021), which reported that people who continued to work in their retirement years tended to be satisfied with the work.

The second research question explored: What is the lived experience of being an older faculty member at an online university? Consistent with previous research by Fideler (2021) were qualitative statements regarding enjoying the students and loving teaching. It has been shown previously and was confirmed in the current study that employees who consider work as a source of learning were more committed to and satisfied with their jobs (Riketta, 2008).

Consistently in the present study, faculty made statements to support the theme of their love of learning and teaching; they also described their intrinsic motivation (curiosity and learning) as increasing with age. Faculty ranking of the importance of work also suggests that while younger faculty tended to focus on pragmatic aspects of work (e.g., keeping them from being socially isolated), older faculty rated as more important the

substance and contribution of their work (e.g., feeling they are contributing to students and the university and feeling they would be bored without their work).

Younger faculty (in their 50s) indicated they thought more highly of people who continued to work, more so than did the older faculty. This finding indicates a difference in thinking between the groups and has not been previously reported. This difference in perceptions of individuals who continue to work could reflect participants' awareness of aging and attempts at impression management (Goffman, 1975). That is, relatively younger workers may hold a negative view of older individuals stereotypically conceived as less likely to work. Younger faculty in the current sample may therefore report a more positive rating for those continuing to work as a form of implicit or explicit stereotyping relative to working and age (Drazic & Schermuly, 2023; Kleissner & Jahn, 2020).

The study showed that older faculty's self-reflection revealed a consciousness of how their online work affected them physically and the need to establish boundaries. Qualitative comments also indicated that they tended to struggle with the constant demands of online work. These findings have not been previously reported as an age-related work issue.

Most of the participants mentioned low pay as a primary negative to working online, which is consistent with most participants being part-time or adjunct faculty (Marasi et al., 2020). The majority emphasized the importance of work in their lives, particularly the mental stimulation provided by being an online faculty member.

The current results indicate that some conclusions can be drawn about older online faculty. Older faculty indicated that, while they were collecting some form of retirement payment, money was not a primary motivator. These individuals enjoy their work and see it as providing mental stimulation and giving their life meaning. They appear to have developed an ability to define work boundaries. They did not tend to endorse the statement that faculty should retire so younger people get more of a chance at work. Older faculty indicated they did not want traditional retirement but instead planned to work part time as long as possible. Further, they indicated that online faculty's retirement should be based on their own judgment of their mental and physical capability and their recognition of whether they were able to do the job adequately. All online faculty indicated that their curiosity keeps them interested in learning new things, that their work is a meaningful and central part of their life, and that they love learning and teaching. Nevertheless, they also indicated that the way adjunct work is structured means they do not get paid enough, and they often feel as if they are always on call.

Limitations and Recommendations

As faculty volunteered to participate, presumably only those interested in the subject participated. Faculty were awarded gift cards for their participation in both aspects of the study, which may have had an effect on who chose to participate. Some of the oldest faculty in the survey refused to be interviewed, as they did not want to discuss issues of aging; they may have had viewpoints we were unable to assess. The present study was cross-sectional; thus, we looked at different people in the decades of interest, and there may have been cohort effects over time that we were unable to recognize.

Future researchers may wish to explore the aging online faculty issue through a longitudinal study and explore how faculty attitudes and opinions change over time. It would also be worth interviewing older online faculty who have decided to retire to determine their motivations for leaving the workforce. Researchers may also wish to compare the attitudes of older online faculty with those of older brick-and-mortar faculty and explore which differences are attributable to aging and which to the medium of their work. It would also be interesting to see how some of the nuances of this study relate, if at all, to productivity or quality of work among age groups.

Conclusion

The present study explored online faculty's perceptions of aging and retirement and found that older faculty remain in their positions because of their love of teaching and curiosity. Participants indicated that their work is central to their lives and feel that they will be adequate judges of when they are unable to do the job.

"I almost consider my work my hobby! I like the mental stimulation of teaching and I thrive on mentoring students" (female, age 66)

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Appendix: Interview Questions

Working

Tell me about your current employment status.

Walk me through a typical day for you, for example when do you start each day? (Consistent every day?)

What is it like being an older faculty member at your institution?

Do you feel that your age is a factor in your assignments? Who makes those decisions—you or administration?

How does your work fit in your life right now? How important is it to you?

What are some positive aspects of your work?

What are some negative aspects?

What is it about your job that keeps you working? Why not retire?

How has your personal extrinsic motivation changed with age (e.g., pay, schedule/hours, title)?

How has your personal intrinsic motivation changed with age (e.g., accomplishment, curiosity)?

Retirement

What is retirement to you?

What are your thoughts on the possibility of retiring?

How will you know when it is time to retire?

What will your retirement look like?

What are some positive aspects of retiring?

What are some negative aspects?

What do you think other people would think of you if you were retired?

How do you think you will feel about yourself when you are retired?



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