



Research on Support for Continuation of Work and Career Development of Middle-Aged and Older Persons with Disabilities

(Research Report No. 186) Summary

[Keywords]

Middle-aged and older

Aging

Job redesign

Career development

Social capital

[Abstract]

The purpose of this research is to understand the vocational challenges that middle-aged and older workers with disabilities face as they age, and the actual conditions of support and accommodation provided by employers, and to obtain knowledge for examining how to support their continuation of work and career development. As a result of the survey, it became clear that the vocational challenges associated with age-related changes result from a combination of factors, including not only deterioration of mental and physical functions due to aging, but also changes in the home environment and the workplace environment. In addition, it was found that middle-aged and older workers with disabilities engaged in self-management to maintain their health and recover from fatigue, and requested assistance from others. Workplaces provided accommodation for their health management, working hours and flexible leave, and reviewed work practices. Furthermore, with regard to social capital in the workplace, it was confirmed that the higher the evaluation of workers with disabilities, the higher the rate of concrete measures by the company to address their vocational challenges.

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2 Research period

FY 2023 to 2025

3 Composition of the research report

Introduction Background, purpose, and methods of the research

Chapter 1 Survey on the Work/Life Support Centers for Person with Disabilities on the status of addressing vocational challenges of middle-aged and older persons with disabilities

Chapter 2 Survey on the state of support for persons with disabilities aged 35 or older at workplaces

Chapter 3 Survey on support needed by middle-aged and older workers with disabilities

Chapter 4 Interview survey on support for continuation of work and career development of middle-aged and older persons with disabilities

Chapter 5 Study on how to support middle-aged and older workers with disabilities by the research committee

Chapter 6 General Discussion

Appendix

4 Background and purpose of the research

In light of the aging of workers with disabilities in Japan, it has become an urgent policy issue to support the active participation of middle-aged and older persons with disabilities who are continuously employed and the employers' efforts to support their continued employment.

According to the “Report of the Study Group on Strengthening Cooperation in Employment and Welfare Measures for Persons with Disabilities,” published by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) in 2021, “While many companies are engaged in the employment of persons with disabilities, quite a few companies feel uneasy about their employment management, including support for career development of employees with disabilities and responses to changes in circumstances due to aging. Therefore, responding to their needs for support is also a challenge” and “Another point is that

work transition support programs should be made available as part of career development support, which can be utilized in conjunction with work at companies.” With the aging of employees with disabilities, it is necessary to consider career development support as well as how to support continuation of work for middle-aged and older people with disabilities.

The purpose of this research is to understand the challenges employers face due to the age-related changes in workers with disabilities and the impact on their work, as well as the actual conditions and effects of the accommodation provided to address these issues. It also aims to provide knowledge for comprehensive consideration of urgent policy issues, including support for their continuation of work and career development in promoting the active participation of middle-aged and older workers with disabilities.

Furthermore, the results of the survey on Work/Life Support Centers for Person with Disabilities, which will be described later, suggested that vocational challenges associated with age-related changes already occur before the age of 45. When considering how to support the continuation of work for middle-aged and older persons with disabilities, it is also necessary to pay attention to the situation of persons with disabilities under the age of 45. Therefore, workers with disabilities aged 35 or older were considered as “middle-aged and older persons with disabilities.”

5 Methods

(1) Survey of the Work/Life Support Centers for Person with Disabilities on the status of responses to vocational challenges of middle-aged and older persons with disabilities (Chapter 1)

It was carried out using the Web form from July to August 2023. Requests for cooperation in survey were sent to 169 centers selected randomly from among 337 Work/Life Support Centers for Person with Disabilities nationwide, of which 77 responded (response rate: 45.6%).

(2) Survey on the state of support for persons with disabilities aged 35 or older at workplaces (hereinafter referred to as “workplace survey”) (Chapter 2)

It was carried out using the Web form from April to May 2024. Requests for survey cooperation were sent to 10,000 companies (9,402 general companies and 598 special subsidiary companies), and 948 responses were received (response rate: 9.5%). Respondents were those in charge of managing the employment of persons with disabilities at the workplace where the largest number of persons with disabilities are employed in the company.

(3) Survey on support needed by middle-aged and older employees with disabilities (hereinafter referred to as “survey on workers with disabilities”) (Chapter 3)

It was carried out using the Web form from April to May 2024. Survey cooperation requests and flyers calling on employees with disabilities to participate in the survey were sent by mail to 10,000 offices and 1,848 work support providers selected for the survey. The survey targeted employees aged 35 or older with a diagnosis of disability. A total of 1,232 responses were received.

(4) Interview survey on support for continuation of work and career development of middle-aged and older employees with disabilities (Chapter 4)

The survey was conducted online or face-to-face between August 2024 and February 2025. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 workplaces that meet prescribed conditions, 9 workers with disabilities, and 1 employee of Work/Life Support Centers for Person with Disabilities among respondents to the workplace survey and the survey on workers with disabilities.

(5) Study on how to support middle-aged and older employees with disabilities by the research committee (Chapter 5)

In addition to vocational rehabilitation research and welfare for persons with disabilities, a research committee was established and operated by persons concerned in business administration, occupational health, social gerontology, industrial health, industrial sociology, etc., to plan surveys, examine the survey methods, and interpret the results.

6 Summarized results of the study

(1) What are the vocational challenges for middle-aged and older workers with disabilities

As a result of the survey, it became clear that the challenges in the working life of middle-aged and older workers with disabilities are diverse. They resulted from a combination of factors, including not only functional decline with aging but also the occurrence of other disabilities, the severity of the disabilities, and changes in the home environment and work environment over time.

In the survey of workers with disabilities, about half of the respondents experienced a decline in performance due to changes over time, and it was shown that the age at which they became aware of the decline differed depending on the type of disability. More specifically, the majority of workers with intellectual disability, those with developmental disability, and those with mental disability were aware of their decline before age 45, while the majority of workers with physical disability (visual disability, hearing disability, physical motor disability, internal disabilities) were aware of their decline over age 45. In addition, the workplace survey revealed that regarding the age at which support and accommodation became necessary for them in response to age-related changes, the most frequently observed age range was “aged 35 to under 45” for workers with intellectual disability and workers with mental disability (though for workers with mental disability, “aged 45 to under 55” category was observed at the same rate). For workers with physical motor disability, the most frequently observed age range was “aged 55 to under 65” (Figure 1). From the above results, it was shown that many workplaces felt that the vocational challenges associated with age-related change appeared earlier for workers with intellectual disability and workers with mental disability than for workers with physical disability.

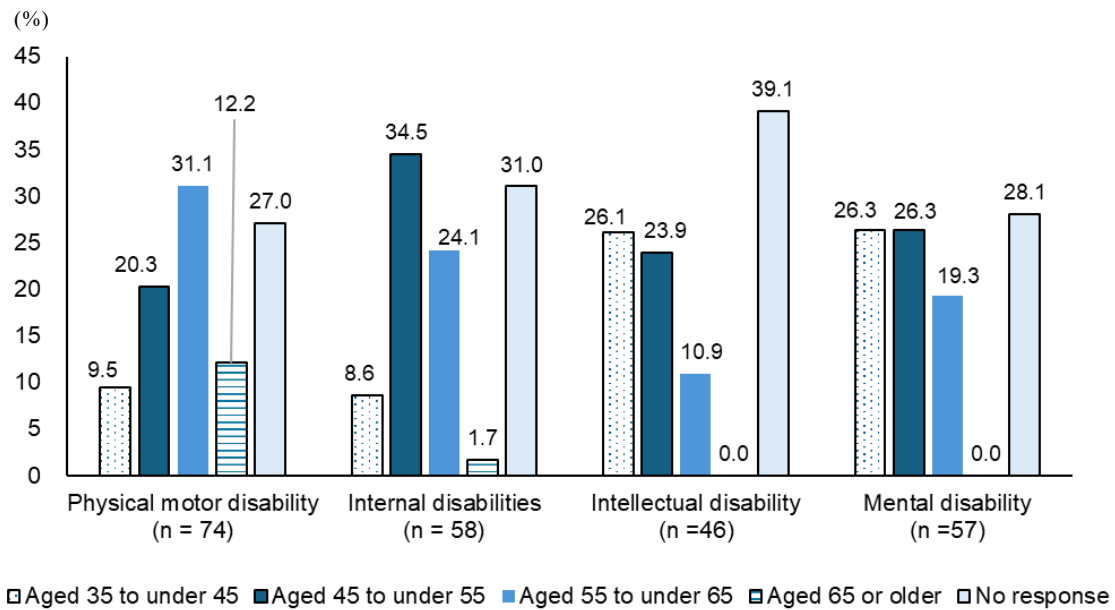


Figure 1: Percentage of middle-aged and older workers with disabilities requiring support and accommodation by age range

As for the specific vocational challenges associated with age-related change, the research committee discussion included errors in office work, a decrease in concentration, and difficulty in cleaning due to back pain. In addition, the workplace survey revealed that the main problem for workers with physical motor disability and workers with intellectual disability was a decline in “work capacity and productivity,” and that for workers with internal disabilities and mental disability it was “health management.” As the background of these vocational challenges, “Problems related to physical strength and motor ability began to arise” was frequently selected for workers with physical motor disability and workers with intellectual disability, while “Problems related to memory, comprehension, and judgment began to arise” was frequently selected for workers with intellectual disability. These findings suggested that decline in mental and physical function due to aging lied in the background of vocational challenges associated with age-related changes.

However, the vocational challenges associated with age-related changes are not based solely on functional decline due to aging. From the interview survey, it was suggested that changes in the family environment, such as home care problems due to aging of parents, own health management, starting to live alone, and death of parents, could trigger the vocational challenges. Moreover, there were mental disorder cases such as sleeplessness and hallucinations/delusions caused by change of superiors who had supported them for many years due to personnel reshuffling, indicating that changes in the work environment can also be a cause of vocational challenges.

(2) How middle-aged and older workers with disabilities and employers respond to vocational challenges arising from age-related changes and realize their continuation of work

It was found that reasonable accommodation provided by employers and professional support given by external support providers are important for continuation of work for middle-aged and older workers with disabilities.

A. Actions taken by middle-aged and older workers with disabilities

As a result of the survey on workers with disabilities, among those who experienced performance decline, the most common measure taken by themselves was “Slept well and took rest,” indicating that about half of the respondents were implementing self-management to maintain their health and recover from fatigue. About 30% of the respondents requested assistance from others, such as “Consulted with superiors, colleagues, industrial physicians, nurses, public health nurses, etc.” or “Consulted with specialists outside the workplace (such as staff of work support providers or doctors at hospitals).”

B. Employers' responses

According to the results of the survey for workers with disabilities, about 30% of those who experienced performance decline requested the cooperation of their supervisors and colleagues, and approximately 20% each reported that regular consultations or interviews about job duties, improvements to the work environment and facilities, reviews of job duties, and securing breaks or leave for hospital visits had been implemented. In the workplace survey, health management accommodation, accommodation of working hours and flexible leave, and review of work contents within the same department were selected as support and accommodation provided in order to address vocational challenges due to age-related changes. This tendency was similar to the results of the survey for workers with disabilities.

C. Responses of work support providers, etc.

From the cases identified through the interview survey, it became clear that various social resources such as Work/Life Support Centers for Person with Disabilities, medical institutions (attending physician, mental health worker, industrial physician, nurse, public health nurse), local vocational centers for persons with disabilities, employment support providers established by the municipalities, and employee assistance program (EAP) are utilized in responding to vocational challenges due to age-related changes. The survey on Work/Life Support Centers for Person with Disabilities revealed that the Work/Life Support Centers for Person with Disabilities provided a wide range of support to middle-aged and older workers with disabilities, including physical condition checks by meeting with workers with disabilities, advice on employment, introduction of necessary support services, accompanying workers to medical appointments, support for pension applications and debt settlement, consultation on work styles, and hygiene management.

D. Factors related to support inside and outside the workplace

According to the survey on workers with disabilities, whether middle-aged and older workers with

disabilities consulted with relevant persons in the workplace when their performance deteriorated was closely related to the response of the workplace. Those who consulted received more support from their workplace than those who did not. Furthermore, with regard to workplace social capital (a network with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate collaboration within or between groups), it was found that workplaces with higher ratings for workers with disabilities were more likely to take specific measures, such as promoting understanding of superiors and colleagues and improving the working environment and facilities (Figure 2). Therefore, it was confirmed that workplace social capital is an important factor associated with the measures taken when the performance of workers with disabilities declined. This finding may reflect that when social capital in the workplace is highly perceived by workers with disabilities, it is easier for them to request assistance in the workplace in order to elicit concrete responses.

On the other hand, according to the results of the workplace survey, there are many employers who do not receive support from support providers or specialists in responding to the age-related changes of workers with disabilities. It is observed that support tends to be provided entirely within companies. These results indicate that there are a certain number of cases in which cooperation with support providers and specialists in companies is not conducted in response to vocational challenges associated with age-related changes.

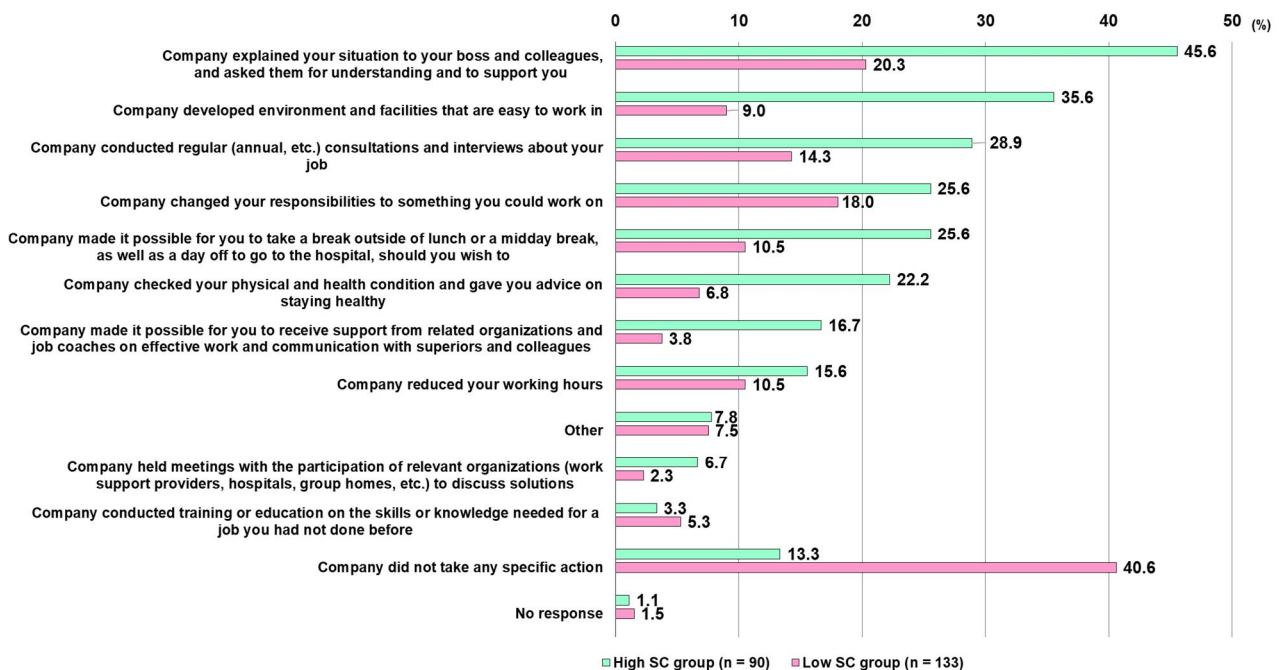


Figure 2 Workplace responses to poor performance by high and low social capital (SC) groups

(3) How middle-aged and older workers with disabilities and employers are trying to prevent the occurrence of vocational challenges associated with aging

The survey conducted in this research did not include specific questions on preventive measures, but the responses to vocational challenges and career development support measures associated with age-

related changes suggested, although indirectly, preventive factors.

A. Understanding the situation of middle-aged and older workers with disabilities through periodic interviews

The survey of workers with disabilities revealed that those who consulted with their superiors, colleagues, industrial physicians, nurses, public health nurses, etc. when their performance deteriorated were more likely to receive support from their workplaces than those who did not. In addition, the interview survey revealed initiatives that led to early identification of issues, such as holding regular individual interviews and sharing information through a weekly report tool. These results suggest that employers should continuously grasp the conditions and needs of workers with disabilities through regular interviews, etc., as this could serve as an effective preventive measure to detect signs of age-related changes at an early stage and deal with them.

B. Ensuring psychological safety

In the survey of workers with disabilities, it was confirmed that in workplaces where workers perceived a high level of social capital, there is a tendency to proactively promote understanding of superiors and colleagues and to provide accommodation through environmental adjustments. Such a work environment with a high degree of psychological safety is thought to create an environment where workers with disabilities can easily consult about changes and problems at an early stage, thereby enabling preventive intervention before the problems become serious. This result is also related to the finding of the interview survey, which identified the workplace environment where employees share awareness such as “It is important to speak up right away on what you’re having trouble with” as a workplace characteristic of the high social capital group.

C. Use of health promotion programs

The interview survey identified business establishments that are implementing health promotion programs such as “Health Day” and “Health Challenge Campaign.” Approaches that combine health maintenance and health promotion are known to be effective in improving worker health and reducing workplace safety risks. Such health promotion programs can also be expected to be effective as preventive measures against the occurrence of vocational challenges for middle-aged and older workers with disabilities due to age-related changes.

(4) What kind of support is sought by middle-aged and older workers with disabilities and what kind of support is provided by employers in order to help them develop their careers

It was found that middle-aged and older workers with disabilities are interested in continuation of work and maintaining opportunities for social connection and participation, and are seeking various career development support.

A. Career development support sought by middle-aged and older workers with disabilities

In a survey of workers with disabilities, approximately 40% of respondents gave such answers as “I want my current company to raise the retirement age or hire me again after retirement.” and “I hope

more companies hire older people,” indicating a strong need for an environment where they can continue working. In addition, about 30% of respondents mentioned they wanted a place where they could continue to connect with society after retirement, with comments such as “I want a place where I can interact with local people even if I quit my job at retirement.” However, it should be noted that some requests for continuation of work were found to reflect strong financial concerns after retirement.

B. Career development support provided by employers

The career development support provided by employers was most frequently observed for “career counseling” followed by “target management system.” In the interview survey, it was found that a wide range of initiatives were implemented, including skill-building training (training for new employees, mid-level employees and managers, assertion training, qualification acquisition support, etc.); career planning and financial planning training (provision of information on asset building, pension system, health management, re-employment system, etc.); career-related consultations and interviews (adjustment of duties and reasonable accommodation through regular interviews); self-development support (subsidy for expenses related to acquisition of qualifications and participation in external seminars, etc.); assessment of vocational capacities (performance evaluation using work data, utilization of growth support sheets, and understanding of the status of self-management at home through daily report); and target management system (setting and evaluation of annual and semiannual targets, feedback, and motivation through systems for conversion to regular employment and award system).

7 Discussion

(1) Findings of the research

This research clarified that the vocational challenges of middle-aged and older workers associated with age-related changes result from a combination of factors, including not only deterioration of mental and physical functions due to aging, but also changes in the home environment and the workplace environment. It clarified the actual situation of how employers are responding to such vocational challenges by adjusting working hours and improving the working environment. In particular, workplaces where workers perceived a high level of social capital significantly suggested the possibility of promoting early identification of issues and effective responses. On the other hand, it was clarified that about half of the workplaces that responded to the survey did not utilize external support providers, support tends to be provided entirely within companies, and middle-aged and older workers with disabilities had strong financial and health concerns after retirement from working life.

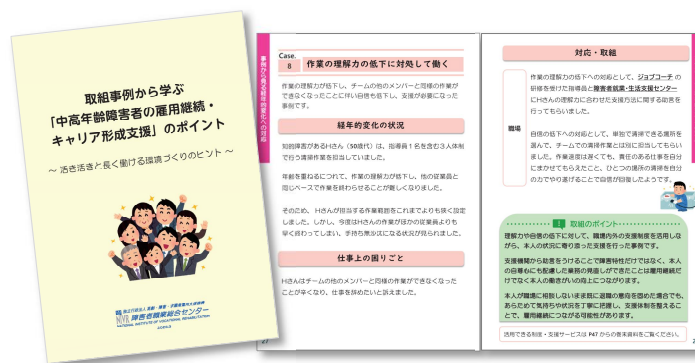
(2) Limitations of the research

The Web survey used as the survey method in this research may bias the results by skewing the responses toward specific types of disabilities or people with high digital literacy. In addition, in the survey on workers with disabilities, it cannot be denied that the responses based on subjective assessments about the social capital in the workplace and the support received from the workplace when

their performance decline are different from the objective reality. Moreover, the interview surveys did not provide detailed findings due to a lack of cases of specific disability types, particularly intellectual and hearing disabilities. With regard to the types of disabilities for which the case examples were not identified, it is necessary to conduct more detailed surveys and case studies in the future to provide detailed support measures according to their characteristics.

8 Relevant research outputs

- Points of “Support for Continuation of Work and Career Development for Middle-Aged and Older Workers with Disabilities” learning from case studies - Hints for Creating an Environment that Supports Long-term and Vibrant Work -, 2026
- Research on Support for Middle-Aged and Older Persons with Disabilities Related to Work Life Redesign, Research Report No. 159, 2021
- Points of Work Life Redesign for Middle-Aged and Older Persons with Disabilities from Case Studies, 2021
- Research on Employment Promotion and Stabilization of Persons with Disabilities in an Aging Society, Research Report No. 97, 2010



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