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Received: 22 July 2022 | Revised: 1 May 2024 | Accepted: 2 May 2024

DOI: 10.1111/1748-8583.12555

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Human Resource Management Journal WILEY

Enabling older employees' well-being through HR attributions: The moderating role of management context

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Abstract

Fusing the extant literature on successful aging at work (SAW) and HR attributions, we examined the confluence of employee-oriented internal HR attributions and unit-level employee management context on burnout for employees across the age spectrum. Time-lagged, multi-level survey data were collected from a sample of 1762 blue-collar employees from 178 work units at the manufacturing plants of a large firm operating in the Turkish energy industry, which is characterized as a high-risk safety environment. A cross-level moderated mediation model was tested using multi-level structural equation modeling (MSEM). Results supported study hypotheses such that the negative association between age and burnout was mediated by employee-oriented positive HR attributions, and this indirect association was moderated by unit-level perceptions of the employee management context. Development-oriented contexts that emphasized personal development/growth—indicated by the degree of emphasis on innovation strategy, safety training, and active unit safety leadership—weakened the negative indirect (i.e.,

Abbreviations/acronyms: CFA, Confirmatory Factor Analysis; H1, Hypothesis 1; H2, Hypothesis 2; H2a, Hypothesis 2a; H2b, Hypothesis 2b; H3, Hypothesis 3; H3a, Hypothesis 3a; H3b, Hypothesis 3b; HR, Human Resources; ML, Maximum Likelihood; MSEM, Multi-level Structural Equation Modeling; P-E, Person-Environment; R & D, Research & Development; SAW, Successful Aging at Work.

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buffering) effect of age on burnout via less positive HR attributions. Conversely, a maintenance-oriented context that emphasized maintaining the status quo—indicated by passive unit safety leadership—strengthened said effect through more positive HR attributions. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings for fostering employee well-being across the age spectrum are discussed.

KEYWORDS
burnout, employee well-being, HR attributions, innovation, leadership, person-environment fit, safety, successful aging

Practitioner notes

What is currently known?

- Older employees generally view their social and work environments more positively than younger employees.
- Older employees generally are more emotionally resilient at work, but have lower levels of promotion and growth focus than younger employees.
- HR practices emphasizing the preservation of current functioning are more aligned with older employees' personal motives than practices oriented toward growth.

What this paper adds?

- Older employees experience less burnout because they generally make more positive causal attributions about employee management practices.
- Age is not associated with positive HR attributions when unit management practices heavily emphasize development/growth.
- Age is more strongly associated with HR attributions when unit management practices emphasize maintaining current levels of functioning and status quo.
- Older employees' burnout risk compared to their younger colleagues is lowest when their units implement management practices that emphasize maintenance.

Implications for practitioners

- Fostering a development-based employee management environment is more aligned with younger employees' needs and motives.
- A maintenance-based employee management environment in workgroups best preserves older employees' psychological well-being.
- Employers should retain older employees because they are likely to contribute to positive workgroup perceptions of HR.
- Line managers' role in framing and communicating HR messages and leadership styles is instrumental in catering to the specific needs of employees across the age spectrum.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Driven by declining fertility rates, steady increases in life expectancy, and the aging of the large post-World War II baby boomer cohort, the global workforce is rapidly graying (Hertel & Zacher, 2018). People aged 65 and older are expected to represent almost a fifth of the global population by 2050, and the populations both of developed and most developing countries are expected to experience significant aging in the coming century (Rudolph et al., 2019). Indeed, population aging has already begun to result in workforce shortages, consequent of declines in labor market participation after age 50 (Eurostat, 2017). Given these trends, it is both timely and essential for organizations to better understand employee management contexts that best retain and maximize their older talent.

A promising theory to understand the role of employee age in the work context is Kooij et al.'s (2020) successful aging at work (henceforth, "SAW"), a comprehensive framework that explains self-regulation processes involved in maintaining and enhancing older employees' ability and motivation to work. It integrates person-environment (P-E) fit theory (Kristof-Brown, 1996) and the motivational model of lifespan development (Heckhausen et al., 2010) to examine these phenomena via the lens of *employee age*. According to SAW, the compatibility of work demands and resources with employee abilities and needs (i.e., demands–abilities or needs–supplies fit) facilitates well-being across ages, in line with older versus younger employees' differing work motives (Kooij et al., 2020). A key facet of employee well-being is burnout, a psychological state characterized by the depletion of emotional and psychological resources to meet work demands (Bakker et al., 2014).

Older employees generally demonstrate higher resilience to workplace stressors and experience overall less burnout than younger employees (Ng & Feldman, 2010). This resilience may stem from biological changes associated with aging such as reduced physiological reactivity to life events, which can diminish the impact of negative stimuli (Mather & Carstensen, 2005). However, the specific mechanisms underpinning this age-based workplace advantage remain unclear (Scheibe & Zacher, 2013). Importantly, research suggests that under intense, chronic, and inescapable stress, older employees' self-regulation advantage diminishes or reverses, likely because of their slower physiological recovery (Charles, 2010). Consequently, our primary objective is to investigate the underlying perceptual mechanisms and contextual factors that explain *why* and *when* older employees experience reduced burnout compared to younger employees, and whether this advantage persists across various types of management contexts. Building on SAW (Kooij et al., 2020), we argue that the suitability of the work environment is crucial. Specifically, if the work environment aligns with the motivational needs of older workers (i.e., high needs–supplies fit), they are more likely to sustain their resilience advantage. To investigate these dynamics, we focus on a sample of blue-collar employees in a manufacturing setting characterized by chronic health and safety hazards, which are known to intensify work demands and exacerbate burnout (Nahrgang et al., 2011).

The study model (presented in Figure 1) provides an integration of SAW (Kooij et al., 2020) and HR attributions theories (Nishii et al., 2008) by advancing age as an essential cognitively-laden and socio-emotional factor in explaining how employees attribute particular intentions to their employers. Given our interest in the link between age and burnout, we focus on employee-oriented HR attributions, which reflect employees' beliefs that organizational practices are intentionally designed to benefit rather than exploit them, a perspective intimately tied to employee well-being (Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015). We posit that older employees perceive organizational HR practices more positively than their younger counterparts and consequently experience less burnout (H1).

Delving further, the extant literature on SAW suggests that personal and professional goals shift from development to maintenance as people age (Kooij et al., 2011). Accordingly, research indicates that development-oriented HR practices—focused on enhancement, growth, and personal accomplishment—are better suited to younger adults who have many years ahead to develop themselves and reap its benefits, whereas maintenance-oriented contexts—focused on preserving the status quo in personal development and ways of functioning—are better suited to older adults who are more likely to prioritize resource conservation (Kooij et al., 2010, 2013). Based on these premises, we propose that the employee management context regulates associations between age

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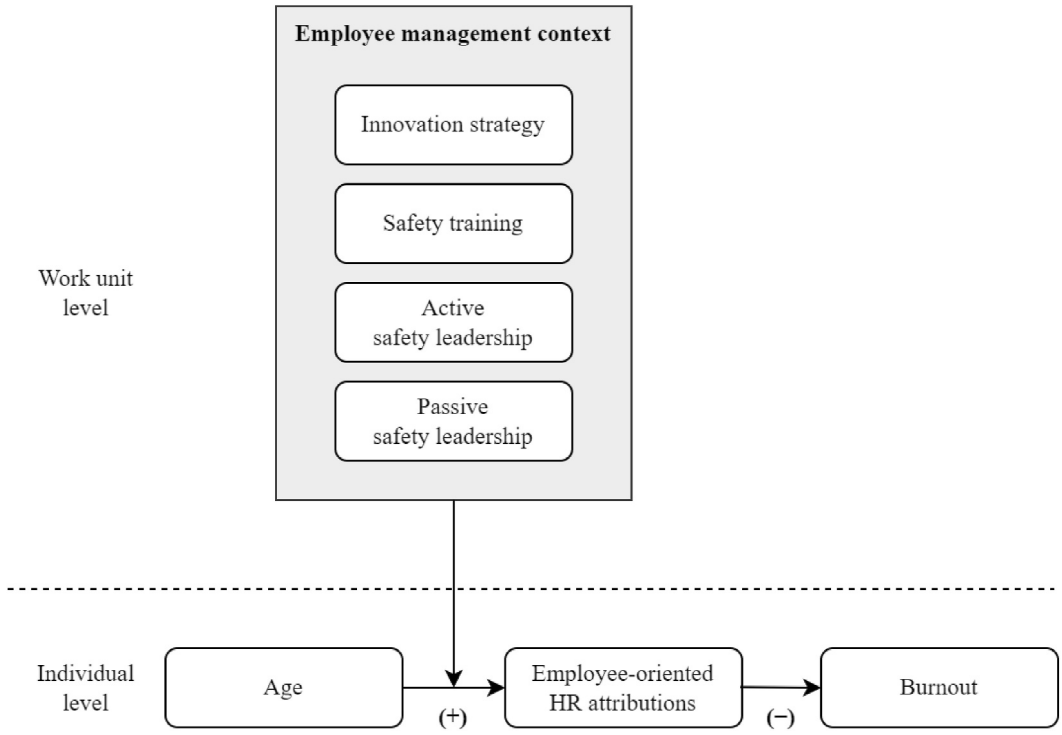


FIGURE 1 Hypothesized model.

and HR attributions, whereby more positive attributions are expected when age and context are aligned. This alignment, in turn, is expected to facilitate older employees' resistance to burnout (H2 & H3).

In line with calls to investigate the impact of age across levels of analyses (Kooij et al., 2020; Marcus et al., 2020), the current study extends the maintenance versus development dichotomy by adopting an HR implementation approach (Mirfakhar et al., 2018). Prior SAW research has focused on HR content, identifying HR bundles (i.e., development, maintenance, utilization, and accommodative) best aligned with advanced age (Kooij et al., 2010, 2013; Pak et al., 2021). However, contemporary HR research highlights variations in actual practices within organizations (Van Beurden et al., 2022). These practices, termed "people management" (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007), are shaped by line managers and influence employee motivation and well-being by conveying organizational values and acceptable work behaviors. Despite their significance in meeting older employees' needs, such practices remain largely understudied in work and aging research (Knies et al., 2015).

Summarily, we make several important contributions to management science and practice. First, we advance research in work and aging by shedding light on the causal mechanisms underlying the widely documented negative association between age and burnout (Ng & Feldman, 2010) via reference to age-based differences in employee-oriented HR attributions. Second, we advance SAW theory by extending understanding on development- versus maintenance-oriented people management practices at the unit level of analysis that best caters to the unique needs of older employees (Kooij et al., 2010, 2013; Pak et al., 2021). Third, we advance theory on HR attributions by identifying the types of employees who are more or less likely to hold benevolent or malevolent attributions of organizational HR practices, and as a function of employee age. Fourth, we extend scientific generalizability on associations between age and well-being to a chronically understudied population, blue-collar employees (Toppinen-Tanner et al., 2002). Following, we elaborate on the specific mechanisms underlying the associations between employee age, HR attributions and practices, and employee burnout.

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2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 | The mediating role of HR attributions

HR attributions theory posits that differences in cognitive and social information processing create variance in employee perceptions of HR practices (Nishii et al., 2008). HR attributions can be either internal (perceiving that management has responsibility or control for adopting HR practices) or external (perceiving that external constraints cause management to adopt HR practices). Internal HR attributions include the business or strategic goals underlying HR (increasing service quality and/or reducing operational costs) and management's employee-oriented philosophies (increasing employee well-being and/or reducing employee exploitation; Nishii et al., 2008). These attributions have consequences for employees, with positive employee-oriented attributions leading to more favorable outcomes such as increased organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and decreased emotional exhaustion (Sanders et al., 2021). HR attributions theory explains that individual differences determine the types of HR information employees attend to and how they cognitively process and evaluate this information. However, little is known about the cognitive bases underlying these individual differences (Van Beurden et al., 2022). Here, research on age-associated cognitive and emotional changes may help inform how employee age shapes HR attributions.

Aging affects all aspects of cognition, including causal attribution processes (Blanchard-Fields & Chen, 1996). Older adults' life priorities shift as they become aware of the limited time remaining in their lives (Carstensen, 2006). Aging thus amplifies the salience of emotional goals, prompting older adults to prioritize positive emotional experiences and attenuating tendencies to recall or dwell on negative social events in favor of positive ones (Mather & Carstensen, 2005). Said focus on positive emotions extends to the workplace, leading to more favorable organizational attitudes among older employees, including organizational commitment, perceptions of organizational support, and trust in the organization (Ng & Feldman, 2010). This positivity is also manifested through their more favorable perceptions of HR policies and practices (Kooij & Van de Voorde, 2015).

An increased focus on positive emotionality among older adults manifests as maximization of emotional satisfaction from existing social relationships while avoiding the formation of new social relationships, leading to fewer social connections both professionally and personally (Carstensen, 2006). This shift places a premium on relationship quality over quantity for older employees, making trust in management more central and desirable for them than pursuing personal achievement and development (Bal et al., 2011). Hence, older employees are arguably more inclined to view HR policies and practices through the lens of benevolence, trust, and mutual exchange, and consequently hold more favorable perceptions of HR policies and practices than younger employees (Kooij & Van de Voorde, 2015).

From the standpoint of SAW, such positive HR attributions may play a pivotal role in helping employees cope with work demands and self-regulate to maintain the ability and motivation to continue working as they age (Kooij et al., 2020). When employees view their work environment in a positive light and perceive that management implements employment practices to enhance their well-being and not exploit them, they experience a more positive psychological environment, perceiving overall greater support and consideration from management, and triggering positive emotions that enable better emotion regulation when responding to stressors (Jensen & Van de Voorde, 2016; Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015). These attributions serve as critical socio-emotional resources for older employees to cope with work demands (Bakker et al., 2014) and reduce emotional exhaustion, job strain, and burnout (Shantz et al., 2016; Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015).

Hypothesis 1 Age will have an overall negative indirect effect on burnout via employee-oriented HR attributions. Relative to younger employees, older employees will have more positive HR attributions, which in turn will lead to less burnout.

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2.2 | The moderating role of the employee management context

Building upon P-E fit theory (Kristof-Brown, 1996) and the motivational model of lifespan development (Heckhausen et al., 2010), the SAW framework emphasizes establishing and maintaining alignment between the evolving needs and abilities of employees as they age, and in contrast to the various demands and resources encountered in their respective work environments. This alignment, often referred to as P-E fit (see also Kristof-Brown, 1996), is how older employees can achieve successful aging at work (Kooij et al., 2020) and shapes their work attitudes as well as physical and psychological well-being (Zacher et al., 2014). In turn, age is associated with two key work-related motives: the desires to achieve increased gains and preserve (or avoid losing) current strengths (Kooij et al., 2011). Accordingly, we follow Kooij et al. (2011, 2013) in distinguishing between development-oriented contexts—which focus on ensuring employees achieve higher levels of functioning through training, skill development, and career growth—vs. maintenance-oriented contexts—which aim to preserve employees' current levels of functioning when faced with new challenges or restoring previous functioning to equilibrium.

Here, we focus on innovation strategy, training, and active leadership as indicators of a development-oriented management context because these factors pose environmental challenges on employees that emphasize continuous work improvement and ability growth (Zacher et al., 2014). We operationalize the maintenance-oriented context as consisting of unit managers' leadership behaviors that focus on preserving the status quo rather than intervening to challenge employees toward development. This passive leadership style is the sole maintenance-oriented practice in this study because, in safety-critical environments (as studied here), promoting innovation and continuous learning is critical for minimizing safety risks (Eeckelaert et al., 2012) and therefore necessitates formal management practices that are development (rather than maintenance) oriented. Hence, as the HR implementation perspective would suggest (Mirfakhar et al., 2018), an inclination to preserve the status quo is typically driven by line managers who are reluctant to adopt developmental practices and exhibit intervention-avoidant leadership behaviors (Kelloway et al., 2006).

Overall, these four contextual moderators arguably capture the confluence of HR implementation, aging, and safety issues. First, the pursuit of an innovation strategy—which indicates an organization's dedication to exploring new and improved products or business processes—represents a desire to deviate from and change the status quo (Oke et al., 2009) and necessitates a high degree of learning and development (Lin & Sanders, 2017). Next, the use of developmental training programs is a major indicator of a development-oriented context (Kooij et al., 2010) and challenges employees to "improve the status quo rather than passively accept it" (Sung & Choi, 2014, p. 398). Lastly, unit managers' leadership behaviors largely determine how much workgroups foster a development versus maintenance approach. Active safety leadership—including transformational (e.g., motivating employees to exceed expectations) and contingent reward leadership (e.g., rewarding achievements)—places higher demands on employees to improve their safety skills and work methods (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Conversely, (passive) management-by-exception and laissez-faire leadership emphasize maintaining the status quo. In passive management-by-exception, leaders preserve the status quo by refraining to "make improvements as long as things are going along all right" (Hater & Bass, 1988, p. 697); laissez-faire leaders do so by exhibiting "delay, absence, and indifference", underplaying self-improvement (Sosik & Dionne, 1997, p. 456).

ence, and as per the above review on development- and maintenance-oriented work contexts, SAW theory suggests that the prevalence of highly development-oriented cues is misaligned with older employees' maintenance-oriented goal preferences that prioritize self-preservation and personal control, making them more likely to appraise development-oriented context as a hindrance to the attainment of their personal goals (Kooij et al., 2020; Podsakoff et al., 2007). In contrast, younger employees are more likely to value developmental contexts as challenges that improve their opportunities for growth and future gains (Kooij et al., 2020). Indeed, goal congruence facilitates goal accomplishment at work, generating more positive affect (Lazarus, 1999), and which tends to be positively attributed to employers (Jensen & Van de Voorde, 2016). Building on this premise, employees tend to respond to goal-congruent opportunities at work by forming positive affect toward their organizations, and consequently exhibit increased

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organizational support (Haar, 2006), organizational commitment (González-Morales & Neves, 2015), and loyalty (Boswell et al., 2004). Conversely, work contexts that hinder or threaten the accomplishment of personal goals lead to negative job attitudes and increased job strain (Podsakoff et al., 2007). Therefore, given theory and evidence indicating that older employees favor maintenance- over development-oriented contexts, we posit that maintenance-oriented management contexts will be more aligned with their motives and thus lead to more positive HR attributions vis-à-vis development-oriented contexts; vice versa for younger employees.

Hypothesis 2 The positive association between employee age and employee-oriented HR attributions will be:

(a) weaker when the employee management context is high in development (i.e., high in innovation strategy, safety training, or active unit safety leadership) versus low;
(b) stronger when the employee management context is high in maintenance (i.e., high in passive unit safety leadership) versus low.

2.3 | Moderated mediation

Strain and emotional exhaustion result from the interaction between work demands and personal resources, with resources buffering the adverse effects of work demands on strain (Bakker et al., 2014). According to Kooij et al.'s (2020) process model of SAW, older employees' ability to continue working is shaped by the alignment between the managerial context and their unique needs. Considering the highly stressful and physically dangerous manufacturing jobs presently studied, a mismatch arising from development-oriented HR practices is likely to erode older employees' inherent emotional resilience advantages. That is, older employees' motivation to continue working is driven by the fit between what the work environment offers and their (age-based) motives (i.e., needs-supplies fit; Kooij et al., 2020). Given that a highly maintenance-oriented work context aligns with older employees' desire to preserve the status quo, this goal congruence is likely to boost positive HR attributions, which serve as a motivational resource that buffers job strain (Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015). Accordingly, we posit that older employees' positive HR attributions—which are boosted by the alignment between their work motives and the maintenance-oriented context—will facilitate their increased emotional resilience and desire to remain in the organization. Conversely, we expect that these advantages will be diminished in development-oriented contexts given less positive HR attributions resulting from perceived motivational misalignment. Taken together, these mechanisms suggest a first-stage moderated mediation process such that:

Hypothesis 3 The indirect negative effect of employee age on burnout via HR attributions will be:

(a) weaker when the employee management context is high in development (i.e., high in innovation strategy, safety training, or active unit safety leadership) versus low;
(b) stronger when the employee management context is high in maintenance (i.e., high in passive unit safety leadership) versus low.

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Organizational context, research design, and participants

We sampled unionized blue-collar employees in four plants of a large manufacturing firm in Turkey's energy industry, which entailed a high prevalence of physical hazards including explosion, fire, and chemical toxicity. The firm implemented extensive formal safety protocols, safeguards, permits, and training for employees. A comprehensive multi-phase collaboration with the HR department was conducted to improve behavioral safety, starting with in-

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depth interviews conducted with 55 field employees from all levels and locations, followed by devising highly contextualized research tools and models.

Employee demographic information (see Appendix A in Supporting Information S1) was provided by the firm's HR department. Employees were emailed to participate voluntarily and encouraged through regular reminders, campaign posters, and endorsement emails from unit managers, HR, and the CEO. Surveys were conducted at two time points 3 months apart. Measurements for HR attributions and employee management context were collected in the first round; data on burnout were collected in the second round. The survey pool consisted of 4082 employees. After data cleaning, we had responses from 1762 employees (a 43% response rate)[1] nested within 178 organizational work units (average unit size ≈ 10).

3.2 | Measures

Survey measures were translated from English to Turkish by three bilingual subject matter experts using a collaborative and iterative translation technique (Douglas & Craig, 2007). The translated questionnaires were then pilot tested on three employees using the think-aloud protocol (Jaaskelainen, 2010) and revised as needed. Details on new or modified measures and their validation analyses are presented in Appendix B in Supporting Information S1. Unless otherwise specified, all items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree"; 5 = "strongly agree").

Employee age. Employees' chronological age (in years) was provided by the firm's HR department.

Employee-oriented HR attributions. We used a modified version of Nishii et al.'s (2008) employee-oriented internal HR attributions measure capturing general perceptions about management's intent behind all implemented HR practices (e.g., "The main purpose of HR practices (such as recruitment, training, remuneration) carried out in this company is to show employees that they are valued and ensure their well-being").

Innovation strategy. Strategic priorities were measured using four items from the Workplace and Employee Survey of the Business and Labor Market Analysis Division of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2004). One item reflected the overall R&D prioritization—the chief indicator of the degree of overall within-firm innovation (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990)—and three items were on product and process innovation (Bergfors & Larsson, 2009). An example item asked employees how much importance is given in their workplace "to conduct research and development."

Safety training. This measure comprised five items assessing the extent and effectiveness of safety training programs geared toward the development of employees' ability and motivation to work safely (e.g., "All employees regularly receive safety training throughout their careers to update their knowledge and skills").

Unit safety leadership. Participants rated the leadership behaviors of their immediate supervisors on how they manage safety. Utilizing full-range leadership theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006), development-oriented active leadership consists of transformational and contingent reward behaviors. Safety-specific active leadership was taken from Barling et al. (2002), which they adapted from the MLQ-5 (Bass & Avolio, 1990), comprising 8 items for transformational (e.g., "My supervisor spends time showing me the safest way to do things at work") and three items for contingent reward leadership (e.g., "My supervisor expresses satisfaction when I meet safety expectations"). Passive leadership included two items for management-by-exception (e.g., "My supervisor fails to intervene until safety problems become serious") and four items for laissez-faire leadership (e.g., "My supervisor avoids making decisions that affect safety on the job").

Burnout. Employee burnout was measured using the exhaustion scale of the 5-item short version of the Oldenburg Burnout Questionnaire (Demerouti et al., 2003; e.g., "After my work, I usually feel worn out and weary").

Control variables. Employees' gender, organizational tenure, education level, and job level were controlled at the individual level. Unit-level age and age variation (standard deviation of age in unit) were included as between-level controls (see Appendix B in Supporting Information S1 for details).

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4 | RESULTS

Individual-level responses were nested within 178 work units. Aggregation statistics and multi-level confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results are presented in Appendix C in Supporting Information S1. Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and variable intercorrelations are presented in Table 1. As shown in Table 1, all measures evidenced good reliability, and intercorrelations between study variables were generally in expected directions.

4.1 | Analytical strategy and hypotheses testing

Hypotheses were tested using multi-level structural equation modeling (MSEM) in Mplus 8.6 using a robust maximum likelihood (ML) estimation with full information maximum likelihood (FIML). Following an ML-moderated mediation (2x (1–1–1)) model (see Gonzalez-Roma & Hernández, 2017), four lower-level moderated mediation MSEM models were used to test the cross-level first-stage moderating effects of the unit-level context variables.[2] This analytical method is statistically powerful because, in MSEM, the individual-level variable variance is partitioned into between and within components, decreasing parameter estimate bias and increasing accuracy (Preacher et al., 2011).

The within-level analyses of all four models presented in Table 2 indicate that the effects of age on employee-oriented HR attributions (Model 1: $\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.05$; Model 2: $\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$; Models 3 and 4: $\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.01$) are all positive and significant. In turn, HR attributions are negatively associated with burnout in all four models. The indirect effects of this path are also negative and significant for all four models (Models 1 and 2: $\beta = -0.04$, Models 3 and 4: $\beta = -0.05$, $p < 0.05$ for all models). Overall, these results support H1.

The cross-level interactions are indicated by the between-level paths from "context × age" to HR attributions and burnout. The interactions predicting HR attributions are all statistically significant (for H2a, development contexts, Model 1: $\beta = -0.07$, Model 2: $\beta = -0.06$, Model 3 $\beta = -0.11$; for H2b, maintenance contexts, Model 4: $\beta = 0.08$; $p < 0.05$ for all models), whereas those predicting burnout are not. Significant interactions are plotted using the simple slope and Johnson-Neyman methods in Figures 2–5. Expectedly, as development orientation increases—indicated by an increase in innovation strategy (Figure 2), safety training (Figure 3), and active unit leadership (Figure 4)—positive associations between age and attributions are weakened and reach non-significance in highly development-oriented contexts (i.e., values above 4.41 for innovation, 3.98 for training, and 3.87 for active leadership). Conversely, as the level of (maintenance-oriented) passive leadership increases (Figure 5), positive associations between age and HR attributions are strengthened (i.e., significant for values above 2.05). These results support both H2a and H2b.

Tests of the moderated mediation model (Hypothesis 3) confirmed that age→HR attributions→burnout paths are significant and negative when the development-orientated context variables are low (Models 1 and 3: $\beta = -0.06$, Model 2: $\beta = -0.08$, $p < 0.01$ for all models) and when maintenance-oriented passive leadership is high (Model 4: $\beta = -0.07$, $p < 0.01$). The indirect paths are not significant when the development-orientated context variables are high or when passive leadership is low. These results support both H3a and H3b.

To verify the robustness of these findings under more comprehensive contextual conditions, we conducted additional tests on the multi-level models by also controlling for the main effects of all remaining contextual factors on employee burnout. These results confirm that, in all four models, the mediating effects of HR attributions on the age-burnout association (Model 1: $\beta = -0.03$ and Models 2–4: $\beta = -0.02$, $p < 0.05$ for all models) as well as the cross-level interaction coefficients are still in the same direction and statistically significant (Models 1: $\beta = -0.07$; Model 2: $\beta = -0.06$; Model 3: $\beta = -0.09$, and Model 4: $\beta = 0.09$, $p < 0.05$ for all models).

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TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations between study variables.

Variables		*N*	*M*	*SD*	*VIF*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Within-level															
1	Burnout	1165	2.66	0.69		(0.75)									
2	Employee-oriented HR attributions	917	2.92	1.03	1.65	−0.36**	(0.70)								
3	Innovation strategy	917	4.01	0.97	1.77	−0.28**	0.48**	(0.85)							
4	Safety training	905	3.71	0.85	1.69	−0.30**	0.52**	0.56**	(0.89)						
5	Active safety leadership	793	3.45	1.04	2.23	−0.32**	0.51**	0.49**	0.51**	(0.97)					
6	Passive safety leadership	793	2.25	0.95	1.67	0.21**	−0.35**	−0.34**	−0.35**	−0.63**	(0.91)				
7	Employee age	1762	35.73	7.17	3.22	0.03	−0.12**	−0.09**	−0.06	0.00	0.03				
8	Employee job tenure	1762	8.31	4.66	3.27	0.11**	−0.22**	−0.19**	−0.14**	−0.09*	0.08*	0.82**			
9	Employee sex (female = 1)	1762	0.04	0.21	1.06	0.04	0.07*	0.03	0.09**	0.01	−0.02	−0.08**	−0.04		
10	Employee education level	1762	2.72	0.73	1.07	−0.01	−0.05	0.02	−0.02	−0.03	−0.04	−0.15**	−0.09**	0.17**	
11	Hierarchical level	1762	0.82	0.42	1.23	0.01	0.04	0.02	0.04	−0.09*	0.07*	−0.40**	−0.38**	0.09**	0.07**
Between-level															
1	Burnout	162	2.64	0.43											
2	Employee-oriented HR attributions	144	2.86	0.69		−0.15									
3	Innovation strategy	144	3.96	0.70		−0.18*	0.58**								
4	Safety training	144	3.68	0.61		−0.07	0.53**	0.70**							
5	Active safety leadership	140	3.54	0.82		−0.29**	0.45**	0.50**	0.52**						
6	Passive safety leadership	140	2.20	0.75		0.19*	−0.34**	−0.22*	−0.18*	−0.54**					
12	Unit age variation	178	7.57	0.64		0.07	0.10	0.00	−0.03	0.02	−0.03				

Note: Cronbach's alphas in parentheses.

*$p < 0.05$ **$p < 0.01$.

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TABLE 2 Multi-level structural equation modeling results.

	Contextual moderators*							
	Model 1: Innovation strategy		Model 2: Safety		Model 3: Active leadership		Model 4: Passive leadership	
Paths	***β***	***SE***	***β***	***SE***	***β***	***SE***	***β***	***SE***
Within-level (individuals)								
Age → HRA	0.12*	0.05	0.13**	0.05	0.14**	0.05	0.14*	0.05
Age → Burnout	−0.12*	0.05	−0.12**	0.05	−0.11*	0.05	−0.11*	0.05
HRA → Burnout	−0.32**	0.06	−0.33**	0.05	−0.31**	0.06	−0.35**	0.05
Control variables								
Gender → HRA	0.03	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.06	0.03
Gender → Burnout	0.07*	0.03	0.07*	0.03	0.07*	0.03	0.07*	0.03
Tenure → HRA	−0.32**	0.05	−0.33**	0.05	−0.34**	0.05	−0.35**	0.05
Tenure → Burnout	0.15**	0.05	0.14**	0.05	0.14**	0.05	0.14**	0.05
Education → HRA	−0.08**	−0.03	−0.08**	0.03	−0.08**	0.03	−0.07**	0.03
Education → Burnout	−0.03	0.03	−0.03	0.03	−0.03	0.03	−0.04	0.03
Job level → HRA	−0.06	0.04	−0.05	0.04	−0.04	0.04	−0.04	0.04
Job level → Burnout	−0.03	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.02
Between-level (work unit)								
Context[1] × age → HRA	−0.07*	0.04	−0.06*	0.03	−0.11*	0.05	0.08*	0.04
Context[1] × age → Burnout	0.02	0.04	0.01	0.05	0.01	0.06	−0.01	0.04
Context[1] → HRA	0.46**	0.05	0.39**	0.06	0.53**	0.07	−0.32**	0.05
Context[1] → Burnout	0.55**	0.12	0.11	0.38	0.24	0.38	−0.18	0.19
HRA → Burnout	−1.64**	0.16	−0.67	0.91	−0.82	0.64	−0.81	0.50
Control variables								
Age → HRA	−0.42	0.28	−0.45	0.28	−0.20	0.35	−0.20	0.39
Age → Burnout	−0.66	0.36	−0.33	0.84	−0.41	0.79	−0.43	0.86
Age variation → HRA	0.02	0.05	0.02	0.03	−0.02	0.06	−0.03	0.06
Age variation → Burnout	−0.01	0.08	−0.01	0.05	−0.02	0.07	−0.02	0.07
Tenure → HRA	0.11	0.20	0.09	0.25	−0.12	0.25	0.30	0.27
Tenure → Burnout	0.38	0.42	0.34	0.52	0.35	0.52	0.31	0.52
	Est.	***S.D.***	***Est.***	***S.D.***	***Est.***	***S.D.***	***Est.***	***S.D.***
R^2 for W-HRA								
Within-level	0.13**	0.03	0.18**	0.05	0.17**	0.04	0.17**	0.04
Between-level	0.95**	0.04	0.80**	0.10	0.71**	0.10	0.65**	0.11

(Continues)

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TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Est.	*S.D.*	*Est.*	*S.D.*	*Est.*	*S.D.*	*Est.*	*S.D.*
R^2 for Burnout								
Within-level	0.19**	0.05	0.18**	0.04	0.17**	0.03	0.19**	0.12
Between-level	0.59**	0.19	0.51**	0.18	0.54**	0.19	0.57**	0.21
AIC	41,930.06		43,460.94		56,966.95		43,100.29	

Note: $N_{observations} = 1762$. $N_{clusters} = 178$. Mean cluster size = 9.90. → indicates causal paths. HRA: employee-oriented HR attributions. Because Mplus RANDOM was used, unstandardized β are reported (variables were standardized before analysis) and model fit statistics are unavailable. R^2 values averaged over clusters obtained using Bayesian estimators.
*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$.

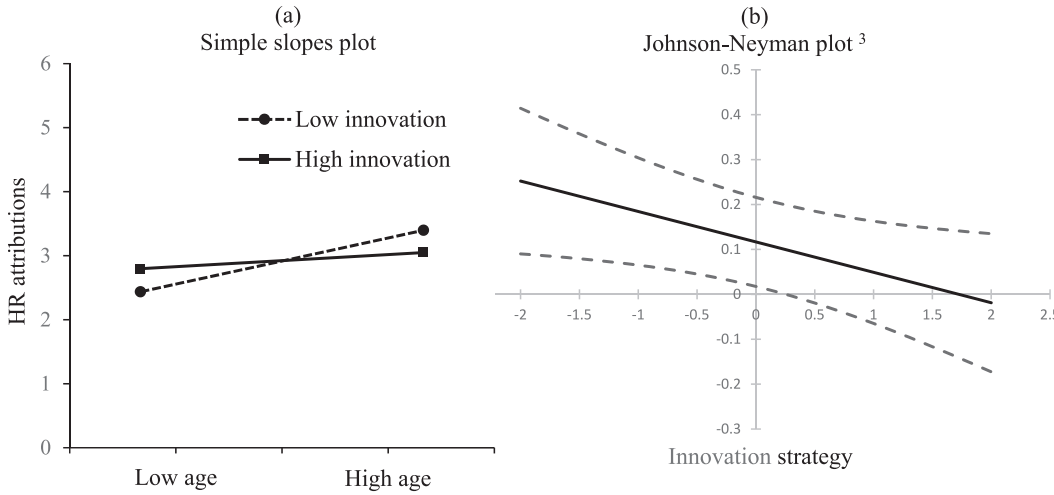


FIGURE 2 Moderating effect of innovation strategy on the association between age and employee-oriented HR attributions.[3]

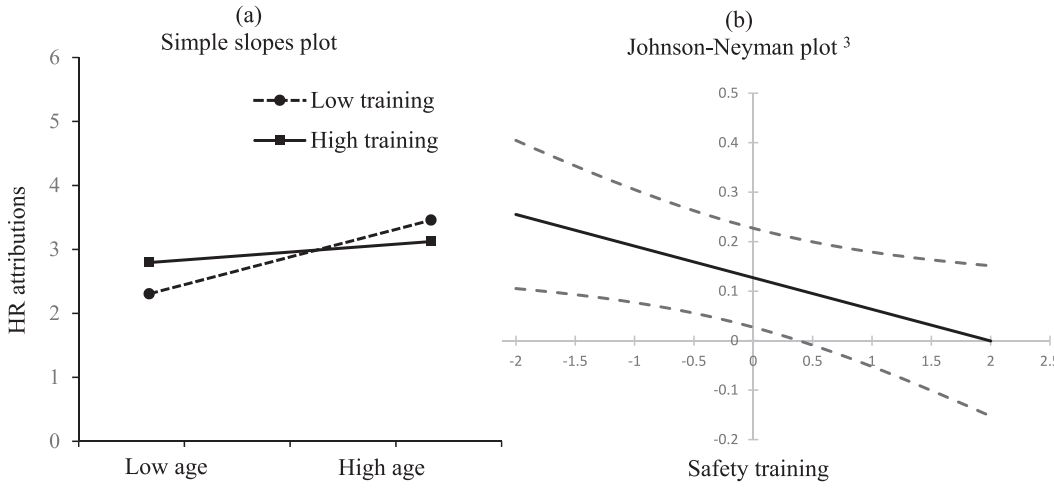


FIGURE 3 Moderating effect of safety training on the association between age and employee-oriented HR Attributions.[3]

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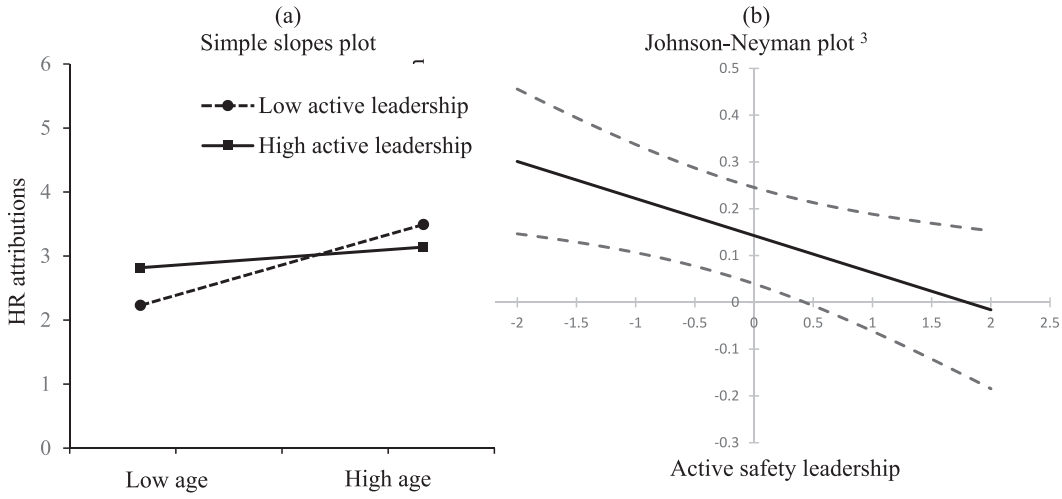


FIGURE 4 Moderating effect of active safety leadership on the association between age and employee-oriented HR Attributions.[3]

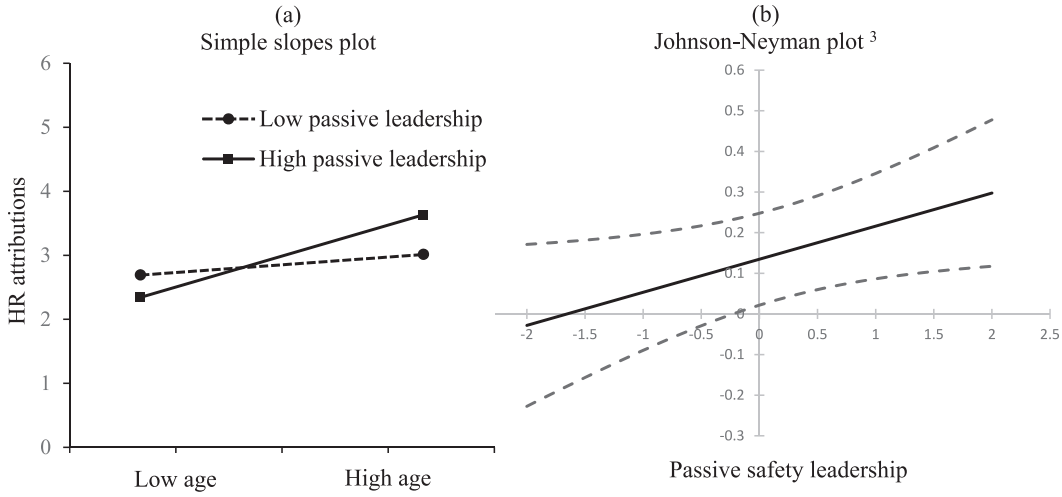


FIGURE 5 Moderating effect of passive safety leadership on the association between age and employee-oriented HR Attributions.[3]

5 | DISCUSSION

Fusing SAW and HR attributions theories, the present study examined associations between employee age, employee-oriented HR attributions, burnout, and the management context. Enabled by the time-lagged design that we utilized, our findings present nuance regarding the underlying psychological mechanisms by which associations between employee age and burnout occur. Notably, older employees exhibited a greater tendency to attribute organizational HR policies as intended to favor employee well-being; in turn, these positive attributions are associated with less burnout among older employees. In line with SAW theory on the relative utility of

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development- and maintenance-oriented employee management contexts for younger versus older employees, we found that the mediated association between employee age, employee-oriented HR attributions, and burnout was moderated by the management context. Specifically, we found that the indirect effect of age on burnout via HR attributions was stronger when passive leadership (a maintenance-oriented context) was high but weaker when innovation strategy, safety training, and active unit leadership (all development-oriented contexts) were high.

5.1 | Theoretical implications

The present findings on the mediating role of HR attributions in associations between employee age and burnout validate Nishii et al. (2008) premise that individuals' identifying characteristics determine how they perceive and respond to management practices. Accordingly, the current study expands limited understanding on the personal antecedents of HR attributions and the mediating role of such attributions on burnout (Van Beurden et al., 2022), and provides nuance on the psychological mechanisms underpinning the well-documented association between age and well-being (Ng & Feldman, 2010). Ergo, our findings provide support for the notion that age is a cognitively-laden and socio-emotional factor engendering positive HR attributions, which in turn gives rise to less burnout for older versus younger employees.

Our findings also have implications for research on the effects of employee age on work outcomes. To date, age has often been treated as a somewhat blunt instrument for understanding employees' experiences in the workplace (Marcus et al., 2020). Incorporating the impact of age-related attributional tendencies, our findings extend beyond the simple categorization of age as a standalone explanatory variable. We thus contribute to understanding of how and why older employees exhibit more positive work attitudes and higher resilience at work (Ng & Feldman, 2010) by delving deeper into the cognitive and emotional mechanisms that differentiate older employees from their younger counterparts in interpreting and adapting to their work contexts. Our findings suggest that positive socio-emotional selectivity triggered by the aging process equips older employees with significant attributional advantages at work, which they benefit from as a personal resource in coping with chronically intense work demands. These results open avenues for research into the design and implementation of age-inclusive management practices that are designed to enhance positive attributions across the age spectrum.

Importantly too, we offer a concrete illustration and test of the self-regulation mechanism put forward by the SAW framework (Kooij et al., 2020). We demonstrate that, in chronically stressful environments such as those that have high physical safety risks, older employees' inherent emotion-regulation advantages are diminished (Scheibe & Zacher, 2013) by their work units' emphasis on developmental management practices. Our findings thus suggest that older employees are better able to counteract these challenges when they leverage the socio-emotional resources from positive HR attributions, which are more prevalent when management practices are congruent with their maintenance-focused needs (i.e., needs-supplies fit). Future research is needed to uncover the different types of contextual factors that regulate older employees' occupational health and safety in physically demanding jobs.

Finally, the current study highlights the importance of studying intra-organizational variation in employee management practices through line management's implementation and leadership behaviors. Our findings provide support for situational and contingency approaches to leadership, which suggest that leader effectiveness is dependent on the match between leaders' behaviors and followers' characteristics (Ayman & Lauritsen, 2018). For instance, transformational leadership is widely seen as a panacea for ensuring followers' behavioral effectiveness and performance (Antonakis & House, 2013). However, the extant literature indicates a lack of universally positive or negative association with followers' psychological well-being; rather, the nature of this relation appears to depend on the interplay between work context and individual motives (Arnold, 2017). Although passive (particularly laissez-faire) leadership is commonly deemed ineffective and detrimental to follower performance, recent findings indicate that some employees may interpret these leadership behaviors more positively, based on their individual characteristics (such as gender, Norris et al., 2021) as well as personal needs and motives (Wong &

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Giessner, 2018; Zhang et al., 2023). Thus, for older employees, who exhibit a heightened preference for autonomy and a tendency to avoid loss according to research (Kooij et al., 2020), passive forms of leadership may be better suited to promoting their psychological well-being. Given insufficient understanding of older employees' leadership preferences (Zacher et al., 2014), our results underscore the necessity for further research in this domain.

5.2 | Limitations and directions for future research

Given that the firm under investigation adopted highly development-oriented macro practices, the only maintenance-oriented contextual factor we studied was the passive safety leadership of line managers. Future research can investigate the impact of other types of unit- and firm-level contextual variability and uncover other management practices to preserve the status quo, such as the relation between cost-cutting HR attributions and budgeting and fiscal control practices (c.f., Kooij et al., 2013, 2020; Nishii et al., 2008).

Additionally, our use of a generalized HR attributions measure was particularly suitable and content valid for our study context because the firm had many (more than ten) HR practices and our attitudinal outcome of interest was also generalized (rather than facet-specific; see Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012, for more on bandwidth-fidelity issues in measuring job attitudes). Nevertheless, future research examining both generalized and practice-specific HR attributions and outcomes may help expand the generalizability of these different measurement approaches.

Further, we extended the organization-level development versus maintenance orientation concept to the unit-level management context by focusing on employees' collective perceptions regarding implementation of organizational strategy, training, and leadership. Continued research on multi-level contextual mechanisms is required to advance our understanding of work and aging by shifting from a content-based HR approach to a process-based HR implementation approach. Although our study focused on the developmental priorities most prominent for the safety of blue-collar employees, it is important to note that other management and HR implementation factors may be relevant in different industry or organizational contexts for reducing employee burnout and improving well-being. For example, unit managers' implementation of goal-setting and feedback mechanisms, employee involvement and recognition efforts, team collaboration, and agile working initiatives can be studied as indicators of developmental priorities in white-collar professional settings.

Finally, Turkey is quite a young country (median age = 33; Turkish Statistical Institute, TUIK, 2021). Thus, although our sample (median age = 35, range = 21–59) was representative of the Turkish population, it was relatively young by a universal age standard. Some may thus wonder whether this sample calls the construct validity of age into question. However, work and aging scholarship evinces chronological age as an empty variable – "old" is not an absolute but a relative, societal-specific judgment (Scheibe & Zacher, 2013). Hence, as hypotheses based on the SAW framework were supported even in a range-restricted context, our findings suggest said relative conceptualizations of age are robust and occupy the same construct space as chronological age. Given a globally aging workforce (Rudolph et al., 2019), our findings thus represent welcome news and suggest theory built by scholars from (mostly) older, Western societies generalize to younger and developing non-Western societies.

5.3 | Practical implications

Given the reality of the graying workforce (Rudolph et al., 2019), organizational decision-makers should be heartened by our finding that their older employees are likely to form more positive attributions regarding the organization's HR philosophy and experience less burnout. Employers should also note that older employees are likely to play a critical role in enhancing collective HR attributions in workgroups, given that individuals' HR perceptions are shaped largely by their supervisors' and coworkers' perceptions (Jiang et al., 2017). These facts

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provide impetus to organizational decision-makers to invest in their older employee talent, taking care to manage the unique needs of this loyal base of employees. As evidenced by the critical role HR attributions play in protecting older employees from burnout, managers can try to leverage these perceptions by clearly and consistently communicating their intentions to care for and support employees through their employment practices.

Organizations could cater to the diverse motivational and emotional needs of employees of all ages by customizing the content of training and development programs. Purposeful variability in HR implementation within an overarching formal HR system may be advantageous for addressing older employees' unique needs. Indeed, research on promotion versus prevention regulatory focus suggests that leaders' communication efforts are instrumental in establishing and maintaining perceived regulatory fit (Johnson et al., 2015). As such, given leader impact on employees' perceived regulatory fit, our findings suggest that employee well-being may be enabled if managers tailor their messages to older employees by highlighting how HR practices promote immediate (rather than long-term) personal gains, health and safety benefits, personal relevance, and work-life balance. Similarly, developmental challenges such as innovation and training can be framed in a manner that encourages older employees to view these initiatives as opportunities to enhance their well-being rather than as potential sources of scrutiny.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is based upon work from COST Action LeverAge, CA22120, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) CA22120.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The distribution and totals vary across survey rounds and study variables because of varying participation and completion rates. Full information maximum likelihood method was used in analysis, which uses all available data.

[2] We followed Muthen and Muthen's (2017) part 3 of example 9.2 in the user's guide (p.278–279), which partitions the variation in *x* (i.e., age) by specifying it both as an observed within-level predictor of random slope and as a between-level latent covariate (x_{bj}). This method utilizes latent-mean centering, which alleviates issues that arise from traditional observed group- or grand-mean centering (Asparouhov & Muthen, 2019).

[3] Solid line indicates conditional slope of age on HR attributions; dashed lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. Areas where both dashed lines are above/below the *x*-axis are region(s) of significance.

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How to cite this article: Aksoy, E., & Marcus, J. (2024). Enabling older employees' well-being through HR attributions: The moderating role of management context. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12555

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