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The Impact of Voluntary Employer Changes on Work Ability in Older Workers: Examining the Honeymoon-Hangover Effect

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Abstract

This research explored how older German workers' self-reported work ability is influenced by voluntarily switching employers and whether a honeymoon-hangover effect (HHE) occurs. In job satisfaction studies, HHE refers to three stages around a voluntary job change: decline in the previous role (deterioration), an initial boost in the new role (honeymoon), and a later reduction over time (hangover). It remains unclear if work ability follows a similar pattern. We analyzed 2,502 participants from all three waves (2011, 2014, 2018) of the lidA study, a nationally representative cohort of employees born in 1959 or 1965. Using fixed-effects regression models with lag and lead variables, we identified clear deterioration, honeymoon, and hangover phases. Work ability rose markedly immediately after the job change. These findings indicate that voluntary employer changes can help preserve work ability in later career stages, even if they do not produce long-term increases. Despite the subsequent hangover effect, the overall benefits of switching employers remain significant.

Keywords: Fixed-effects regression, Turnover, Work ability, Older workers, Cohort study, Honeymoon-hangover effect

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Introduction

With policies around the world increasingly encouraging extended working lives, sustaining work ability at older ages has gained growing attention from both policymakers and the public [1]. Work ability is commonly understood as the match between an individual's resources and the demands of their job [2]. It addresses the question: "How well can a worker perform currently and in the near future, considering job demands, health, and mental capacity?" [3]. Consequently, work ability is shaped not only by personal resources, such as health and functional capacity, but also by the characteristics of the work environment itself [4, 5]. For more than three decades, the Work Ability Index (WAI) has been used globally to measure this concept and predict outcomes such as work motivation [6], long-term sick leave, early exit from work, and disability [4]. Today, the WAI is a key tool in occupational health practice for monitoring and supporting workers' ability to continue working.

Given that work ability often declines with age [7, 8], interventions to maintain a good fit between older workers and their jobs are essential. One potential strategy is a voluntary change of employer, which allows employees to leave unsuitable positions and actively seek work conditions better aligned with their abilities. Such a transition may help them sustain or even enhance their capacity to work at higher ages [9].

Research on voluntary employer changes has largely concentrated on predictors such as job satisfaction, performance, health, and leadership quality (see meta-analysis by Rubenstein *et al.*, [10]) as well as on work ability [11]. This focus on determinants rather than outcomes has often stemmed from data limitations, which typically allowed observation of employees up to the

point of change but not beyond. Consequently, the effects of employer changes remain underexplored. Available studies suggest positive impacts on mental health [12], job satisfaction [13], and working conditions, including job security, working hours, salary, development opportunities, and task suitability [14, 15]. However, evidence on their influence on work ability is lacking.

Several studies have observed that the initial benefits following a voluntary job change tend to diminish over time [13, 16, 17]. This temporal pattern is referred to as the honeymoon-hangover effect (HHE) [16]. Originally described in the context of job satisfaction, HHE consists of three phases:

Deterioration: Job satisfaction declines in the old position prior to turnover.

1. Honeymoon: After switching jobs, satisfaction rises sharply, often due to optimistic expectations and favorable portrayals of the new role by both the organization and the employee.
2. Hangover: Over time, satisfaction decreases toward an individual baseline as the worker gains a fuller understanding of the job, including less appealing aspects.

Evidence supporting the HHE comes from multiple studies. Boswell *et al.* [16] tracked job satisfaction annually and observed all three phases over three to four years. A subsequent study by Boswell *et al.* [17] using four measurement points within one year found both honeymoon and hangover phases. Chadi and Hetschko [13] differentiated between employer changes initiated voluntarily, mutually, or due to dismissal/plant closure, reporting strong HHE for voluntary changers, modest HHE for mutual agreements, and no HHE for involuntary changes. Additionally, Clark *et al.* [18] showed that life satisfaction declined before layoffs and rose afterward, though the increase was temporary; however, voluntary changes were not studied.

Building on this literature, our study investigates whether voluntary employer changes affect work ability among older German workers and whether a HHE emerges in this context. Since HHE may not manifest uniformly across outcomes [19], and because work ability is influenced by sustained changes in the work environment [8], we expect that adaptation to a new employer may require more time than changes in job satisfaction. Older workers must integrate their health, skills, and personal values into the new work setting, which can influence the trajectory of work ability [2].

The lidA Cohort Study in Germany offers a unique opportunity to examine this question in a large, representative sample. Following the theoretical framework of the honeymoon-hangover effect, we formulate the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (Deterioration): Work ability in the old job declines prior to a voluntary employer change.

Hypothesis 2 (Honeymoon): Work ability is initially higher after switching to a new job, reflecting improved work conditions and positive expectations.

Hypothesis 3 (Hangover): The elevated work ability observed immediately after transitioning to a new job will gradually decrease over time.

Methods

Data and sample

The present study draws on data from the German lidA Cohort Study on Work, Age, Health, and Work Participation, a representative longitudinal study of older employees in Germany. The cohort initially included individuals employed under social security (excluding self-employed and civil servants) born in 1959 or 1965. Participants were interviewed at home approximately every three to four years using computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI). Our analysis utilizes data from the first three waves: 2011 (n = 6,585), 2014 (n = 4,244), and 2018 (n = 3,586), at which point participants were aged 53 and 59. A detailed description of the study design is provided elsewhere [20, 21].

For this analysis, participants were excluded if they were not employed in any form (full-time, part-time, or marginal) during a wave, were self-employed, or experienced an involuntary employer change. This selection yielded a balanced panel allowing examination of individual changes in work ability over time. The final analytical sample comprised 2,502 participants who took part in all three waves.

Measures

Voluntary employer change categories

In waves 2 (2014) and 3 (2018), respondents were asked whether they had voluntarily switched employers. If multiple changes occurred between waves, only the most recent was considered. Participants were then classified into four categories based on the timing of job changes:

1. AAA: No change in either interval, remaining in the same job across all waves (Job A, Job A, Job A).
2. AAB: No change in the first interval but a change in the second interval, resulting in a new position by wave 3 (Job A, Job A, Job B).
3. ABB: Change between waves 1 and 2 but stable thereafter, yielding a new job at wave 2 (Job A, Job B, Job B).
4. ABC: Changes in both intervals, resulting in new jobs in waves 2 and 3 (Job A, Job B, Job C).

Assessment of work ability

Work ability was measured at each wave using the second dimension (WAI2) of the Work Ability Index (WAI), an established tool in occupational health research. The WAI2 provides a short measure suitable for large surveys and evaluates work ability relative to job demands [4]. It includes three questions: two items assess current work ability regarding mental and physical demands (rated from "very poor" to "very good"), while the third item indicates the primary nature of the job (mainly mental, mainly physical, or both). Responses are combined and weighted according to the third item, following Hasselhorn and Ebener [22], resulting in a sum score ranging from 2 (lowest work ability) to 10 (highest work ability).

Socio-demographic variables

Time-invariant socio-demographic characteristics included gender (male/female), birth cohort (1959/1965), and vocational education [23]. Partnership status (yes/no) was assessed in each wave.

Work-related characteristics

Work-related factors captured at each wave included employment type (full-time, part-time, marginal), main work activity (primarily mental, primarily physical, or a mix), and income category (≤1,500 Euro / 1,500–3,000 Euro / ≥3,000 Euro).

Health indicators

Mental and physical health were evaluated using the Short Form Health Survey (SF-12) [24, 25], producing component scores ranging from 0 to 100, where higher scores indicate better health. Both scales have demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity [26].

Statistical analyses

The analysis was carried out in two stages: descriptive statistics and regression modeling.

In the descriptive stage, the four voluntary employer change categories were compared regarding socio-demographics, work-related characteristics, health, and work ability across the three survey waves. For work ability, group means were plotted with confidence intervals for each wave to visualize temporal patterns and the trajectories of work ability within each group.

The regression stage employed fixed-effects models incorporating lag and lead variables to examine within-individual changes in work ability before and after voluntary employer changes. Only participants who reported at least one voluntary employer change were included in these models to isolate the effect of job transitions. In the fixed-effects transformation, each participant's mean work ability across all waves was subtracted from their individual scores. This method preserves the temporal relationship of work ability within each participant while removing between-person differences, allowing the analysis to focus on intra-individual changes and controlling for unobserved individual heterogeneity.

To explore the honeymoon-hangover effect, lag and lead dummy variables representing voluntary employer changes were added to the models. Two lag variables indicated whether a participant had switched employers one or two waves prior, capturing the honeymoon and hangover phases (Models 1 and 2). Two lead variables indicated whether a participant would change employers in the following one or two waves, reflecting the deterioration phase (Models 3 and 4). Models 2 and 4 additionally included control variables. Sensitivity analyses were conducted by stratifying the sample by sex and birth cohort (1959 vs. 1965). All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 26.0.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 summarizes socio-demographic characteristics, work factors, health, and work ability for the total sample and by employer change groups. The majority of participants (89.6%) remained with the same employer throughout the seven-year period (AAA), while 9.2% changed jobs once (AAB or ABB), and 1.2% changed twice (ABC).

Notable differences emerged between stayers and changers. Women and the younger 1965 cohort were disproportionately represented in all change groups. Medium education levels were more common in the AAB and ABB groups, while low education was overrepresented in ABC. Participants in all change groups were more likely to have a partner. Those who changed employers once were less likely to hold full-time positions in any wave, and marginal employment was more frequent among changers only in wave 1. By wave 3, full-time work was overrepresented in the ABC group.

Participants in all change groups were more likely to engage in primarily physical work, and after changing jobs, they more frequently performed a combination of physical and mental tasks. Low-income participants were more likely to change employers voluntarily. Regarding health outcomes, mental health scores improved following a voluntary change. Compared with stayers, changers reported lower mental health prior to the transition and better physical health afterward.

Table 1. Sample socio-demographics, work factors, health and work ability in the total sample and across change groups

		Groups of voluntary employer change (jobs in 2011, 2014, 2018)								
	Total sample	Job A, Job A, Job A (AAA)		Job A, Job A, Job B (AAB)		Job A, Job B, Job B (ABB)		Job A, Job B, Job C (ABC)	
n (%)	$N = 2502$ (100.0)	$n = 2242$ (89.6)		$n = 139$ (5.5)		$n = 92$ (3.7)		$n = 29$ (1.2)	
	%	%	Mean (SD)	%	Mean (SD)	%	Mean (SD)	%	Mean (SD)
Socio-demographic factors									
Gender	$n = 2502$	$\chi^2_{(3)} = 11.98$, $p = 0.007$							
Male	45.3	46.5		33.8		38.0		34.5	
Female	54.7	53.5		66.2		62.0		65.5	
Year of birth	$n = 2502$	$\chi^2_{(3)} = 19.79$, $p = 0.000$							
1959	45.6	47.1		34.5		30.4		31.0	
1965	54.4	52.9		65.5		69.6		69.0	
Vocational education	$n = 2488$	$\chi^2_{(6)} = 5.31$, $p = 0.504$							
High	23.1	23.6		19.0		16.3		20.7	
Medium	57.2	56.9		61.3		62.0		51.7	
Low	19.7	19.5		19.7		21.7		27.6	
Partner (2011)	$n = 2493$	$\chi^2_{(3)} = 3.89$, $p = 0.273$							
Yes	88.2	87.8		92.8		89.1		[a]	
No	11.8	12.2		7.2		10.9		[a]	
Partner (2014)	$n = 2499$	$\chi^2_{(3)} = 6.07$, $p = 0.108$							
Yes	88.1	87.6		93.5		91.3		[a]	
No	11.9	12.4		6.5		8.7		[a]	
Partner (2018)	$n = 2480$	$\chi^2_{(3)} = 3.36$, $p = 0.339$							
Yes	86.9	86.5		91.4		89.1		89.7	
No	13.1	13.5		8.6		10.9		10.3	
Work factors									
Working hours (2011)	$n = 2502$	$\chi^2_{(6)} = 43.07$, $p = 0.000$							
Full time	67.5	69.0		52.5		53.3		69.0	
Part time	27.5	26.8		33.8		38.0		20.7	
Marginal employment	5.0	4.2		13.7		8.7		10.3	
Working hours (2014)	$n = 2502$	$\chi^2_{(6)} = 39.62$, $p = 0.000$							
Full time	66.9	68.3		51.8		55.4		62.1	
Part time	29.3	28.2		36.7		[a]		[a]	
Marginal employment	3.9	3.4		11.5		[a]		[a]	
Working hours (2018)	$n = 2502$	$\chi^2_{(6)} = 26.05$, $p = 0.000$							
Full time	67.5	68.9		51.1		58.7		72.4	
Part time	29.4	28.0		[a]		[a]		[a]	
Marginal employment	3.0	3.1		[a]		[a]		[a]	
Mental and physical work (2011)	$n = 2502$	$\chi^2_{(6)} = 17.36$, $p = 0.008$							
Mainly mental	50.0	50.8		41.7		42.4		48.3	
Mainly physical	9.9	9.1		15.1		18.5		17.2	
Both	40.1	40.1		43.2		39.1		34.5	
Mental and physical work (2014)	$n = 2502$	$\chi^2_{(6)} = 16.48$, $p = 0.011$							
Mainly mental	51.0	52.3		40.3		40.2		34.5	
Mainly physical	9.9	9.5		14.4		10.9		13.8	

Both	39.2	38.2	45.3	48.9	51.7	
Mental and physical work (2018)	$n = 2502$	$\chi^2_{(6)} = 13.98$, $p = 0.030$				
Mainly mental	51.0	52.1	41.0	44.6	[a]	
Mainly physical	7.4	7.3	7.9	9.8	[a]	
Both	41.6	40.5	51.1	45.7	62.1	
Income level (2011)	$n = 2404$	$\chi^2_{(6)} = 50.43$, $p = 0.000$				
Up to 1500 Euro	40.1	37.8	63.3	57.8	50.0	
1500 to 3000 Euro	47.0	49.1	28.1	27.8	32.1	
3000 Euro and more	12.9	13.1	8.6	14.4	17.9	
Income level (2014)	$n = 2459$	$\chi^2_{(6)} = 56.32$, $p = 0.000$				
Up to 1500 Euro	34.7	32.4	59.0	51.6	44.8	
1500 to 3000 Euro	49.7	51.7	30.6	31.9	34.5	
3000 Euro and more	15.7	15.9	10.4	16.5	20.7	
Income level (2018)	$n = 2438$	$\chi^2_{(6)} = 46.85$, $p = 0.000$				
Up to 1500 Euro	27.1	25.1	48.9	40.7	37.9	
1500 to 3000 Euro	52.4	53.8	38.3	42.9	44.8	
3000 Euro and more	20.5	21.1	12.8	16.5	17.2	
Health	$n = 2495$	$F(3, 2491) = 0.766$, $p = 0.513$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.00$				
Mental health[b] (2011)						
	52.1 (9.5)		52.2 (9.4)	52.6 (10.0)	50.7 (10.7)	51.9 (9.1)
Mental health[b] (2014)	$n = 2490$	$F(3, 2486) = 3.170$, $p = 0.023$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.00$				
	50.6 (10.0)		50.7 (9.9)	48.5 (11.4)	51.7 (9.4)	53.4 (7.7)
Mental health[b] (2018)	$n = 2495$	$F(3, 2491) = 1.777$, $p = 0.149$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.00$				
	51.7 (9.7)		51.5 (9.7)	53.2 (9.9)	51.9 (9.3)	53.9 (7.5)
Physical health[b] (2011)	$n = 2495$	$F(3, 2491) = 0.632$, $p = 0.595$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.00$				
	50.3 (8.8)		50.3 (8.8)	50.8 (8.8)	51.3 (8.0)	51.0 (7.3)
Physical health[b] (2014)	$n = 2490$	$F(3, 2486) = 3.253$, $p = 0.021$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.00$				
	50.0 (8.8)		49.8 (8.9)	51.3 (8.5)	50.9 (8.5)	53.7 (7.7)
Physical health[b] (2018)	$n = 2495$	$F(3, 2491) = 2.928$, $p = 0.033$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.00$				

		48.2 (9.2)	48.0 (9.2)	49.6 (9.0)	49.9 (8.4)	50.5 (7.2)
Work ability						
Work ability[c] (2011)	$n = 2493$	F(3, 2489) = 1.359, $p = 0.253$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.00$				
		8.1 (1.5)	8.1 (1.5)	8.3 (1.4)	8.1 (1.6)	7.7 (1.6)
Work ability[c] (2014)	$n = 2494$	F(3, 2490) = 5.022, $p = 0.002$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$				
		8.0 (1.4)	7.9 (1.4)	7.9 (1.7)	8.5 (1.4)	8.3 (1.1)
Work ability[c] (2018)	$n = 2497$	F(3, 2493) = 7.727, $p = 0.000$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$				
		7.8 (1.5)	7.7 (1.5)	8.2 (1.6)	7.9 (1.4)	8.6 (1.2)

SD: Standard deviation.

Group comparisons across the four employer-change categories (AAA, AAB, ABB, ABC) were conducted using Chi-square tests for socio-demographic and work-related variables, and one-way ANOVAs for health and work ability.

[a] Data not displayed due to data protection regulations.

[b] Scores range from zero to one hundred, with higher values reflecting better health.

[c] Scores range from two to ten, with higher values indicating greater work ability.

Figure 1 illustrates the trajectories of work ability over time for the four voluntary employer change groups. Distinct patterns emerge for each group: the work ability of participants who remained with the same employer (AAA) showed a slight decline over the study period, whereas those who changed employers twice (ABC) experienced substantial improvements following each job change. The trajectories of the single-change groups (AAB and ABB) differed. For group ABB, work ability initially increased after the job change but later declined notably while remaining in the new position. In contrast, group AAB showed a modest decrease in work ability while in the old job, followed by an improvement after the transition.

Overall, these patterns align with the honeymoon-hangover effect. Specifically, work ability decreased in group AAB prior to the job change (deterioration), all groups that changed jobs (AAB, ABB, ABC) experienced a rise in work ability immediately after changing employers (honeymoon), and group ABB showed a subsequent decline while adapting to the new position (hangover). These observations provide support for Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3.

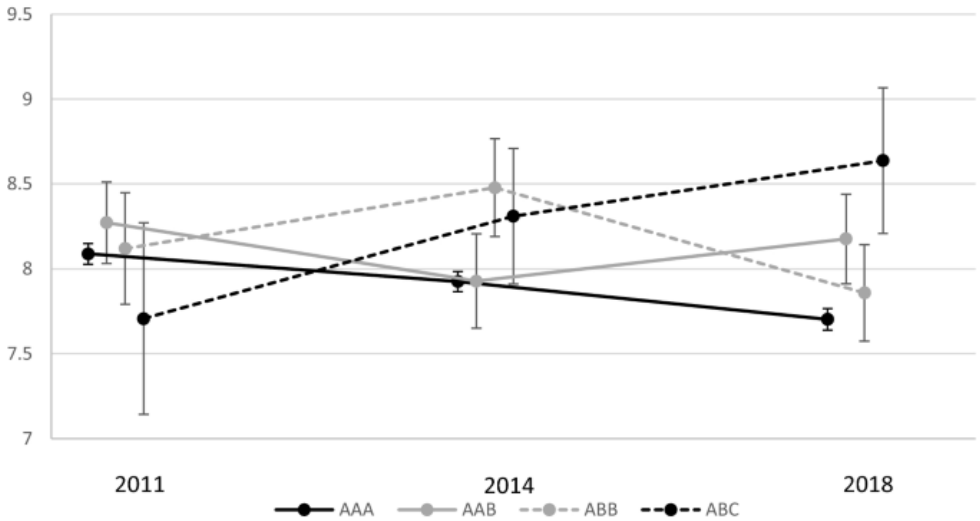

Figure 1. Work ability trajectories of voluntary job changers from 2011 to 2018, with 95% confidence intervals (2011: n = 2493; 2014: n = 2494; 2018: n = 2497). Note: Scores range from 2 (no work ability) to 10 (best lifetime work ability).

- AAA: Stayed in the same job (Job A) across all waves (n = 2234–2237)
- AAB: Job A (2011 & 2014) → switched to Job B (2018) (n = 138–139)
- ABB: Job A (2011) → switched to Job B (2014 & 2018) (n = 92)
- ABC: Three different jobs across the three waves (Job A → Job B → Job C) (n = 29)

Regression analyses

The regression results offer deeper evidence of the honeymoon–hangover pattern while adjusting for sociodemographic characteristics and workplace factors. By applying fixed-effects estimation to the work ability outcome, the models focus on within-person changes over time. Thus, a positive coefficient does not reflect high absolute work ability but rather an increase

in an individual's work ability compared to their own earlier measurement(s). All models include only participants who experienced at least one voluntary employer change during the observation period (groups AAB, ABB, and ABC; **Table 2**).

Table 2. Fixed effects regression analyses: Work ability before and after voluntary employer change

Predictor	Model 4	Model 3	Model 2	Model 1
Future effects (Leads)				
New job in 2 waves	−0.005	−0.005		
New job in 1 wave	−0.106**	−0.114**		
Past effects (Lags)				
New job since 1 wave			0.135***	0.132***
New job since 2 waves			−0.039	−0.038
Working hours (Ref.: full-time)				
Part-time	0.009		0.005	
Marginal employment	0.012		0.015	
Work type (Ref.: mainly mental)				
Mainly physical	−0.055		−0.059	
Both mental and physical	0.015		0.006	
Income level (Ref.: 1500–3000 Euro)				
Up to 1500 Euro	−0.003		−0.004	
3000 Euro and above	−0.008		−0.016	
Observations	750	777	750	777
Individuals	250	259	250	259
Corrected within R^2	0.005	0.010	0.015	0.017

Note: Regression coefficients are standardized beta (β). Significance levels: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001. Analyses include only participants reporting a voluntary job change.

Models 1 and 2 incorporated two lagged indicators to assess how being employed in a new job for one or two waves influenced work ability. These lag variables were coded as dummies, showing whether a participant had been in the new job for the respective time span. Results indicated that work ability increased significantly one wave after switching jobs, while the effect of being in the new position for two waves was not significant, suggesting that the initial gain in work ability does not extend beyond the first wave. These findings support hypotheses 2 and 3, demonstrating both a honeymoon and subsequent hangover effect.

Models 3 and 4 included two lead indicators to examine differences in work ability before the employer change relative to after the transition. These lead variables indicated whether participants would move to a new job within one or two waves. Analyses revealed that work ability one wave before the change was significantly lower than post-change work ability, reflected in negative regression coefficients. However, two waves before the change, no significant differences were found. This pattern supports hypothesis 1 and illustrates a deterioration phase, with work ability declining just before the job change but not earlier.

Including control variables in Models 2 and 4 did not alter these patterns. Sensitivity analyses (not shown) revealed similar results across genders, birth cohorts (1959 vs. 1965), and when including all participant groups (AAA, AAB, ABB, ABC). Significant coefficients were primarily observed among women and younger employees, likely reflecting the smaller number of male participants and older cohorts reporting voluntary job changes. Additional analyses including the full sample (n = 2479; observations = 7437) largely replicated the patterns, though corrected within R^2 values decreased, likely due to reduced within-person variation in the lag and lead indicators.

Discussion

The findings suggest that older workers who voluntarily change employers represent a distinct subgroup. In our study, these changers were disproportionately younger and female. The higher share of women may be related to the types of jobs they hold—part-time or marginal positions, lower-income roles, or professions such as social and health care, which offer more opportunities and necessity for employer change. Over time, many moved from marginal to full-time work. Voluntary changers also tended to have lower or medium vocational education and perform mostly physical work, populations with higher early-retirement risk in Germany [27]. Other factors associated with voluntary job changes included lower income, having a partner, and better physical health.

Patterns of work ability over time (Figure 1) and regression results supported the three hypotheses: (1) work ability declined prior to a voluntary employer change, (2) it increased initially after transitioning to the new job, and (3) the initial boost decreased over subsequent waves.

Time as a key factor

The timing of measurement proved critical. Boswell *et al.* [16] documented the honeymoon-hangover effect (HHE) in job satisfaction over five years, showing a deterioration phase two years before the job change, a honeymoon one year after, and a hangover in the following year. Despite measuring work ability over longer intervals (three to four years), our results similarly demonstrated an HHE. As Roe [19] notes, the onset of effects can vary, with some employees experiencing immediate changes while others show delayed responses. For work ability, delayed effects may occur due to gradual adjustments in work routines and personal life—shorter commutes, increased leisure, more time for social or physical activities—all of which may improve resilience, health, and, consequently, work ability.

Honeymoon-hangover effect for work ability

The HHE theoretically comprises three phases: deterioration, honeymoon, and hangover [16]. In our study, we observed a deterioration phase; however, pre-change work ability (AAB and ABB) did not significantly differ from employees who stayed (AAA, **Figure 1**), suggesting that low work ability alone is not the primary motivator for older workers to change jobs—unlike job satisfaction, which turnover theories often emphasize [28]. Whether this deterioration is due to poor working conditions or aging remains uncertain. Nevertheless, Garthe and Hasselhorn [29] found that older voluntary changers reported worse psychosocial work conditions than stayers, underscoring the influence of workplace factors.

We also identified a honeymoon period, with work ability improving noticeably following a voluntary job change. While the HHE literature attributes honeymoon effects mainly to positive perceptions of the new organization [16], our findings suggest that actual improvements in work conditions contribute. Changes such as enhanced leadership, reduced work-family conflict, shorter commutes, better colleagues and tasks, increased autonomy, improved work environment, and superior equipment can directly boost work ability [14, 15, 29]. Prior research also confirms the relationship between physical and psychosocial working conditions and work ability [30-34]. Furthermore, voluntary changers may represent a selective group anticipating better conditions, indicating that the honeymoon period likely reflects actual gains rather than solely positive perceptions.

Although voluntary employer changes are assumed to improve working conditions, our analyses indicate the presence of a hangover period for work ability. As illustrated in **Figure 1** (ABB pattern) and supported by the regression results, the positive effect of changing employers on work ability was strong immediately after the transition but did not persist into the subsequent wave. This aligns with theoretical expectations, as employees gradually adapt to the new role, learn organizational routines, and become aware of potential negative aspects of the job, all of which may influence self-reported work ability [17]. We believe that this hangover effect cannot be explained solely by aging, since work ability declines sharply back to a "normal" level within four years following the honeymoon period. Interestingly, participants who changed jobs twice (ABC group) did not exhibit a hangover period; rather, they appeared to experience a renewed honeymoon effect. Gielen [35] observed similar patterns in men, showing that repeated employer changes led to significant gains in job satisfaction with only minor declines afterward, suggesting that multiple transitions may serve as steps toward finding a more suitable position. However, we cannot rule out the possibility of a hangover period emerging in this group if they remain longer with the second new employer.

In summary, despite the hangover period, voluntary employer changes likely serve as a strategy to sustain work ability in older age for several reasons. First, such changes are typically accompanied by improvements in working conditions and job fit, which enhance work ability. Second, they may better align work demands with the capabilities of aging employees, whose health and work ability tend to decline over time [5]. Third, it is plausible that work ability would have deteriorated more substantially if these employees had remained in their previous roles. Research on job lock and being stuck at a job demonstrates that remaining with an undesired employer often leads to declining health and job satisfaction over time [36, 37].

Limitations

Despite the strengths of this study, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, we lacked data on work ability prior to 2011 and beyond 2018, limiting our ability to examine patterns two periods before or after the change. Second, the intervals between waves were three to four years, preventing analysis of short-term fluctuations in work ability. Third, potential selection effects cannot be excluded, as only employees who participated in all three waves were included in the analyses.

Conclusions

Sustaining work ability among older employees is crucial for society, employers who rely increasingly on older workers, and for the employees themselves, who may choose or need to work longer. Our findings suggest that voluntary employer changes can help maintain work ability in later working life, although the improvements are not permanent. The results demonstrate a clear honeymoon-hangover effect: work ability rises significantly immediately following the change but gradually declines while remaining with the new employer. This indicates that the initial improvement should not be overestimated in terms of duration, yet the overall positive effect of the change remains meaningful.

This study is the first to examine how voluntary employer changes affect older workers' work ability. Future research should explore the reasons behind the hangover effect, despite expected improvements in working conditions. It would also be valuable to investigate whether changers maintain higher work ability compared to employees who do not change employers. Studies with shorter intervals could capture short-term effects more precisely. Finally, employees who feel stuck in their jobs should be studied longitudinally, as their work ability may decline more sharply than among those who voluntarily stay with their employer.

Abbreviations

HHE: Honeymoon-hangover effect; AAA: Job A, Job A, Job A (in the years 2011, 2014 and 2018); ABB: Job A, Job B, Job B (in the years 2011, 2014 and 2018); AAB: Job A, Job A, Job B (in the years 2011, 2014 and 2018); ABC: Job A, Job B, Job C (in the years 2011, 2014 and 2018).

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