The experience of being an older worker in an organization: A qualitative analysis

STANIMIRA K. TANEVA[1]

School of Business and Economics, Loughborough University

JOHN ARNOLD

School of Business and Economics, Loughborough University

ROD NICOLSON

Department of Psychology, University of Sheffield

Correspondence to Stanimira Taneva, School of Business and Economics, Loughborough

University, Ashby Road, Loughborough, LE11 3TU, United Kingdom, Phone: +44 (0) 1509

228007; Email: s.taneva@lboro.ac.uk.

Abstract

This qualitative study with 37 older workers from ten employing organizations in two countries (United Kingdom and Bulgaria) and two industrial sectors (healthcare and ICT) identifies key themes around workers' conceptualizations of being an older worker and aging at work, and the types of organizational support they considered most beneficial in late career. The study integrates current fragmented theories around work performance and well-being in late career and also introduces new concepts in this context. We find that overall older workers are likely to view their late career more in terms of development than decline. This is reflected in their positive perceptions of themselves and their conceptualizations of beneficial age-related changes such as ability to see the big picture and freedom to speak frankly. Many of these stem from their accumulated knowledge and experiences, and valuing meaning and contribution over career advancement. Whilst some concern with coping and getting by is evident (we call this surviving), interviewees were able to articulate many ways in which they felt they were thriving (Porath et al., 2012) at work. We identify nine types of organizational support perceived by these older workers as most desirable (whether or not available). Four concern intrinsic features of work, three are to do with social integration and respect, and two concern extrinsic factors. Hence there is much that organizations can do apart from retirement programs and flexible work options to enable workers in late career to thrive and survive.

Keywords: older workers; aging workforce; late career; thriving; surviving; qualitative; successful aging

Population aging is occurring in almost all areas of the world with Japan, Germany and Italy being the most aging countries. It is expected that the number of people aged 60 years or over will at least double, and exceed the number of children by 2050 (United Nations, 2013). This is a result of two simultaneous developments - a steady increase in life expectancy and falling fertility rates. Thus, the aging population becomes a key challenge for society and an important social and economic responsibility (EEO Review, 2012; Härmä, 2011). Furthermore, the aging of the population has led and will lead to significant changes in the workforce, particularly demonstrated by the rise of employment rates amongst older workers across Europe and beyond (Kooij, Lange, Jansen, Kanfer & Dikkers, 2011; Robson & Hansson, 2007). In the last few years, the need to keep older workers in the workforce (despite high levels of unemployment amongst new entrants to the labor market) has been referred to as an "emergency" (CIPD & CMI, 2010).

There is no consensus in the literature about who is the "older worker." According to James, McKechnie and Swanberg (2011, p. 176) "the idea that '50 is the new 40' suggests a public perception that the subjective experience of age is changing." Recently more researchers choose to define older workers as those who are at least 55 years old, partly because this is currently the fastest growing segment of the workforce. Another empirical study reports that when asked to suggest an age of an "older employee", people in the United Kingdom on average refer to men at the age of 56 and over and women at the age of 55 and over (CIPD & CMI, 2010).

Research on the aging workforce tends to be highly multidisciplinary incorporating economic, sociological, psychological, vocational, biological and even political aspects (CEDEFOP, 2012). Traditionally, among the most discussed issues are age stereotypes and discrimination against older workers (Ng & Feldman, 2012), age-related changes and their associations with work outcomes (Warr, 1993, 2001), and how organizations can support and

retain older workers (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Bal, Kooij & De Jong, 2013; Boehm, Kunze, & Bruch, 2014). Most studies with older workers are quantitative and cross-sectional, with samples often derived from a single organization or industrial sector. In addition, the aging workforce research tends to be more focused on some industrial sectors (e.g. healthcare) with little attention given to others (e.g. information technologies) and on national rather than cross-cultural samples (with the exception of Inceoglu, Segers, Bartram & Vloeberghs, 2009). Furthermore, the recent national and cross-cultural studies with older workers have been conducted in Western rather than non-Western (including Eastern European) countries.

Coming mostly from a life-span theory perspective, our purpose in this study is to explore how older workers in large organizations experience late career. We specifically examine (i) how older workers see themselves in the workplace, (ii) how they conceptualize and manage age-related changes in their work abilities, attitudes and approaches, and (iii) the types of organizational support they consider most beneficial in terms of their well-being and performance. We focus on the older workers themselves, because we believe that they are the best sources of information regarding their own feelings, potential, limitations and aspirations and the best agents of their own careers. In order to achieve a deeper understanding, in contrast to most research of older workers, we use a qualitative cross-sectorial and cross-cultural approach.

Age-Related Changes, Work-Related Behaviors and Outcomes

It has been well documented that people change physically and psychologically with age. Some of these changes are demonstrated through people's behaviors at work. Most importantly, it has been acknowledged that there are big individual differences and, for example, some of these age-related changes may be substantial for some individuals and negligible for others (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Salthouse, 2010; Truxillo, Cadiz, Rineer,

Zaniboni, & Fraccaroli, 2012; Wang, Olson & Shultz, 2012; Warr, 1993; 2001). The degree

of such changes is not just related to age, but also depends on many other factors such as an

individual's heredity, lifestyle, physical activity and environment. Most age effects are not

great on average and can be reduced by a supportive environment (e.g. using new enabling

technologies and adjusting time). In addition, declining cognitive abilities are usually

compensated by workers' knowledge and experience (Inder & Bryson, 2007; Kanfer &

Ackerman, 2004; Wang et al., 2012; Warr, 2001).

As well as physical and cognitive changes, people may experience some personality

changes when they grow older. For instance, studies demonstrate that older workers are on

average less extraverted and open to change than younger workers, but at the same time more

self-controlled, tolerant, modest and conscientious (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Warr, 2001).

A meta-analysis by Roberts, Walton and Viechtbauer (2006) revealed that, particularly for

the age group around 60 years, mean-level decreases in social vitality (a facet of

extraversion) and openness to experience occur in parallel with increases in agreeableness,

conscientiousness, and (less markedly) emotional stability. In a cross-sectional study of over

a million people, Soto, John, Gosling and Potter (2011) reported broadly similar findings

regarding agreeableness, emotional stability and conscientiousness, but observed a slight

tendency for openness to experience to be higher in middle and older age than in early

adulthood. Both studies observed that for most aspects of personality, change was greater in

magnitude (and in the case of social vitality opposite in direction) in late adolescence and

early adulthood than subsequently. Yet as Roberts and colleagues point out, these changes are

very individual and do not apply to everyone. Further, it has consistently been reported that,

despite what some people believe, work motivation does not decline at later ages. However,

workers' priorities tend to change over time and with age. For instance, older workers

(compared with younger workers) may tend to attribute more importance to intrinsically

rewarding job features, some social aspects of work (such as supporting younger workers and transferring their experience), and to feeling valued and involved. In contrast, they may be less motivated by extrinsic awards, career advancement and striving for achievement (Carstensen, Isaakowitz & Charles, 1999; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Inceoglu et al., 2009; CEDEFOP, 2011; Kooij et al., 2011).

The concept of "successful aging" suggests an individual's good health and vitality over the life-span and, in this sense, is the individual's capacity to thrive. One interpretation of successful aging is as a developmental process where growth is still possible (Zacher, 2015). Porath and colleagues (2012) introduce the construct of "thriving" in a work context as "…the psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of vitality and learning" (Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2012, p. 250). Theoretically, thriving implies the individual's orientation towards growth and successful adaptation. The vitality facet of thriving is similar to what other scholars address as social vitality in the context of the broader construct extraversion and is seen as corresponding to traits such as sociability, positive affect and energy level, while the learning sub-dimension of thriving is conceptually close to the construct openness (to experience). In line with the empirical evidence that older (compared with younger) people are likely to demonstrate less of both social vitality and openness (Roberts et al., 2006), thriving is believed to decline at older ages (i.e. older workers would be expected to experience less thriving in the workplace compared with younger workers). However, no study on older workers' experiences of thriving in the workplace has been published so far, to our knowledge.

Life-span theories suggest that adaptation is a proactive process which involves self-regulation, reflected in life management strategies applied by individuals in their attempts to cope with changes in their environment (such as loss and gain of resources, success and failure in the achievement of goals). The life-span theory of selection, optimization and

compensation (SOC) proposed originally by Baltes and Baltes (1990) is a leading model of successful aging and suggests that individuals can successfully adapt to age-related changes and changes in the workplace through using three types of personal strategies: selection, optimization and compensation (Abraham & Hansson, 1995; Hansson, DeKoek, Neece, & Patterson, 1997; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Kooij et al., 2011; Ouwehand et al., 2007). Furthermore, there is good evidence that the use of SOC strategies can enhance workers' performance and well-being, and that it becomes particularly important with age (Abraham & Hansson, 1995; Müller, Weigl, Heiden, Glaser, & Angerer, 2012; Ouwehand et al., 2007; Zacher & Frese, 2011).

The SOC model is complemented by another prominent life-span conceptualization, namely the socioemotional selectivity theory (SES), proposed by Carstensen (1992). SES theory emphasises the fundamental role of perception of time in the selection and pursuit of (particularly) social goals. Depending on whether time is perceived as open-ended (e.g. at younger ages) or limited (e.g. at older ages), individual's priorities may shift from long-term knowledge-related goals (e.g. learning) to short-term emotional goals (e.g. focusing on meaningful activities and/or relationships). The shift towards emotional goals at older ages is facilitated by improved emotional regulation (Carstensen et al., 1999; Carstensen, Turan, Scheibe, Ram, Ersner-Hershfield, Samanez-Larkin, Brooks, & Nesselroade, 2011). Applying the ideas of SES theory in a work context may provide valuable insights into the adaptive age-related changes in workers' behaviours.

Age discrimination has been found to be the most widely experienced form of discrimination across Europe (Age UK, 2011). Examples of positive stereotypes of older workers are "increased levels of loyalty", "reliability" and "job commitment" (Barnes, Smeaton & Taylor, 2009). However, it appears that older workers are more often negatively stereotyped (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). Recent research indicates that six of the most

common and damaging stereotypes about older workers are that older employees (compared with younger workers) are "less motivated", "less willing to engage in training and career development programs", "more resistant to change", "not as trusting", "more likely to experience health problems that affect their work", and "more vulnerable to work–family conflicts" (Ng & Feldman, 2012). Although mostly unjustified (Inder & Bryson, 2007; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Kunze, Boehm, & Bruch, 2013), these age stereotypes may have negative effects on older workers' self-esteem, job performance and well-being. It has consistently been found that negative stereotypes significantly affect employers' attitudes towards training, promotion and retention of older workers and willingness to work with older workers (Chiu, Chan, Snape & Redman, 2001). This, in turn, may lead to older workers' withdrawal from the labor market. Many times the effects of age discrimination are masked by situations such as forced retirement or redundancy and limited recruitment opportunities.

Finkelstein, King and Voyles (2015) discuss the process of age metastereotyping in the workplace (i.e. the individual's beliefs about the stereotypes that colleagues from other age groups hold about his/her age group). They suggest that older individuals are likely to perceive themselves as viewed by younger others in more negative terms than they actually are. For instance, Finkelstein, Ryan and King (2013) found that older workers' metastereotypes from middle-aged colleagues were 65-67% positive, while middle-aged workers' stereotypes of older colleagues were actually 87% positive. Furthermore, both positive and negative age metastereotypes may provoke positive or negative responses in the workplace. For example, a negative metastereotype may be associated with either a challenge or a threat by its holder. In a similar fashion a positive metastereotype may lead to boost (expressed by feelings of happiness, excitement) or threat (expressed by fear, worry) reactions. Therefore, the investigation of age metastereotyping in the workplace may provide useful information about the decisions that people make in late career.

Past research has focused mostly on evaluations of older workers by employers and colleagues. However, less is known about older workers' conceptualizations of their own position in the workplace. These may or may not be in line with traditional research and may reveal unexplored areas. Overall, we recognize the need for a more synthesized picture of aging at work, and being an older worker, painted by older workers themselves. In addition, there are clear theoretical and empirical gaps in the literature to date that are worthy of investigation. For instance, there is no information about older workers' experiences of thriving (or not thriving) in the workplace. The assumption that people in their late careers are not likely to be thriving (at least not as much as their younger colleagues) may be another myth. It will also be interesting to explore workers' own definitions of thriving and its antecedents in late career. Furthermore, learning about age-related changes in older workers' approaches to work may shed more light on the meaning of successful personal strategies (e.g. SOC) for older workers as well as the role of these strategies in managing late careers. This will enable a deeper understanding of late career and its underlying processes, which in turn will stimulate practical individual and organizational solutions with a focus on late careers' successful management. Following these arguments, our first and primary research question is *"How do older workers describe and account for age differences at work?"*

The Relationships of Older Workers with Their Organizations

As organizations play a significant role in shaping one's skills, knowledge, motivation, and social relationships, they are an important social context for individuals. In particular, older workers are likely to prefer organizations which demonstrate their consideration of older workers through their human resource (HR) practices (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Barnes et al., 2009; Kooij et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2012; Boehm, Kunze & Bruch, 2014). Fighting negative stereotypes (and metastereotypes) and discrimination against older workers

has become increasingly important for many organizations and is reflected in HR strategies

designed to promote positive aging and more particularly, the utilization and retention of

older workers (Barnes et al., 2009). A recent study by Boehm and colleagues (2014) based on

descriptions from key organizational informants, has pointed out the importance of "age-

inclusive" HR practices that (through facilitating age-diversity climate) appear to be a

powerful tool for increasing organizational-level performance and reducing employees'

collective turnover intentions. Thus, promoting an age-diversity climate among employees of

all ages and encouraging age-diverse collaboration may also reinforce the successful

management of late careers in organizations.

However, the forms of "age-friendly" HR strategies and the extent of their

implementation vary significantly across countries, industrial sectors and organizations

(Barnes et al., 2009). Most examples of successful age-management are derived from

Western countries. Some HR practices associated with older workers may include reduced

working hours, flexible work options, adjusting job roles, refresher training, and extra annual

leave (Barnes et al., 2009; Veth et al., 2011). They often aim to help older workers maintain

their job performance at an acceptable level. Other HR practices encourage older workers to

undertake new projects, tasks, and job roles, learn new skills, and mentor/coach others on the

job. These may have a developmental (i.e. associated with growth and learning) rather than

maintenance (i.e. related to being able to soldier on at work) effect on older workers and, thus

increase their work performance and satisfaction (Veth et al., 2011). Furthermore, good HR

practices may encourage some older workers to remain in the workforce longer and even

return to work after retirement (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Barnes et al., 2009; Kooij et al.,

2011; Bal et al., 2013; Cahill, James & Pitt-Catsouhes, 2015).

Despite the increasing number of studies on organizational support for older workers, to

date not enough is known about older workers' needs and expectations of such support and

the rationale behind these needs. In the present study, we ask older workers directly in an open format about the types of work environment they would benefit from. Thus, our work goes beyond the norm set by the prevailing quantitative approach in this area, which is to pre-define a set of organizational practices that could be supportive for older workers. Our second (and secondary) research question is therefore *"How can organizations provide an environment that older workers perceive as supportive?"*

Combining the two research questions, we therefore seek to understand how older workers experience and make sense of being an older worker. We place particular emphasis on how they experience their own aging process in a work context, how they see themselves relative to younger workers, and what they think organizations can do to support them at this stage of their working lives. Some age-related intra-individual changes (e.g. declining physical abilities) may be perceived as difficulties, while others (e.g. crystalized intelligence) may be seen as advantages (Warr, 2001). Also, it is possible that some people respond to age-related changes by developing specific individual techniques or strategies in the workplace. It would be interesting to investigate what these techniques and strategies are (e.g. whether they correspond to some of the successful aging strategies described in the literature (Abraham & Hansson, 1995; Carstensen et al., 1999; Ebner, Freund & Baltes, 2006), how individuals make sense of them, what the circumstances in which they are employed are, and what potential work outcomes they are associated with. In addition, it might be the case that workers deal more successfully with age-related changes in the presence of certain types of work environment and organizational systems (e.g. Warr, 1993; Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Veth et al., 2011; Truxillo et al., 2012; Boehm et al., 2014; Cahill et al., 2015). Again, we are interested in how workers themselves describe such characteristics and why they find them desirable and potentially supportive of their thriving at work.

Method

Research Strategy

With the ultimate purpose to explore how older workers experience late career, their aging self at work, and in the light of this, the kinds of organizational support they consider beneficial in terms of their work performance and well-being and why (Figure 1), we come from a contextual constructionist perspective (Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000). King (2004) argues that such a perspective implies the assumption that "…there are always multiple interpretations to be made of any phenomenon, which depend upon the position of the researcher and the context of the research" (King, 2004a, p. 256). Therefore, it is particularly suitable for our study that is interested in workers' interpretations of late career life.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Furthermore, we employ a phenomenological psychological approach, because we are not interested in testing a strictly pre-defined conceptual framework, but in exploring inductively workers' authentic experiences of late career. As outlined in the research methodology literature (e.g. Denscombe, 2007), instead of relying on processes of categorizing and quantifying things, and in contrast to other approaches, phenomenology focuses on describing how things are experienced by the people directly involved. We follow what Denscombe (2007) refers to as the "North American approach" to phenomenology or "new phenomenology" that is concerned with the ways in which people interpret and draw conclusions about their life experiences, often drawing upon personal and societal beliefs that are frequently experienced as "common sense." We consider this approach most appropriate for capturing how older workers perceive themselves in the workplace, how they understand

and deal with workplace challenges including age-related intra-individual changes, and what types of organizational support they desire.

We used a non-probability sampling strategy to identify participants for qualitative semi-structured interviews. An advantage of the qualitative research interview over other qualitative and quantitative techniques is its potential to capture different meanings of the topics under examination. In addition, it may be very useful in studying phenomena in large organizations (King, 2004a).

For a number of reasons, we focused on large employment organizations. The patterns of systems and processes (e.g. organizational, work-group and inter-individual) in large organizations are likely to be more complex than those in, for example, small organizations and thus, there may be potentially more variables to explore. Furthermore, our search for potential collaborators revealed that large organizations were more likely than smaller ones to demonstrate interest in the aging workforce and to respond positively to research participation opportunities. Also, there are larger numbers of late career workers in larger (compared with smaller) organizations, which could potentially facilitate the participant recruitment process.

We worked in two European member states (one old – the United Kingdom - and one new – Bulgaria) and in two languages (English and Bulgarian). These two European countries were chosen for their contrasting national economies, cultures, policies, and levels of awareness and experience in terms of aging workforce management (EEO review, 2012; ILCUK, 2013; Appendix 1). For instance, according to the Global AgeWatch Index 2014 Insight Report comparing 91 countries, the UK is in the 12 countries with best practices for older people (aged 60+) with an overall rank of 11 and rank values of 11 for older people's socio-economic status, 27 for older people's health status, 23 for capability (including employment) and 3 for enabling environment. In contrast, Bulgaria comes 56th with rank

values of 47 for income security, 68 for health status, 45 for capability, and 69 for enabling

environment (HelpAge, 2014).

We chose two industrial sectors – healthcare and information and communication

technologies (ICT). These sectors were chosen because they are considered to be amongst the

most significant for the European economy as well as rapidly developing and, consequently,

demanding new skills and larger numbers of employees. At the same time, it appears that

these sectors are contrasting in some aspects (see Appendix 1). For instance, while the ICT

sector is highly associated with the need for new ideas and behaviors, predominantly male

employees, particularly rampant age discrimination against older workers and consequently

smaller numbers of older workers (Schwartz-Woelzl & Healey, 2007), the healthcare sector is

mostly associated with specialist knowledge, larger numbers of female employees, larger

proportions of older workers (aged 55+), and demanding working conditions (including on-

going restructuring) (HOSPEEM, 2013). Thus, it could easily be assumed that in some

aspects the experiences of late career of healthcare workers may differ from those of the ICT

workers.

Overall, then, we selected these two sectors and countries, because of our belief that a

wider range of contexts will help to identify a wider range of variables. At this point our aim

is to explore this wider range of variables, rather than provide a structured comparison

between countries and sectors (that could be better achieved through a quantitative approach).

However, we looked for cross-cultural and cross-sectorial patterns that may indicate paths for

future (quantitative) research.

Having already defined the population as people working in health or ICT sectors aged

55 or more (we went a little under 55 in some cases in the ICT sector) in Bulgaria or the UK,

we set a quota of 3-5 interviews per organization, and ensured as far as possible that the

invitation to participate went out to all relevant people in the organization.

The Participating Organizations

Seventeen employing organizations from both countries and from both industrial sectors were approached directly or indirectly via branch organizations and HR consultancies between September 2013 and January 2014. Organizations were given information about the study and were invited to participate through email, phone conversations and/or meetings. They were offered copies of a summary report with the results after the completion of the study. Ten (59%) of the 17 organizations reacted positively. Five of these were in Bulgaria and five in the UK; six in healthcare and four in ICT.

Preliminary documentary analysis and interviews with ten human resource managers (one per participating organization) demonstrated that all the healthcare organizations except one were large, with between 1000 and 3000 employees. All the ICT organizations were large multinational organizations. All the healthcare organizations were from the public sector and all the ICT organizations were private. In addition, all large healthcare organizations were unionized while none of the IT organizations formally recognized a trade union, although two had internal staff associations. In terms of their age profiles, the healthcare organizations had significant proportions of older workers (55+) ranging from 20% to over 50%. In contrast, proportions of older workers in the ICT organizations varied between 1% and 12%. All healthcare organizations had large numbers of female workers (varying between 60% and over 75% across organizations), while ICT organizations had predominantly male staff (between over 50% and about 80%).

With regard to the organizational HRM strategies and practices, all organizations, with the exception of the Bulgarian health organizations, had formal equality and diversity policies in place. However, even when available, diversity policies and practices tended to focus on disability and gender more than age and were not always clearly communicated with

employees. No organization had ever before participated in a research and development initiative related to the aging workforce. One organization had applied for and won a youth employment award.

The scope of the HRM function varied significantly across organizations. For instance, the UK health organizations and all the ICT organizations from both countries had well-developed HR departments covering the full spectrum of HR activities. The HR function in the Bulgarian health organizations, however, was rather limited being focused on administrative (mostly payroll) activities only (served by 1-2 people) in some of these organizations and stretching to recruitment, mandatory training, payroll and retirement services (provided by 3-4 people) in others. Overall, we expect that these differences across organizations would also potentially contribute to the diversity in participants' experiences of late career.

The Individual Interviewees

A total of 37 older workers (3-5 people per organization; 20 from healthcare and 17 from ICT; 20 from Bulgaria and 17 from the UK) were interviewed. Twenty-eight participants were aged between 55 and 65 years, 5 were aged between 52 and 54 years, and 4 were aged 66 years and over. The mean age of the whole sample was 59: 60.7 for the healthcare sub-sample and 57.5 for the ICT sub-sample. Over 60% of interviewed employees were female with much larger proportions of females than males for the healthcare sector and almost equal proportions of males and females for the ICT sector. This corresponds with the overall age and gender profiles in the two sectors (Schwartz-Woelzl & Healey, 2007; HOSPEEM, 2013) and the organizations in the study. The majority of interviewees held management roles (about 50% for healthcare organizations and about 75% for ICT organizations). Overall, for both of the sectors and countries most workers (60-70%) had been with their organizations

longer than 10 years and many of them for over 20 years. Three quarters of the ICT workers had been in the same job from 5 to 10 years while 61% of the healthcare workers had been in the same job for over 10 years. See also Appendix 2.

Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interview guide was developed in two languages (English and Bulgarian). It included a background information section as well sections with questions about older workers' overall perceptions of late career life, perceived age-related changes in their overall work capacity, work values and preferences, and approaches to work. In addition, there was a section regarding workers' perceptions of thriving in the workplace as well as the types of organizational support they considered important for supporting workers in terms of their vitality and learning in the workplace. The interview guide was trialled through pilot interviews with older employees from both countries. Sample prompt questions are "What are the key challenges for you as a mature worker in the workplace?"; "How, if at all, have you changed the way you do your job as you have got older?"; "How, if at all, has your capacity to do your work changed as you have got older?"; "What, if anything, helps you feel energized at work?"

Older workers were invited to participate in the interviews by their organizations through announcements on their intranet and email. People who volunteered to participate contacted the research team directly. All volunteers were interviewed between November 2013 and April 2014. All interviews were individual and most of them (32) were conducted face-to-face on the premises of participants' organizations with five interviews over the phone. The duration of each interview was between 30 and 80 minutes.

The interviews were voice-recorded with the exception of five which were documented in writing at the time of the interviews. Informed consent was obtained from all participants

prior to the interviews in the form of written consent for the face-to-face interviews and email confirmation for the phone interviews. All the voice recordings were transcribed and the interviewees were anonymized through the application of codes. The transcripts of the interviews in Bulgarian language were translated into English.

Transcripts were analyzed through an inductive thematic analysis procedure (King, 2004b; Braun & Clarke, 2006). We chose this analytical technique, because of its relatively higher flexibility (over, for example, grounded theory or interpretive phenomenological techniques), "the balance between within and across case analysis" (King, 2004a, p. 267), and its particular suitability for larger (over 30 cases) qualitative research samples. Most importantly, as our ultimate purpose was to achieve an overall picture of older workers' conceptualizations of late career and the support desired in the workplace, we were more interested in the potential patterns of meanings across the whole data set, rather than in the within-individual aspects of the data.

With regard to the development of the coding system, we followed the typical template analysis guidelines (King, 2004; Braun and Clarke, 2006). In terms of the validation of the coding system, we used the approach suggested by Campbell and colleagues (2013), because it focuses specifically on in-depth structured interviews and, also, it is particularly useful where coding of the transcripts is applied by a single knowledgeable coder.

In order to gain an initial overall impression of the data, prior to the development of the codes the first author reviewed the entire set of interview transcripts twice. Then an initial set of 12 primary codes based on existing theory and research, the interview guide, transcribing and notes was developed. This version was tested on a sample of interview transcripts using qualitative data software (NVivo 10). It was then revised and emerging categories were added. Thus a second version with 7 main and 36 (including demographic characteristics) sub-categories was developed. Each category was operationalized by a definition and

examples, where needed. The second version of the coding scheme was explained to and discussed with the second author. Both authors then coded independently three randomly selected interview transcripts. We excluded codes reflecting factual demographic and organizational characteristics because they might artificially inflate reliability scores (Campbell et al., 2013).

Then, we compared the results and discussed discrepancies in codings. The initially calculated index for intercoder reliability was 67%. That is, in two thirds of cases, the two coders gave identical codes to passages of text (both the use of different codes and the use of a code by one coder and the non-use of any code by the other were recorded as disagreements). Comparison of the codings in many cases quickly led one coder or the other to acknowledge an error or oversight. These instances increased the agreement rate to 84%. The remaining 16% of cases were resolved through continued discussion, with the first author's view taking precedence in the few cases where agreement could not be reached.

The first author coded the remaining interview transcripts and identified main and sub-themes within the entire data set. Before reaching a final thematic template, themes were gradually modified mostly through deletion of overlapping or insignificant themes, adding new categories and changing the scope of the codes (e.g. when some codes were found too narrowly or too broadly defined). Coding and development of themes was accompanied by regular discussions with the second author. Consequently, a final version of the thematic template was developed and agreed with the second author (Figure 2 and Table 1).

Results

Research Question 1

Our first and main research question was *"How do older workers describe and account for age differences at work?"* Most of the relevant data were derived from a set of questions asking older workers about their perceptions of work-life and associated current challenges and advantages, self-conceptualizations in comparison to younger workers, perceived age-related changes in their overall work capacity, work values, ways of working, as well as whether and how they experienced thriving in the workplace. However, we also use data obtained through interviewees' responses to other categories of questions, additional comments and field notes. The themes identified with regard to this question are shown in Figure 2. In this section we combine data and insights from across these themes to present what we see as the most important threads in the data. As a general observation, positive perceptions in our study are more prominent and diverse than the literature on age stereotypes might lead one to expect (Posthuma & Campion, 2009; Finkelstein et al., 2013).

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

The far-reaching effects of knowledge and experience

The most prevailing theme is *accumulated knowledge and experience*, being reported by all study participants. The following comment from a UK male ICT worker was typical: "They (older workers) can also have a more balanced view point….personal wisdom, which comes with age." This is not a surprise, but much more significantly, we were struck by the diversity of the benefits that our respondents saw as stemming from their increased knowledge and experience. Whilst this may partly be an effect of the improved emotional

experience at later ages suggested by SES theory (Carstensen et al., 1999, 2011), it may also demonstrate older workers' awareness of some developmental benefits (i.e. a rather cognitive phenomenon).

First, far from being a compensation for declining fluid intelligence, knowledge and experience were seen as facilitators of higher level cognitive functioning. For example, a male British ICT worker indicated that "….experience also enables you to maneuver out of trouble and around obstacles", and a male health worker from Bulgaria expressed the view that "we know better how to cope with different situations. This is especially obvious in complex situations." Second, benefits like this were seen as significant contributors to superior work performance by older workers. As a female Bulgarian health worker put it: "….the older worker can work more efficiently, because based on his/her experience he/she can better summarize, evaluate/judge and organize his/her work." A male ICT worker from the UK noted "now I have more understanding of what people need…I still want to do a good job, and these things help me to do my job a lot better". These comments suggesting perceptions of improved performance capacity in late career support recent findings of Kunze and colleagues (2013) that (at least in relation to some performance indicators, such as high goal accomplishment) older workers are likely to be better performers than younger workers.

Third, knowledge and experience were sometimes also thought to foster confidence and a certain serenity that placed the older worker above some of the rough and tumble of the workplace: "…..we have a lot of knowledge and experience and we can bring some calm to certain situations……can put a better structure and address things in a proper way" (ICT, UK, male). "…(we) bring experience, various aspects of past experience into the job and confidence in yourself, because you are not worried about what people will say, you are just professional" (ICT, UK, female); "I have less to prove now" (ICT, UK, male). Again, some of these statements can be easily related to the proposition (from SES theory) that older

people are likely to demonstrate improved emotional functioning (Carstensen et al., 1999,

2011). Confidence was described as the courage to question and challenge authority, too:

"You can have a broader perspective, you are not just taking everything what is said. Just

because everything has been done this way, it doesn't always need to be done in this way…it

is the confidence" (ICT, UK, female). This runs counter to the common stereotype of older

workers as being resistant to change (Ng & Feldman, 2012). Furthermore, it adds new

evidence to the discovery by Kunze and colleagues (2013) that older (compared with

younger) employees are likely to be less resistant to change.

       In line with the SES theory (Carstensen et al., 1999, 2011), accumulated knowledge and

experience were also often seen as important contributors to participants' *stability*, *good*

people and team skills, *ability to influence* others. Stability is the broadest of these categories

as it can mean self-discipline, consistency, balance, resilience, persistence, reliability, and

loyalty: "Older workers are more patient, responsible and disciplined" (health, Bulgaria,

female); "Possibly a younger person may not … have the resilience of an older person to

keep going on the job" (health, UK, female). Remarkably, all references regarding good

people and team working skills improving with age came from healthcare workers. For

instance, "We have learned to be more supportive, understanding and tolerant to the others"

(health, Bulgaria, female); "The older person is more inclined to handle criticism, is not that

sensitive to it and this is good for the team" (health, Bulgaria, female). Experience was also

viewed as giving older workers a good chance of influencing others: "Older workers have a

lot of experience across their career and they can be listened to and be very influential" (ICT,

UK, female).

       However, despite these perceived virtues of older workers, another important sub-theme

that emerged from the interview data analysis is a lack of employer recognition of what older

workers can offer (c.f. Loretto & White, 2006). This was most evident in perceptions of

whether the employing organization would be willing to hire older workers (outside the remit of this paper) but was also reflected in a perceived lack of recognition and respect by the employing organization. Most statements came from health workers in both countries. For instance, a female British health worker shared "Knowledge and experience… you can't take that away from people. But it isn't recognized enough."

Becoming less dynamic?

Negative perceptions of older workers about themselves tend to revolve around deficits of *proactivity*, *learning*, *creativity*, *flexibility* and *openness to change*. These perceptions may well represent older employees' acknowledgement of some age-related personality changes in a work context such as a drop in openness to experience (Roberts et al., 2006) and/or their internalization of age metastereotypes (Finkelsten et al., 2015). There is considerable similarity between these perceptions and the common stereotypes about older workers (Posthuma & Campion, 2009) and this similarity with stereotypes is more evident than for the positive perceptions. At the same time, the number of reported negative categories and their prevalence in the interview transcripts is considerably smaller than the positive categories. This observation corresponds to the report by Finkelstein and colleagues (2013) that both stereotypes and metastereotypes about older workers contain more positive than negative categories. In addition, we observed slightly different patterns in the conceptualizations of the older workers across sectors and countries. Overall, the Bulgarian health workers (compared with the UK workers and the Bulgarian ICT workers) were more likely to report negative perceptions about older workers in general. One contributory factor for these outcomes could be the lack of strong a HRM function and formal equality and diversity policies of the kind investigated by Boehm and colleagues (2014) in the studied Bulgarian health organizations. For instance, two female Bulgarian workers offered the views that "older workers' resistance

to change is an impediment for the implementation of change/new things in organizations"

and "older workers can become rigid and passive." A male colleague added that

"….sometimes the older workers have stopped following actively the new developments and

information."

While perceptions of resistance to change are in line with one of the most common

negative stereotypes (Ng & Feldman, 2012) about older workers and often attributed to

personality characteristics (Warr, 2001; Roberts et al., 2006), some participants in our study

suggested different explanations in which change appeared to be associated with deeper

knowledge and fear of risk-taking. A female Bulgarian health worker said "People at 55+ are

more sceptical, because they know more". Another female worker from the health sector in

Bulgaria explained "Older workers, who approach retirement, could be more concerned about

keeping their job and, therefore, scared to take risks, to get involved in conflicts…" These

quotes present something of a counter-balance to those above which portrayed older workers

as open to change and unafraid of the opinions of others. They also suggest that sometimes

resistance to change may be related to external rather than internal factors. For instance,

people who perceive their work situation as more insecure may be less likely to react

positively to change, compared with people who feel more confident about their work

circumstances.

Perceptions of older workers as lacking creativity, proactivity and a desire for learning

(compared with younger workers) were attributed to older workers' changing motives with

age/career stage (Inceoglu et al., 2009; Kooij et al., 2011), and/or unwillingness to compete

with younger workers, as well as declining learning ability and vitality (Warr, 2001; Warr &

Birdi, 2002; Roberts et al. 2006; Salthouse, 2010; Porath et al. 2012) that imposes the need of

more time and effort to learn, especially regarding IT skills: "the differences (between older

and younger workers) are mostly in terms of new technologies. Younger people come better

prepared and learn quicker, and this is an advantage for them" (health, Bulgaria, female);

"There are things I don't want to learn, because everything is developing so quickly" (ICT,

Bulgaria, male); "…younger people are more energetic, vital" (health, UK, female). Some

older workers shared that they needed more frequent training (compared with younger

workers) in order to be able to keep up with on-going changes in job content and work

environment. Yet in contrast, most interviewees perceived themselves as continuously

learning (formally or informally) and did not report any significant difficulties in doing so.

Anxieties about learning mainly surfaced when there was an explicit comparison with

younger workers, which may reflect metastereotypes of older workers as set in their ways and

technophobic (Finkelstein et al., 2013).

Only a few interviewees from both sectors and countries mentioned declining physical

and cognitive capacity, and consistent with past research (Warr, 2001; Salthouse, 2010) most

of them thought that even if such declines do occur, they are insignificant and do not have an

impact on their job performance especially if an appropriate work environment is provided

(Warr, 1993). "Age has an impact on one's capabilities – especially on the speed of his/her

reactions. However, if the person is healthy this change is not significant", said a female

Bulgarian health worker. A female British worker from the ICT sector pointed out:

"…because of the type of work I do, it's not physical and therefore my capacity to do it

hasn't changed."

There were a number of references from both countries and sectors to the maintenance of

physical and mental fitness. However, importantly, these were usually in the context of

worries about what might happen in the future rather than what was happening now. These

findings are in line with other studies demonstrating that on average age-related physical and

cognitive declines are likely to become significant later in life (i.e. past working age) (Warr,

2001). A male British healthcare worker said: "…but you know, at my age you don't know

what's around the corner…You can get all sorts of illness and obviously then you will maybe think differently". These perceptions were coupled with the fear of social isolation as well as losing one's independence: "Now I am wondering…if I stay at home I will get stupid. I will not have connections with the external world" (health, UK, female); "…we feel active and are concerned that staying at home could cause isolation and depression" (health, Bulgaria, female). There was concern with self-monitoring and also enlisting the help of others in making sure one wasn't "losing the plot". For instance, a female Bulgarian ICT worker emphasized "I observe myself and...I have even asked my colleagues to let me know if they notice some changes in me, because this is very important." Thus, for some staying longer at work may seem a more attractive and healthier life style option than a complete withdrawal from the workforce (e.g. retirement).

Thriving and surviving

The tension between personal growth on the one hand and a more defensive "hold on to what I've got" orientation was evident in a number of respondent's accounts. It mirrors the "maintenance" career concern identified by Super (1957) and personal goal orientation discussed by Ebner and colleagues (2006). However, in our data growth seemed usually to be in the ascendancy, and reflected both components (i.e. vitality and learning) of the construct of thriving at work (Porath et al., 2012). However, in older workers' narratives thriving at work had wider and deeper meaning. Interviewees' descriptions of their experiences of thriving in the workplace included references to personal development, growth, on-going upgrading, enrichment, learning new things, achieving goals, impacting others, evolution, proactivity, dynamism, variety, vitality, energy, enjoyment, enthusiasm, and positive life attitude. Some of these descriptions are very close to the social vitality facet of extraversion that Roberts et al. (2006) found to be decreasing in this age group. Others depict growth

personal goals which Ebner et al. (2006) and Kooij et al. (2011) found less prominent relative to other motives with increasing age. Often this thriving was expressed as continuity with the past: something that they were still doing or experiencing in late career, as they had earlier as well.

The type of growth that mattered to respondents reflected a shift in career aspirations from progression up the organizational ladder to focusing on job quality and meaningfulness (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Inceoglu et al., 2009; Kooj et al., 2011). A male ICT worker from the UK explained "Then it was achieving, delivering, financial rewards, getting a better job. Now it's doing a good job." Another male British ICT worker described his experience of thriving in the workplace as "I just evolved with the job. No, it hasn't got any more difficult as I got older…And I also enjoy my job. I think this helps too". In addition, most people who reported experiences of thriving were also likely to report positive features of the work environment such as having an interesting job, being a part of a good team, having the opportunity to make important decisions in their jobs, access and encouragement to take up learning opportunities, and support from line managers. These findings demonstrate an intersection between the life-span theories of individual development and the concept of thriving at work (Porath et al., 2012).

Whilst for most of our interviewees a priority in late career was to continue developing themselves, for some it was more important to preserve or maintain their mental and physical resources: "There are always small new things to learn. However, there is nothing that can enrich my perspective or knowledge" (ICT, Bulgaria, female); "My idea is not so much about career development, but maintaining the status quo" (ICT, Bulgaria, male). We construe this as *surviving* (as opposed to thriving) in the workplace as the individuals' tendency to preserve their mental and physical resources by limiting their work activities and perspectives in order to cope with work conditions that are perceived as highly demanding. These perceptions in a

work setting reflect the motivational shift from longer- to shorter-term goals proposed by

SES theory (Carstensen et al., 1999). At first sight, they may also reflect the "maintenance"

orientation mentioned earlier. However, some of the interviewees' statements indicated

something more embattled – a variant of surviving we call "preserving the status quo," as

opposed to the more proactive type of surviving, which we call "meeting job demands".

Meeting job demands is associated with updating job skills and using strategies to ensure that

one remains an adequate performer. Preserving the status quo is shown by a lack of desire to

learn/update skills and to avoid involvement in workplace changes and initiatives. This

distinction perhaps mirrors the one Ebner et al. (2006) made between maintenance and loss-

prevention personal goals. Ebner and colleagues were ambivalent about whether these two

types of personal goals were empirically separable. We suspect that they are, and indeed

Ebner et al's data show that although maintenance and loss prevention orientations loaded

onto the same factor, they had markedly different correlations with well-being amongst older

adults, with maintenance somewhat positive and loss prevention slightly negative.

Social roles at work

Almost all workers from both countries and sectors expressed social and generativity

motives, demonstrated by their willingness to transfer knowledge within the organization and

contribute to the organizational and societal good. This observation supports the idea of

increased emphasis on the emotional aspects of social goals at later ages, postulated by SES

theory (Carstensen et al., 1999). Nearly all participants reported that they had undertaken

formal or informal mentor roles helping younger workers to learn on their jobs and/or

transferred knowledge to colleagues through succession planning initiatives. Workers also

shared that they often volunteered for these roles and appreciated being in them because they

felt useful, involved, respected and recognized in their organizations. For example, a male

British ICT worker said "Everyone at this age has accumulated knowledge and the challenge in the last years is to transfer this experience to younger people."

In addition, older workers were increasingly likely to appreciate opportunities to relate to others in organizations, which again may be an illustration of SES theory in a work context. For instance, a male healthcare employee from Bulgaria, who had been working full-time a few years past retirement age, explained that he decided to stay in his organization mostly because he enjoyed the opportunities to communicate with colleagues and that his need to relate to people had increased as he got older. A UK male ICT worker said "I want to feel part of the team and the organization. I like to be in the office, to communicate, banter and be part of part of things". Kooij et al. (2011) reported a slight tendency for affiliative motives like those expressed here to decrease with age, but we found no sign of this in the reported experiences of our older workers. However, Kooij and colleagues also found a slight increase with age in motives related to helping others or contributing to society more broadly, and our observations in the previous paragraph are in line with that.

Behavioral strategies at work

Consistent with existing literature (e.g. Abraham & Hansson, 1995; Baltes & Baltes, 1990), our interview data demonstrated that many older workers begin using successful aging (SOC) strategies that help them to secure good performance and derive more pleasure from their work. Generally, these strategies were seen by our interviewees as new approaches aimed at the optimal utilization of their work capacity particularly in late career. However, rather than a deliberate attempt to compensate for declining energy and cognitive capacities (as, for example, Ng & Law, 2014, suggest), the use of SOC strategies seemed to be seen as an outcome of years of learning about how to make the best of oneself at work. Again, this

demonstrates another knock-on effect of the knowledge and experience possessed by older workers.

Many older workers were likely to report selecting carefully and prioritizing better their tasks (selection strategy). For instance, a Bulgarian male ICT worker shared "…thanks to one's experience one can judge what is important and what is not, and can better prioritise the tasks in his/her everyday life and at organizational level." Another approach is to seek to maximize one's capabilities (optimization strategy). A male ICT worker from the UK mentioned "You know what you can do better…your strengths and you tend to put yourself forward if there is an opportunity." Sometimes the SOC strategies were used in combination. A female ICT worker from the UK explained: "It is about the things that are truly important to me and adding value by doing the things I know I am good at, and knowing when to say I don't think I am the best person for this" (selection, optimization and compensation strategies).

Overall, the increased use of SOC strategies in late career was seen by older workers as refinement of their work approach due to their wising up and development (i.e. positive age-related changes) over the life course. Interviewees who reported using SOC strategies were likely to attribute these changes in their work approach to increased self-awareness, increased self-confidence and thus ability to ask for help, increased ability to add value to one's work, better organization skills, stronger focus on higher job quality, flexibility, and even reduced anxiety. Thus, these perceptions demonstrate an intersection between the SOC and SES theories (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Carstensen et al., 1999) in an organizational context. For instance, a male British ICT worker explained: "And I think that realization has become stronger with age, that instead of maximizing over the 10 percent of the things that you don't do very well, to concentrate on the 80 percent of the things that you do very well…"

The majority of references to SOC strategies came from ICT workers from both countries. However, the reports of the Bulgarian workers revealed mostly the use of selection strategies, while the UK workers were more likely to report also the use of optimization and compensation strategies. This may suggest effects of specific environmental factors on the use of SOC strategies. For example, it is possible that the employees in the UK ICT organizations in our study have more access (compared with the employees from the other organizations) to resources and strategies that facilitate the use of the compensation and optimization strategies. In addition, the interviewees who reported using successful aging strategies also reported high levels of autonomy and control over their jobs. This observation supports previous findings (Müller et al., 2012) that the effective use of SOC strategies can be enabled through increasing workers' job autonomy and control.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked *"How can organizations provide an environment that older workers perceive as supportive?"* The data for this research question were obtained mostly through direct questions about the types of organizational support considered important for keeping older employees vital, developing and overall happy at work. We also used field notes and additional comments. Furthermore, we sought to examine in-depth the possible factors associated with workers' preferences. The nine themes related to the types of organizational support desired by older workers are presented in Table 1. Because we explicitly asked about what would support feeling energized and learning at work, it is not surprising that all these themes are associated with thriving, at least as defined theoretically – even though our criterion here is whether people thought they actually were thriving irrespective of the support they did or did not get. However, comments about what is (or would be) supportive in various ways were also made in response to other questions.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

These themes clearly refer to some job design characteristics such as job autonomy and control, task variety and significance, social support (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006; Truxillo et al., 2012), as well as to some human resource management strategies such as flexible work options, job design, training and development, performance evaluation, compensation, and recognition and respect (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008). Whilst these findings are not entirely surprising as to some extent they support previous theoretical assumptions and empirical evidence about good work design practices for older workers (Truxillo et al., 2012; Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Veth et al., 2011), it is important to note that in our study they were derived from the conceptualizations of the older workers themselves. Particularly notable is the prevalence of themes to do with autonomy, influence and use of skills. These "developmental" aspects of human resource practices (Veth et al., 2011) outweighed the "maintenance" ones like flexible working which relate more obviously to hanging on until retirement.

As a rough categorization, four of these nine themes can be considered intrinsic work features (work meaningfulness, feedback, job control and learning and development); three are to do with social integration and recognition (social cohesion, knowledge transfer, recognition respect, and voice) and two could be considered extrinsic (compensation and benefits; work-life balance).

The *meaningfulness* of work and the *learning and development* opportunities it provides come through clearly as a priority for many. For example, a female UK health worker said "I have learned my job now and changing it a little, I think, would give me new opportunities to learn, that would be a challenge", and a female health worker in Bulgaria asserted that "We

also need real opportunities for development within the organization. Not just training."

However, for some respondents learning on the job was viewed as an opportunity to update

their skills and thus maintain their performance rather than as leading to professional or

personal development: "I am mostly interested to learn only the things that I need to know at

work" (ICT, UK, male). These findings, demonstrating that many older people are actively

involved in (at least in some forms of) learning at work, challenge the common stereotype of

older workers as unwilling to learn (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). Furthermore, it is possible

that the differences in workers' attitudes towards learning (e.g. learning oriented towards

development vs learning focused on maintenance) are explained by some differences in

workers' environment. For example, older employees in jobs that demand constant and rapid

updates (e.g. working with changing technologies, etc.) may feel that they have to dedicate

lots of personal resources to updating skills and thus do not wish to stretch to learning about

new areas, while workers in more "stable" (i.e. less changing jobs) may feel more motivated

and capable of learning new aspects of work.

Closely associated with meaningfulness for many older workers was the allied concept of

recognition and respect, which gave public acknowledgement of their meaningful

contribution. This finding is consistent with Armstrong-Stassen's (2008) analysis, which

indicated that "recognition and respect" is one of the most valued HR practices. Our study

participants described their perceptions of recognition and respect in the workplace in a

variety of ways. A Bulgarian female ICT worker commented that "What gives me energy is

the recognition for my achievements. This is the biggest energizer for me." For others

recognition meant just acceptance and reassurance by colleagues: "…when people say 'thank

you, you are a star', or whatever…And it just makes you feel better" (health, UK, female).

Also, the conceptualizations of recognition can stretch to feelings of satisfaction from

providing for others. For instance, a female UK health worker asserted that "I know that I am

needed in this job, supporting other people in their jobs. I know that I am useful and that does energize me."

This last quote is a particularly good illustration of the intersection of the personal developmental and the social (e.g. Carstensen et al., 1999). Further, it shows that the source of recognition can be people lower as well as higher in the organizational structure, and can even be internalized, so that the older worker knows that he or she is contributing to others over and above any public recognition of this. There were also instances in the data of a wish to hand on *knowledge to others*, perhaps an expression of generativity (McAdams & de St Aubin, 1992). For example, a Bulgarian female health worker said "This is the pill that makes me swallow all the rest…the fact that I will leave something after myself, that my knowledge will not be wasted."

Also present in the data are notions of social cohesion and community. For example, a female Bulgarian healthcare worker said "In the first place the team and work environment is very important. I am working in a very good environment and team and this makes my work pleasant; for this reason, I feel satisfied and want to continue working. However, comments like this are perhaps less prominent than might be expected. Social relations and community were usually linked with being appreciated or making a contribution, rather than being important for their own sake. This combination of social integration and contribution may reflect the joint effects of increases with age in agreeableness and conscientiousness observed by Roberts et al. (2006) and Soto et al. (2011).

Running alongside the themes of development, contribution and recognition were additional ones that reflect *work-life balance* and possibly reduced engagement with work. For example a female Bulgarian healthcare worker said "I would like longer annual leave", whilst a UK male in IT offered the view that "going part-time could keep me going another couple of years." Such opportunities were not always easy to come by, particularly in

Bulgaria. A female Bulgarian healthcare worker complained that "All of us would like to have flexible working options, but unfortunately this is not common practice here." These comments illustrate well the preferences of some older workers to changing their work-life balance. This partly supports recent studies (e.g. Cahill et al., 2015) that demonstrate the role of workplace flexibility for promoting continued work life, though here as in Cahill et al., the role of flexible working options is perhaps less prominent than one might expect.

There were associations between older employees' experiences of thriving and surviving in the workplace and the types of organizational support they desired (see Table 1). In the narratives of our interviewees all nine types of desired organizational support were mentioned by at least one interviewee as being a reason why they felt they were in one respect or another thriving in the workplace. However, work meaningfulness, knowledge transfer, and inclusion in organizational decision making (a facet of voice) seemed to be the only three types of organizational support associated with thriving, but not with either of the two dimensions of surviving. Seven out of 9 types of desired organizational support were associated with feelings of surviving (meeting job demands) and only two types of desired organizational support (performance evaluation & compensation and work-life balance) appeared to be associated with surviving (protecting the status quo). These results are important, because they suggest potential predictable effects of different types of desired organizational support on late career employees' work approach and experiences (i.e. orientation towards development/thriving or maintenance/surviving).

Discussion

This study aimed to understand the experiences of aging and being an older worker, including how older workers see themselves relative to their past self and younger workers in the context of a continuously changing work environment. It also aimed to ascertain the

features of work and organization that older workers regarded as most supportive at this late

stage of their career. We went beyond the single national context of most aging workforce-

related research, by exploring the phenomena simultaneously in two (one Western and one

Eastern) European countries. We also extended our research to the ICT sector which has been

traditionally skipped (with just a few exceptions) in the aging workforce studies. Most

importantly, we investigated specifically older workers' conceptualizations of their own

position in the workplace. We accomplished this using one broader and one more focused

perspective expressed in two research questions that enabled us to clarify the dynamics of late

career.

Contributions

We contribute new evidence and suggestions to several related literatures. These include

age-related individual changes (Warr, 2001; Roberts et al., 2006; Inceoglu et al., 2009; Kooij

et al., 2011), age stereotypes, metastereotypes and age-diversity in organizations (Posthuma

& Campion, 2009; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Boehm et al., 2014; Finkelstein et al., 2013, 2015),

and the empirical validation of established life-span theories and concepts (Baltes & Baltes,

1990; Carstensen et al., 1999; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Ebner et al., 2006) in a work

setting. Our findings also inform academic debates in the fields of job design (Truxillo et al.,

2012) and human resource management (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Veth et al., 2011; Boehm

et al., 2014; Cahill et al., 2015), positive organizational behavior (Porath et al., 2012), late

career management (Clark & Arnold, 2008; Wang et al., 2012), and successful aging at work

(Zacher, 2015).

Most importantly, we contribute to aging workforce research by developing an integrated

multi-level model of older employees' perceptions of aging at work (Fig. 2), which does not

just emphasize and extend known constructs, but also introduces new concepts and provides

the basis for investigation of new types of relationships. This is particularly obvious in the idea of thriving vs surviving in the workplace and the associations of these constructs with various types of organizational support. In our study surviving emerged as a new category related and somehow opposed to thriving in the workplace. Consequently, all forms of desired organizational support appeared to be associated with thriving and fewer with surviving. In addition, we share initial insights about potential cross-cultural and cross-sectorial differences that may trigger deeper understanding of older workers' experiences and aspirations.

Older employees across countries and industrial sectors in our study were likely to conceptualize the process of aging at work, and the attributes of older workers, in positive more than negative terms (i.e. development vs decline), which questions traditional views about older workers as focused mostly on coping with developmental losses. The overall positive perception of age-related changes suggests perceived developmental gains. Thus, given the salience of the idea of developing (growth, thriving) as well as maintaining (coping, surviving) in late career, we emphasize the positives associated with aging in contrast to other studies (Ng & Law, 2014; Ouwehand et al., 2007) which mostly discuss the ways in which older workers deal with loss of resources. Furthermore, in the narratives of our interviewees, differences between older and younger workers were conceptualized as age-related, more than generational, i.e. the older workers thought that they used to be like the younger ones are now. This is consistent with some previous studies (Parry & Urwin, 2011; Warr, 2001).

Overall, the positive perceptions of older workers in our study are stronger and more diverse than one might expect, and include some slightly unexpected elements. The many perceived positive consequences of accumulated knowledge and experience seemed not so much to compensate for declines in fluid intelligence (Warr, 2001), but instead to bestow a sound basis for higher cognitive functioning and emotional security. Worries about personal

decline and health problems were evident, but more in the future than the present and rarely particularly worrisome. There were references in our data to older workers being attracted by flexible working that enables them to pace themselves and/or conserve energy (Cahill et al., 2015), and to their possible lack of innovation, as well as their steadiness and reliability (Posthuma & Campion, 2009; Ng & Feldman, 2012). Yet any reluctance and hesitancy about learning new things seemed to co-exist with, and often be eclipsed by, an outlook where personal development was desired and equated with a sense of thriving at work (Porath et al., 2012). Overall, the workers in our sample appeared to be aware of their own potential and needs, willing to take a pro-active approach in managing late careers, and desiring opportunities for personal and professional growth. This suggests they can be active partners with their organizations in finding ways to managing effectively late career and age successfully at work (Zacher, 2015).

Of course, this positive tone may be partly a consequence of older workers reporting favorably on themselves. Even so, their self-reports might just be accurate, and redress an imbalance in the way older workers are frequently viewed and treated. In particular, as suggested by life-span theorists (Carstensen et al., 1999; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004), older workers in our study tended to be enthusiastic about the intrinsic features of their job. Our findings strongly support the proposed tendency of older workers still to value the opportunity to use their skills and exercise autonomy (Truxillo et al., 2012). They also wanted to be appreciated for their contribution (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008) which rested not only on their experience but also on the cognitive complexity and emotional stability that came with it (Carstensen et al., 1999, 2011). Some engaged in mentoring colleagues, but what mattered most to them at work seemed to reside more in being part of the mainstream action in their workplace, and contributing to the collective (present and future) rather than to the development of one or a small number of individuals (Clark & Arnold, 2008).

Generally, the negative references towards older workers in this study are in line with some of the age stereotypes in the existing literature (Posthuma & Campion, 2009; Ng & Feldman, 2012), and tended to be reported by the same participants who reported concerns about some age-related changes (e.g. physical fitness and cognitive ability) that are often perceived as challenges in the workplace. Furthermore, it appears that these negative perceptions may be (at least partly) rooted in underlying insecurity (e.g. fear of job loss), in the lack of a strong human resources function and shared equality and diversity policy, and lack of appropriate opportunities (e.g. learning and development) for older workers in the employing organizations (Warr, 1993; Boehm et al., 2014). There were some signs that these issues were more evident in Bulgaria than in the UK, perhaps reflecting the two countries' relative status on the Global AgeWatch Index (HelpAge, 2014). However, this was less marked than the index might lead one to expect. This may suggest that some perceptions of age-related differences in the workplace reflect universal (e.g. mean developmental changes in individuals) rather than contextual processes and/or that the organizational culture and systems that shape work environment are stronger predictors of the observed differences than mega-factors, such as national culture and economy. Similarly, although some healthcare work is heavy physically relative to ICT work, there were only limited signs that physical limitations were more of a problem in health than in ICT. Overall, the data signal that employers need to handle training and development firmly but gently with older workers. Firmly because it may require insistence that it happens, and gently because older workers may feel anxious about change and learning new things that enable them to cope with that change. It may be helpful to offer training and development separate from younger workers (Warr 2001; Warr & Birdi, 2002).

Without explicitly investigating the use of SOC strategies (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Abraham & Hansson, 1995), we identified many occasions when our interviewees

spontaneously reported the use of such strategies that helped them not just to maintain, but also to improve their work performance. Most interviewees who reported the use of SOC strategies were in job roles with relatively high levels of autonomy. This indicates that higher job autonomy can encourage the use of successful aging strategies in the workplace and is consistent with previous findings (Müller et al., 2012) about the interplay between job control and SOC strategies. Therefore, organizations can support their workers by providing them with higher job autonomy when possible (Müller et al., 2012; Truxillo et al., 2012). Most importantly, older workers in our sample were likely to view successful aging strategies as an evolution of their work approach based on their accumulated experience and knowledge rather than as a compensating (for developmental losses) approach as suggested by other researchers (Ng & Law, 2014). It might be interesting to explore this matter further as it could add new insights into the SOC inquiry.

In the current study for the first time we explored the concept of thriving in a sample of older workers and found that despite previous assumptions (Porath et al., 2012), older employees across countries and sectors are likely to view themselves as thriving in the workplace, at least in some respects. Furthermore, in our interviewees' narratives thriving appears to have an extended positive meaning, being associated with, for example, "on-going upgrading", "enrichment", "enthusiasm", and "enjoyment". In addition, experiences of thriving in the workplace were often reported along with overall positive perceptions about older (compared with younger) workers, positive over negative age-related changes, and satisfaction with the work environment. These descriptions fall in line with the concept of successful aging at work (Zacher, 2015). It is possible that these outcomes are influenced by the overall tendency of older people to think in more positive terms (compared with younger people) (Carstensen et al., 1999). However, the findings suggest that older workers do aspire to further personal and professional development and have clear views about what types of

organizational environment can best support such development. As Table 1 shows, most forms of organizational support are seen not only to help older workers keep going, but they are also (and sometimes only) associated with thriving rather than surviving at work. Therefore, we suggest that organizations that provide such support would be potentially more successful in managing thriving late career workers.

Moreover, we introduce for the first time the concept of surviving in the workplace and describe it as the individuals' tendency to preserve their mental and physical resources by limiting their work activities and perspectives in order to cope with work conditions that are perceived as highly demanding. This concept resembles Ebner and colleagues' (2006) goal orientations towards maintenance and loss-prevention, which may be (at least partly) attributed to scarce of resources. Surviving can take two forms (meeting job demands and preserving the status quo), which seem to correspond to the more traditional ways of portraying older workers as oriented towards maintenance/accommodation than development (Ebner et al., 2006). Because in the narratives of our interviewees the experiences of surviving did not appear to be seen as positive and were often reported alongside references about unfavorable work environment (e.g. overwhelming job demands, negative perceptions about older workers), we consider older workers' experiences of surviving as somehow opposite to those of thriving. Furthermore, we provide initial insights about what particular types of organizational support can be efficient in supporting older workers in terms of both thriving and surviving and thus outline potential paths to successful aging at work (Zacher, 2015).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Our study has several limitations. First, because of the qualitative approach employed there are potential risks of data pollution caused by socially desirable responses and self-

selection of participants. However, at the same time the focus on interviewees' perceptions may provide valuable information about older workers' self-conceptualizations that is not obtainable in other ways. Second, we used chronological age, which is only a proxy indicator of age-related processes (Kooj et al., 2011). Future research should examine other age categories such as, for example, psychological and social age that may provide a better context of understanding some of the phenomena associated with older workers. Third, our 37 respondents were a "lop-sided" group in various ways which limited opportunities for structured comparison between subgroups. Most were women, they tended to be at middle and higher occupational levels, 14 of the 20 healthcare interviewees were in Bulgaria and 12 of the 17 ICT interviewees were in the UK. In addition, our sample included only people in a formal work setting. Thus, our findings are limited to this setting only. For instance, older people who are still at work may have stayed at work longer (compared to those who have chosen to retire), because they are healthier, feel more energetic, and/or experience better work environments. Furthermore, our study included only participants from large organizations and therefore our results are not generalizable across small and/or middle-sized organizations, and self-employed individuals. Extending the characteristics of this research sample in the future may add valuable information about older workers' experiences and aspirations.

Future research could therefore extend the inquiry into establishing the role of occupational, gender, country and sectorial differences as well as the contributions of trade unions to the support provided for older workers (Barnes et al., 2009; Cassell & Lee, 2009). It would be valuable to investigate further the nature, content and correlates of perceptions of older workers as well as the role of organizational cultures in reinforcing, shaping positive perceptions, and/or fighting negative stereotyping and discrimination against older workers (e.g. Boehm et al., 2014; Finkelstein et al., 2015). For example, it is important to know

whether positive perceptions and experiences of older workers are, as our data suggest, more apparent in high autonomy high skill jobs; to what extent age metastereotypes in our study match with stereotypes, and how metastereotypes can best be managed. Table 1 shows that the range of organizational interventions that older workers can find supportive is broad, and this could be reflected in future work on age-friendly HR. Most importantly, future research should consider in-depth investigation of the content, antecedents, outcomes and relationships between the constructs of thriving and surviving that seem to have the potential of providing a functional framework for the management of individuals' early, mid- and late careers, and therefore the process of successful aging at work.

REFERENCES

Abraham, J. D., & Hansson, R. O. (1995). Successful aging at work: an applied study of

selection, optimization, and compensation through impression management. *The

Journals of Gerontology. Series B, Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 50(2),

94–103. doi:10.1093/geronb/50B.2.P94

Age UK (2011). *A snapshot of ageism in the UK and across Europe*. Retrieved 28

September, 2014, from http://www.ageuk.org.uk/Documents/EN-

GB/ID10180%20Snapshot%20of%20Ageism%20in%20Europe.pdf?dtrk=true

Armstrong-Stassen, M. (2008). Human resource practices for mature workers -- And why

aren't employers using them? *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, 46(3), 334–

352. doi:10.1177/1038411108091755

AWPA (2013). *ICT workforce study.* Retrieved 12 January, 2016, from

http://www.unprme.org/resource-docs/ICTSTUDYFINAL28JUNE2013.pdf

Bal, P. M., Kooij, D. T. A. M., & De Jong, S. B. (2013). How do developmental and

accommodative HR enhance employee engagement and commitment? The role of

psychological contract and SOC-strategies. *Journal of Management Studies*, 50(4), 545-

572. doi: 10.1111/joms.12028

Baltes, P. B., & Baltes, M. M. (1990). Psychological perspectives on successful aging: The

model of selective optimization with compensation. In P. B. Baltes & M. M. Baltes.

(Eds.), *Successful aging: Perspectives from the behavioral sciences* (pp. 1–34). New

York: Cambridge University Press.

Bansal, P., & Corley, K. (2011). The coming of age for qualitative research: Embracing the

   diversity of qualitative methods. *Academy of Management Journal*, 54(2), 233-237. doi:

   10.5465/AMJ.2011.60262792

Barnes, H., Smeaton, D., & Taylor, R. (2009). *An aging workforce: The employer's*

   perspective. Institute for Employment Studies. Retrieved 17 November, 2014, from

   http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/An%20Aging%20Workforce

   _An%20Employer%27s%20Perspective.pdf

Boehm, S.A., Kunze, F., & Bruch, H. (2014). Spotlight on age-diversity climate: The impact

   of age-inclusive HR practices on firm-level outcomes. *Personnel Psychology,* 67 (3),

   667–704. doi: 10.1111/peps.12047

Braun, V., Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research*

   in Psychology, 3(2), 77-10. doi: 10.1191/147808870qp063oa

Cahill, K.E., James, J.B., & Pitt-Catsouphes, M. (2015). The impact of a randomly assigned

   time and place management initiative on work and retirement expectations. *Work, Aging*

   and Retirement, 1 (4), 350–368. doi: 10.1093/workar/wav012

Campbell, J. L., Quincy, C., Osserman, J., & Perderson, O. K. (2013). Coding in-depth

   semi-structured interviews: Problems of utilization and intercoder reliability and

   agreement. *Sociological Methods and Research*, 42(3), 294-320. doi:

   10.1177/0049124113500475

Carstensen, L. L. (1992). Social and emotional patterns in adulthood: support for

   socioemotional selectivity theory. *Psychology and aging*, 7(3), 331-338. doi:

   http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0882-7974.7.3.331

Carstensen, L. L., Isaacowitz, D. M.; & Charles, S. T. (1999). Taking time seriously: A

theory of socioemotional selectivity. *American Psychologist*, 54(3), 165-181. doi:

10.1037/0003-066X.54.3.165

Carstensen, L. L., Turan, B., Scheibe, S., Ram, N., Ersner-Hershfield, H., Samanez-Larkin

G.R., Brooks, K.P., & Nesselroade, J.R. (2011). Emotional experience improves with

age: evidence based on over 10 years of experience sampling. *Psychology and Aging,*

26(1), 21–33. doi: 10.1037/a0021285

Cassell, C., & Lee, B. (2009). Trade unions learning representatives: Progressing

partnership? *Work, Employment and Society*, 23(2), 213-230.

doi:10.1177/0950017009102855

CEDEFOP (2011). *Working and aging: Guidance and counselling for mature learners.*

Retrieved 17 November, 2014, from http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/cedefop

---working-and-aging---guidance-and-counselling-for-mature-learners-3062_en.pdf

CEDEFOP (2012). *Working and aging: The benefits of investing in an aging workforce.*

Retrieved 17 November, 2014, from http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-

resources/publications/working-and-aging-1

Chiu, W. C. K., Chan, A. W., Snape, E., & Redman, T. (2001). Age stereotypes and

discriminatory attitudes towards older workers: An East – West comparison. *Human

Relations*, 54(5), 629–661. doi: 10.1177/0018726701545004

CIPD & CMI (2010). *Managing an aging workforce: How employers are adapting to an

older labour market.* Retrieved 9 December, 2014, from

http://www.ncoss.org.au/projects/enews/downloads/101006Managing-Aging-

Workforce.pdf

Clark, M., & Arnold, J. (2008). The nature, prevalence and correlates of generativity among men in middle career. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 73(3), 473-484. doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2008.09.002

Denscombe, M. (2007). *The good research guide for small scale social research projects.* (3rd Edn) Berkshire: Open University Press.

DiGicco-Bloom, B, & Grabtree, B.J. (2006). The qualitative research interview. *Medical Education,* 40(4), 314 – 321. doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2929.2006.02418.x

Ebner, N. C., Freund, A. M., & Baltes, P. B. (2006). Developmental changes in personal goal orientation from young to late adulthood: From striving for gains to maintenance and prevention of losses. *Psychology and Aging*, 21(4), 664-678. doi: 10.1037/0882-7974.21.4.664

EEO Review (2012). *Employment policies to promote active aging.* Retrieved 5 December, 2014, from http://www.eu-employment-observatory.net/resources/reviews/ EEOReview-ActiveAging-2012-published-FINAL.pdf

Eurofound (2012). *Sustainable work and the ageing workforce.* Retrieved 17 December, 2015, from http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2012/working-conditions-social-policies/sustainable-work-and-the-ageing-workforce

Eurofound (2013). *Employment trends and policies for older workers in the recession.* Retrieved 17 December, 2015, from http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2012/labour-market-social-policies/employment-trends-and-policies-for-older-workers-in-the-recession

Finkelstein, L. M., Ryan, K. M., & King, E. B. (2013). What do the young (old) people think

of me? Content and accuracy of age-based metastereotypes. *European Journal of Work

and Organizational Psychology*, 22(6), 633-657. doi:10.1080/1359432X.2012.673279

Finkelstein, L.M., King, E.B., & Voyles, F.C. (2015). Age metastereotyping and cross-age

workplace interactions: A meta view of age stereotypes at work. *Work, Aging and

Retirement,* 1(1), 26-40. doi: 10.1093/workar/wau002

Hansson, R. O., DeKoek, P. D., Neece, W. M., & Patterson, D.W. (1997). Successful aging

at work: Annual review, 1992–1996: The older worker and transitions to retirement.

Journal of Vocational Behavior, 51(2), 202–233. doi:10.1006/jvbe.1997.1605

Härmä, M. (2011). Adding more years to the work careers of an aging workforce--what

works?. *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health*, 37(6), 451–453. doi:

10.5271/sjweh.3198

HelpAge International (2014). *Global AgeWatch Index 2014 Insight report.* Retrieved 9

August, 2015, from http://www.duchodova-komise.cz/wp-

content/uploads/2014/10/Global-AgeWatch-Index-2014.pdf

HOFSPEEM (2013). *EPSU-HOSPEEM Guidelines & good practice examples "Ageing

Workforce Healthcare Sector*." Retrieved 15 June, 2015, from

http://www.epsu.org/IMG/pdf/EPSU-HOSPEEM-GGP-AW-FINAL-04-12-13-EN.pdf

ILCUK (2013). *Working longer: An EU perspective*. Retrieved 5 December, 2014, from

http://www.ilcuk.org.uk/index.php/publications/publication_details/working_longer_an

_eu_perspective

Inceoglu, I., Segers, J., Bartram D., & Vloeberghs, D. (2009). Age differences in work

    motivation in a sample of five Northern European countries. *Zeitschrift für*

    Personalpsychologie, 8(2), 59-70. doi:10.1026/1617-6391.8.2.59

Inder, L.& Bryson, J. (2007). *The aging workforce: retaining, utilizing and challenging*

    workers. A literature review. Retrieved 27 September, 2014, from

    http://www.victoria.ac.nz/som/researchprojects/dhc-publtns/The_Aging_Workforce_-

    _lit_review.pdf.

Kanfer, R., & Ackerman, P. L. (2004). Aging, adult development, and work motivation.

    Academy of Management Review, 29(3), 440-458. doi:10.2307/20159053

King, N. (2004a). Using interviews in qualitative research, in C. Cassell and G. Symon

    (Eds.) *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research* (pp. 11-22).

    London: Sage.

King, N. (2004b). Using templates in the thematic analysis of text, in C. Cassell and G.

    Symon (Eds.) *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research*

    (pp.256-270). London: Sage.

Kooij, D. T. A. M., Lange, A. H. D. E., Jansen, P. G. W., Kanfer, R., & Dikkers, J. S. E.

    (2011). Age and work-related motives: Results of a meta-analysis. *Journal of*

    Organizational Behavior, 32(2), 197–225. doi: 10.1002/job.665

Kunze, F., Boehm, S., & Bruch, H. (2013). Age, resistance to change, and job performance.

    Journal of Managerial Psychology, 28(7/8), 741-760. doi: 10.1108/JMP-06-2013-0194

Loretto, W., & White, P. (2006). Employers' attitudes, practices and policies towards older

    workers. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 16(3), 313-330. doi: 10.1111/j.1748-

    8583.2006.00013.

Madill, A., Jordan, A., and Shirley, C. (2000). Objectivity and reliability in qualitative

analysis: realist, contextualist and radical constructionist epistemologies. *British Journal*

of Psychology, 91, 1-20. doi: 10.1348/000712600161646

McAdams, D. P., & de St Aubin, E. (1992). A theory of generativity and its assessment

through self-report, behavioral acts, and narrative themes in autobiography. *Journal of*

Personality & Social Psychology, 62(6), 1003-1015. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.62.6.1003

Morgeson, F. P., & Humphrey, S. E. (2006). The Work Design Questionnaire (WDQ):

Developing and validating a comprehensive measure for assessing job design and the

nature of work. *Journal of Applied Psychology,* 91(6), 1321-1339. doi:10.1037/0021-

9010.91.6.1321

Müller, A., Weigl, M., Heiden, B., Glaser, J., & Angerer, P. (2012). Promoting work ability

and well-being in hospital nursing: the interplay of age, job control, and successful

aging strategies. *WORK: A Journal of Prevention, Assessment & Rehabilitation*, 41(1),

5137-5144. doi: 10.3233/WOR-2012-0083-5137

Ng, T. W. H., & Feldman, D. C. (2012). Evaluating six common stereotypes about older

workers with meta-analytical data. *Personnel Psychology*, 65(4), 821–858.

doi:10.1111/peps.12003

Ng, E. S. W., & Law, A. (2014). Keeping up! Older workers' adaptation in the workplace

after age 55. *Canadian Journal on Aging*, 33(1), 1-14.

doi:10.1017/S0714980813000639

Ouwehand, C., de Ridder, D. T., & Bensing, J. M. (2007). A review of successful aging

models: Proposing proactive coping as an important additional strategy. *Clinical*

Psychology Review, 27(8), 873-884. doi:10.1016/j.cpr.2006.11.003

Parry, E., & Urwin, P. (2011). Generational differences in work values: A review of theory

    and evidence. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 13(1), 79 –96. doi:

    10.1111/j.1468-2370.2010.00285

Porath, C., Spreitzer, G., Gibson, C., & Garnett, F. G. (2012). Thriving at work: Toward its

    measurement, construct validation, and theoretical refinement. *Journal of

    Organizational Behavior*, 33(2), 250–275. doi: 10.1002/job.756

Posthuma, R. A., & Campion, M. A. (2009). Age stereotypes in the workplace: Common

    stereotypes, moderators, and future research directions. *Journal of Management*, 35(1),

    158–188. doi: 10.1177/0149206308318617

Ritchie, J., & Lewis, J. (Eds.) (2003). *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social

    science students and researchers.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Roberts B.W., Walton K.E., & Viechtbauer W. (2006). Patterns of mean-level change in

    personality traits across the life course: a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies.

    Psychological Bulletin, 132(1), 1-25. doi: 10.1037/0033-2909.132.1.1

Robson, S. M. & Hansson, R. O. (2007). Strategic self-development for successful aging at

    work. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 64(4), 331 – 362. doi:

    10.2190/Q303-171U-7686-8517

Salthouse, T. A. (2010). Selective review of cognitive aging. *Journal of the

    Neuropsychological Society*, 16(5), 754-760. doi:10.1017/S1355617710000706

Schwartz-Woelzl, M.T. & Healey, M. (2007). *Recruitment policies and practices in the

    context of demographic change: Critical issues in the ICT sector and recommendations.*

    Retrieved 7 June, 2015, from

    https://www.zsi.at/competence/20/attach/1_mature_final_report_2007.pdf.

Soto, C. J., John, O. P., Gosling, S. D., & Potter, J. (2011). Age differences in personality traits from 10 to 65: Big Five domains and facets in a large cross-sectional sample. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100(2), 330 - 348. doi: 10.1037/a0021717

Super, D. E. (1977). Vocational maturity in mid-career. *Vocational Guidance Quarterly*, 25(4), 294-302.

Truxillo, D. M., Cadiz, D. M., Rineer, J. R., Zaniboni, S., & Fraccaroli, F. (2012). A lifespan perspective on job design: Fitting the job and the worker to promote job satisfaction, engagement, and performance. *Organizational Psychology Review*, 2(4), 340–360. doi:10.1177/2041386612454043

United Nations (2013). *World population aging.* Retrieved 14 November, 2014, from http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WorldPopulationAgeing2013.pdf

Veth, K. N., Emans, B. J. M., Van der Heijden, B. I. J. M., De Lange, A. H., & Korzilius, H. P. L. M. (2011). *Taking care of older workers: A multi-perspective case study on HR practices in health care organizations for older workers.* Retrieved 28 July, 2015, from https://www.academia.edu/2678702/Taking_care_of_older_worker

Wang, M., Olson, D., & Shultz, K. (2012). *Mid and late career issues: An integrative perspective.* New York: Routledge.

Warr, P. (1993). In what circumstances does job performance vary with age? *European Work and Organizational Psychologist*, 3, 237-249.

Warr, P. (2001). Age and work behavior: Physical attributes, cognitive abilities, knowledge, personality traits and motives. In C. L. Cooper, & I. T. Robertson (Eds.), *International review of industrial and organizational psychology*, 16 (pp. 1–36). New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Warr, P., & Birdi, K. (2002). Employee age and voluntary development activity. *International Journal of Training and Development*, 2(3), 190-204. doi: 10.1111/1468-2419.00047

Webster, J. (2007). *Diversity management in the ICT industry. Challenges and issues for social dialogue*. Retrieved 12 January, 2016, from http://www.mature-project.eu/materials/DiversityManagement_en.pdf

Zacher, H. (2015). Successful aging at work. *Work, Aging and Retirement*, 1(1), 4-25. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/workar/wau006

Zacher, H., & Frese, M. (2011). Maintaining a focus on opportunities at work: The interplay between age, job complexity, and the use of selection, optimization, and compensation strategies. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 32(2), 291–318. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/job.683
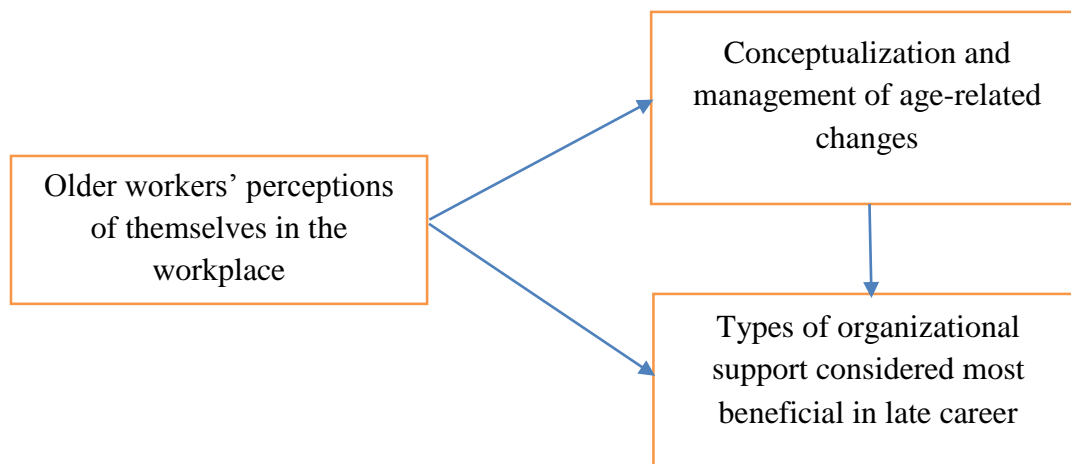
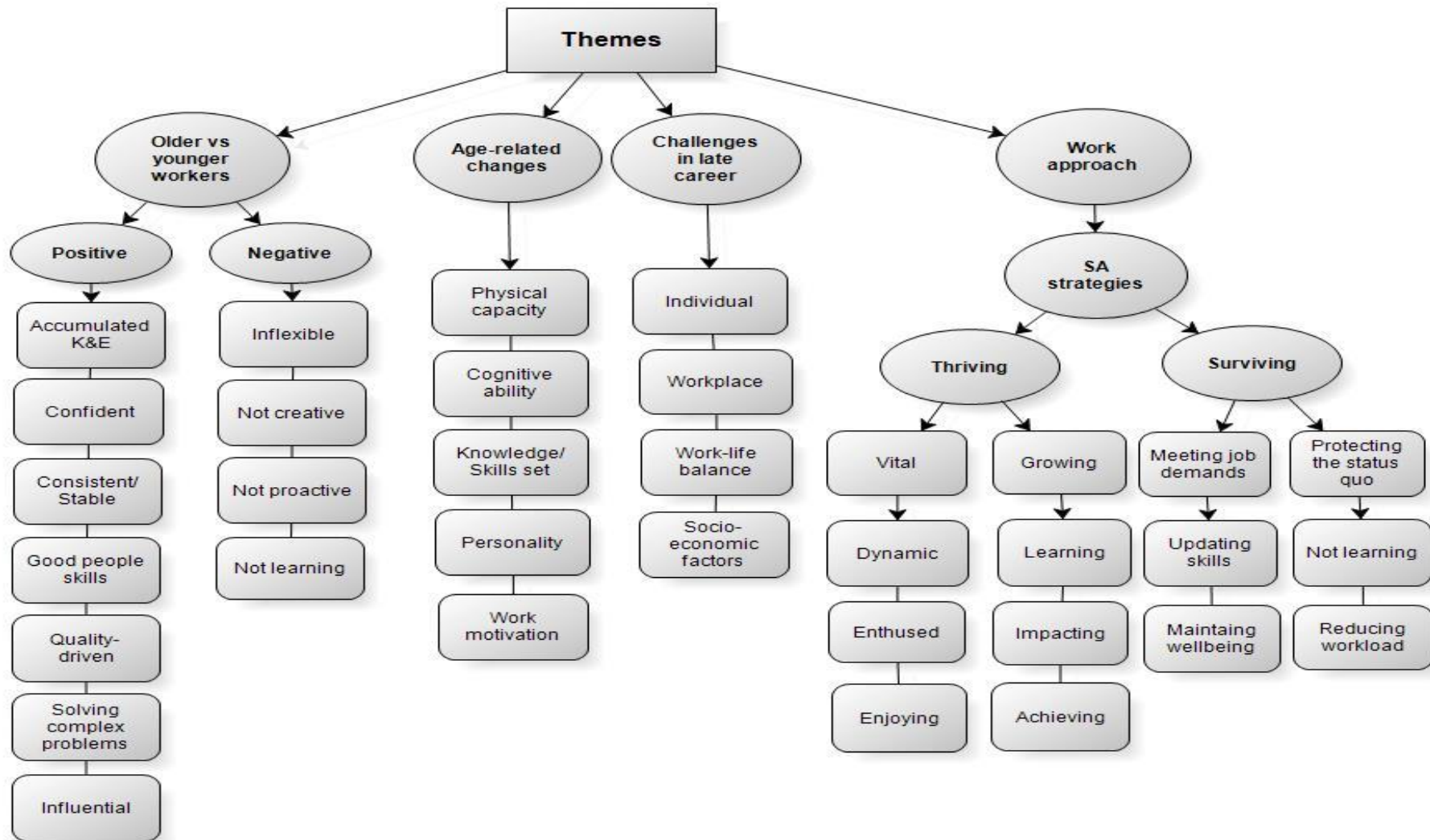**Figure 1.** *Areas of enquiry and connections between them*

Figure 2. *Older workers' conceptualizations of age differences at work*

Table 1: *Desired organizational support for older workers*

Theme/ Description	Relevant literature	Illustrative quote	Work approach
Work meaningfulness To have access to meaningful and interesting tasks, more opportunities	Carstensen et al., 1999; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Inceoglu et al., 2009; Kooj et al., 2011; Truxillo et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2012.	*"We (older workers) can be empowered to do a lot more this way. I am certainly empowered by having more opportunities."* (ICT, UK, female) *"Interesting means not outside my capabilities, but newish that requires delivery to a timescale. But nothing too scary."* (ICT, UK, male)	Thriving
Social cohesion To be given opportunities to work in teams and relate to other people in the organization	Carstensen et al., 1999; Kooij et al., 2011; Truxillo et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2012.	*"The relationships with the people you are working with is the most important thing."* (ICT, UK, female) *"I want to feel part of the team and the organization. I like to be in the office, to communicate, banter and be part of things."* (ICT, UK, male)	Thriving Surviving MJD

Knowledge transfer To be provided with opportunities to mentor/transfer knowledge	McAdams & de St Aubin, 1992; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Clark & Arnold, 2008; Veth et al., 2011; Truxillo et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2012.	*"I know that I am needed in this job, supporting other people in their jobs. I know that I am useful and that does energise me."* (health, UK, female) *"From my point of view I help many people at the start of their careers, who do not have the experience that I have."* (ICT, UK, male)	Thriving
Feedback To be given opportunities for direct and constructive communication/ feedback from line managers	Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Truxillo et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2012.	*"Even just having a positive feedback is enough and gives you the strength and will to continue contributing, working at your best."* (ICT, Bulgaria, female) *"...it is important… to say what they (managers) are happy with and if they are not happy with, how you can change it. I do think that this is particularly important for mature workers."* (health, UK, female)	Thriving Surviving MJD

| **Recognition, respect and voice**

To be shown respect by the organization and co-workers. To be heard and given opportunities to contribute to organizational decisions, processes, policies and practices | Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Loretto & White, 2006. | *"Respect, reflected in organizational events such as awards at official celebrations, formal award rituals for longer service…"* (health, Bulgaria, female)

"…when people say 'Thank you, you are a star', or whatsoever…And it just makes you feel better. It's very important, especially at my time in life…It doesn't take a lot, but it does mean a lot to the person who receives it." (health, UK, female)

"There were a couple of things I was not happy about and they were resolved. So, my satisfaction is high, I feel I have quite a lot of input." (ICT, UK, male) | Thriving

Surviving MJD |
| **Compensation & Benefits**

To be provided with access to good benefits systems with bigger | Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Veth et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2012. | *"Oh, the access to good benefits packages is a big bonus here. Not many other companies provide these…"* (ICT, Bulgaria, female)

"It's really important that we have a flexible benefits package that appeals to the age spectrum…" (ICT, UK, male) | Thriving

Surviving MJD & PSQ |

focus on healthcare and extra holiday			
Work-life balance To have access to flexible working options	Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Barnes et al., 2009; Veth et al., 2011; Cahill et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2012.	*"Going part-time could keep me going another couple of years…"* (ICT, UK, male) *"All of us would like to have flexible working options, but unfortunately, this is not a common practice here."* (health, Bulgaria, female)	Thriving Surviving MJD & PSQ
Job control To be given opportunities to contribute to their own job design (and setting performance standards)	Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Veth et al., 2011; Müller et al., 2012; Truxillo et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2012.	*"Well, obviously it depends on the individual, but I do believe that when you get to a certain stage in your life and your career you have a good idea about your strengths and weaknesses and you can tailor that job as much as possible to play on these strengths."* (ICT, UK, female) *"Older workers should be given such opportunities (to have a say in their job design), because every person, especially at*	Thriving Surviving MJD

		this age, may have valuable practical suggestions." (health, Bulgaria, female)	
Learning & development To be provided with (equal) access to learning (formal and informal) and development opportunities	Boehm et al., 2014; Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Veth, 2011; Warr, 1993; Warr & Birdi, 2002; Wang et al., 2012.	*"We also need real opportunities for development within the organization. Not just training"* (health, Bulgaria, female) *"Maybe to change my job a little, to do something a little bit different. Because I have learned my job now and changing it a little, I think, would give me new opportunities to learn, that would be a positive challenge."* (health, UK, female)	Thriving Surviving MJD

Appendix 1: *Comparisons between countries and sectors*

Indicators	by COUNTRY	
	Bulgaria	**United Kingdom**
Population/ annual population growth rate (World Bank, 2012)	7.305 million/ -2.5(%)	63.23 million/ 0.8(%)
Year of EU entry	2007	1973
Active aging national policies (EEO review, 2012)	1.　Pension reform (2011) promoting longer working lives. 2.　Anti-discrimination legislation (Labor Code). 3.　Lifelong learning: low popularity; not geared to older workers. 4.　Health: mandatory period medical examinations for employees also tailored to the worker's age. 5.　Age management: low awareness; stable, but low quality employment of older workers.	1.　Pension reform (2011) promoting longer working lives. 2.　Anti-discrimination legislation (Equality act, 2012). 3.　Life-long learning: need and relevance to older workers is recognised; not enough applications for LLL opportunities from older workers; older workers also take up on apprenticeships. 4.　Health: actively promoting healthier living in the workplace. 5.　Age-management: growing awareness about the importance of managing older workers.
Average unemployment rate (Eurostat, 2013)	13.2%	7.5%

Employment rates among older workers, 2011 (Eurofound, 2013)	Slightly above 50% (50-64 age group) Less than 10% (65-74 age group)	Above 60 % (50-64 age group) Above 10% (65-74 age group)
50-59 aged workers' attitudes towards work sustainability (Eurofound, 2012)	Work is less sustainable than the EU average (poorer work content and low job latitude; almost 40% do not think they will be able to do the same job at the age of 60).	Work is more sustainable than the EU average (richer content and higher degree of job latitude; almost 20% do not think they will be able to do the same job at 60)
At what age are people regarded as old? (Eurobarometer, 2012)	63.8	61.9

by SECTOR

	Health	ICT
Growth and employment (HOSPEEM, 2013; Webster, 2007)	One of the most significant sectors in the EU economy with increasing employment potential due to population aging; provides about 9% of all jobs in the EU.	One of the most dynamic areas of the European economy in terms of growth and employment; provides about 2.7% of the total employment in EU member states.
Skill areas (EC, 2012; Schwartz-Woelzl and Healey, 2007)	Critical workforce shortages in certain healthcare professions and geographical areas; employs a higher than average number of highly educated people. High mobility (outflow) for some professions – e.g. nearly 80% of	Associated with the need of innovation, new ideas and behaviours. Short supply of skills and labour - 20% gap between demand and supply in some member states. Growing demand of soft skills.

	migrant doctors coming outside the EU go to Ireland and the UK.	
Workforce (HOSPEEM, 2013; AWPA, 2013; EC, 2012, Schwartz-Woelzl and Healey, 2007)	High proportions of women and older workers (in 2009 about 30% of all doctors in the EU were over 55 years of age).	Young (predominantly male) and highly mobile workforce - employment is heavily skewed towards the age between 25 and 44 as employees in the age group between 25 and 35 are considered as "prime employees". The participation of mature aged workers in ICT is lower than the national average for all occupations.
Work environment (Barnes et al., 2009; EC, 2012; Schwartz-Woelzl and Healey, 2007)	On-going reorganizations, problems with staff recruitment and retention due to demanding working conditions, relatively low pay, requirements of new skills.	Age discrimination is particularly "rampant" (even in a context of skills gaps and shortages; employers tend to see aging workforce rather as a challenge than an opportunity (5%).

Appendix 2: *Demographic characteristics of the interviewees*

Total sample (N=37)

Variable	Number of participants	Variable	Number of participants
Country		**Tenure in the job**	
Bulgaria	20	Up to 10 years	18
United Kingdom	17	Between 11 and 20 years	10
		Over 20 years	9
Sector		**Working past normal retirement age**	
Healthcare	20	Yes	13
ICT	17	No	24
Gender		**Organization**	
Male	13	Org. 1 (HC, BG)	5
Female	24	Org. 2 (HC, BG)	3
Age		Org. 3 (HC, BG)	3
52-54	5	Org. 4 (HC, BG)	3
55-65	28	Org. 5 (HC, UK)	3
66+	4	Org. 6 (HC, UK)	3
Tenure in org.		Org. 7 (ICT, BG)	5
Up to 10 years	10	Org. 8 (ICT, UK)	4
Between 11 and 20 years	10	Org. 9 (ICT, UK)	3
Over 20 years	17	Org. 10 (ICT, UK)	5