

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF OLDER WORKERS' PERCEPTIONS OF STEREOTYPES, SUCCESSFUL AGEING STRATEGIES AND HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT: Because of the progressive ageing of the world's population in the last 25 years, the contributions of older age groups of workers have become increasingly important in many countries. Yet, older workers (those aged 55 years and over) are not always utilised or valued as much as they could be in the workplace. As a part of an EU funded cross-cultural and cross-sectorial programme we are investigating what features of work and work environment both older workers and Human Resource managers find increasingly important for older workers' well-being and performance. We are discussing workers' individual approaches in the utilization of successful ageing strategies as well as the types of organisational support valued by older workers. Our findings based on a literature review and data from over 40 interviews in nine employment organisations from two countries (United Kingdom and Bulgaria) and two industrial sectors (healthcare and IT) suggest that workers in their late career are likely to acknowledge the occurrence of some age-related changes in their work values, needs, approaches and capacity. These changes, in turn shape workers' views about the types of work environment and organisational support they want.

Key words: ageing workforce, older worker, Human Resource Management, well-being, performance, successful ageing strategies, cross-cultural

КАЧЕСТВЕН АНАЛИЗ НА ПЕРЦЕПЦИИТЕ НА ПО-ВЪЗРАСТНИТЕ СЛУЖИТЕЛИ ЗА СТЕРЕОТИПИТЕ, СТРАТЕГИИТЕ ЗА УСПЕШНО СТАРЕЕНЕ И ПРАКТИКИТЕ ПО УПРАВЛЕНИЕ НА ЧОВЕШКИ РЕСУРСИ

РЕЗЮМЕ: Поради прогресивното застаряване на населението в света през последните 25 години, приносът на по-възрастните групи от работещи става все по-важен за много държави. Въпреки това, по-възрастните служители (тези на 55 години и повече) не винаги са ценени толкова, колкото би могло. В рамките на част от финансирана от Европейската комисия международна и междусекторна изследователска програма, ние проучваме кои характеристики на работата и работната среда по-възрастните служители и мениджърите по управление на човешките ресурси намират за все по-важни за благополучието и изпълнението в работата на по-възрастните служители. Обсъждаме индивидуалните подходи на служителите в усвояването на някои стратегии за успешно стареене,

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както и видовете организационна подкрепа ценена от тях. Резултатите, основани на анализ на съвременната професионална литература и данни от над 40 интервюта, проведени в 9 организации в две държави (България и Великобритания) и два икономически сектора (здравеопазване и информационни технологии) сочат, че служителите в късната си кариера са склонни да признават наличието на някои свързани с възрастта промени в техните ценности, потребности, подходи към работата и работен капацитет. Тези промени формират възгледите на работещите относно желаните от тях типове работна среда и организационна подкрепа.

Population ageing is taking place in almost all areas of the world with Japan, Germany and Italy being the most ageing countries. It is also expected that demographic ageing will become entrenched in many countries during the next half of the century with the number of people aged 60 years or over increasing more than twice and exceeding the number of children by 2050 (United Nations, 2013). Statistics from the past 25 years show that the population of the European Union is becoming progressively older already (e.g. Eurofound 2006, 2011). This is a result of two simultaneous developments - the steady increase of life expectancy across Europe and falling fertility rates. Thus, the ageing population becomes a key challenge for society and an important social and economic responsibility (e.g. EEO Review, 2012; Harma, 2011). Furthermore, the ageing 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 (e.g. Robson & Hansson, 2007; Kooij et al., 2011). In the last few years, the need to keep older workers in the workforce (despite high levels of unemployment amongst new entrants to the labour market) has been referred to as an “emergency” (e.g. CIPD & CMI, 2010). Key terms like ‘age-friendly employment’ have been introduced and various prevention measures ranging from changes in legislation and social security systems to the introduction of tailored life-long learning programmes and flexible work models have been undertaken. Figures show that there has been a considerable increase of the employment rates of older workers (aged 55-64) over the last ten years from 38% to 47% (Eurostat, 2000-2010). There is a wealth of examples about how employers can benefit from hiring and retaining older employees at work. Reforms in the pension and legislation systems have been made, and actions in terms of the development of age neutral recruitment and retention measures have been undertaken. Most arguments are around potential financial and social benefits as results of utilising older workers’ experience and transferring their skills to younger employees within organisations (e.g. EEO Review, 2012).

There is no consensus in the professional literature about who is the “older worker”. This term could be very broad referring to workers at the age of 40 to the age of 75 years (e.g. Age UK, 2011; Veth et al., 2011). Recently more researchers choose to define older working people in terms of their chronological age as those who are 55 years and over. There are various reasons for this specific age criterion. For instance, data show that currently the fastest growing segment of the workforce is 55 years and older. According to James and colleagues ‘the idea that ‘50 is the new 40’ suggests a public perception that the subjective experience of age is changing’ (James, et al., 2011, p176). Another empirical study reports that when asked to suggest an age of an ‘older employee’, people 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 ageing workforce tends to be highly multidisciplinary incorporating economical, sociological, psychological, vocational, biological and even political aspects (e.g. Wang et al., 2012). Traditionally, among the most discussed issues are age-related changes and their associations with particular work outcomes, age stereotypes and discrimination against older workers, the impact of job-related and organisational characteristics on older workers. Recently, more attention has been paid to cross-cultural research and topics such as successful ageing at work and how best organisations can support and retain older workers. However, there are still some research gaps, particularly with regard to older workers’ personal approaches towards enhancing their own well-being and job performance.

Coming mostly from a Work and Organisational psychology perspective, our aims in this study were to research whether age-stereotypes still exist in organisations and whether they have an impact on older workers, to examine the age-related changes in people's work preferences, and to investigate the organisational support available for employees in their late careers. Furthermore, we are particularly interested what do older workers themselves think is their position in the workplace in these days of allegedly increasing attention to ageing workforce. Thus, we identified the following research questions: What are the perceptions about older workers in their organisations? What, if any, are the perceived age-related changes in people at work? What type of work environment and organisational support older workers consider beneficial for their well-being and performance at work?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Age-related Changes, Work-related Behaviours and Outcomes

It has been well documented that people change physically and psychologically with age. Some of these changes are demonstrated through people's behaviours 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 (e.g. Warr, 1993, 2001; Salthouse, 2010; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Wang, et al., 2012; Truxillo et al., 2012).

Older workers are likely to be less fit and to show lower test results than younger workers in terms of, for example, the flexibility of some muscle groups. Therefore, older workers may experience more difficulties compared to younger colleagues when performing physically demanding jobs (Warr, 2001). This may result in poorer job performance and job satisfaction (Truxillo et al., 2012). However, research has demonstrated that the degree of physical change is not just related to age, but is highly dependent on many other factors such as individual's heredity, life styles, physical activity, and the environment. Thus, not everybody is likely to experience age-related disadvantages in their work (Warr, 2001; Inder & Bryson, 2007). In addition, there could also be declines in some cognitive functions, mostly associated with fluid intelligence (such as working memory and information processing) at later age. However, such age effects were found not to be great on average and can be further reduced within a supportive environment (i.e. when adjusting time, using new enabling technologies, etc.). Furthermore, the levels of cognitive decline among older individuals may vary significantly. For instance, some older individuals show very little change in competence or performance until very old age. In addition, declining fluid intelligence abilities (i.e. abstract problem solving) are usually compensated by increased crystalized intelligence (i.e. knowledge and experience). Thus, using their accumulated knowledge and experience, older workers may perform better than younger workers in their jobs (Warr, 2001, Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Wang et al., 2012; Inder & Bryson, 2007).

Similarly to physical and cognitive changes, people may experience some personality changes when they grow older. For instance, studies demonstrate that older workers are less extraverted and open to change than younger workers, but at the same time - more self-controlled, tolerant, modest and conscientious (Warr, 2001; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004). Yet again, these changes are very individual and do not apply to everyone. Some of the findings on age-related personality changes tend to be controversial. A particular example is the relationship between age and proactive behaviour. Some findings indicate that older individuals are less proactive, compared to younger ones in some work-related areas such as training and development (e.g. Bertolino et al. 2011). In contrast, a study by Claes and colleagues published during the same year (2011) demonstrates that overall there are no significant differences between the proactivity indices between samples of older and younger workers.

Of significant research interest are age-related changes in workers' motivation. 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 to younger workers) may tend to attribute more importance to some social aspects of work (such as supporting younger workers and transferring their experience) as well as to feeling valued and involved than to career development options and striving for achievement (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Veth et al., 2011; CEDEFOP, 2011). A study by Inceoglu and colleagues (2009) examined age differences in work motivation in a sample of five Northern European countries (Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden). Results were generally consistent across the five countries and revealed older workers' tendency to be more motivated by intrinsically rewarding job features, and less motivated by extrinsic awards. Thus, they support the notion that there is a shift in individuals' motivation rather than a decline in motivation with age.

Some individual outcomes such as work performance and occupational well-being have also been discussed with regard to older age. Well-being can be interpreted in terms of various concepts including workers' mental and physical health and work satisfaction. Older age is usually associated with higher (physical) health risks and some jobs and workplaces are more hazardous than others for workers' health. For instance, Dolan and colleagues (2012) investigated the effects of organisational restructuring on older workers' well-being and found lay-offs contributed significantly to the workers' burnout and depression. This effect was weaker for individuals in managerial positions. In addition, co-workers' general support was found to be highly positively related to workers coping with the change and negatively associated with physical burnout among older workers. However, individuals' health depends on many other factors, such as for example their biology and life styles (Hansson et al., 1997; Warr, 2001). Regarding job satisfaction, it has been reported that older workers attribute significant importance to their job content and relations with colleagues (e.g. Truxillo et al., 2012). Overall, researchers suggest that there is no age-related decline in job performance, apart from when the work demands high levels of physical stamina and effort. The declines of performance are more likely due to skills obsolescence or exhaustion than to age. In addition, it is well documented that workers' well-being and performance are related. Therefore, keeping older workers healthier and happier at work can enhance their performance (Hansson et al., 1997; Inder & Bryson, 2007).

The discussion about age-related changes and work-related behaviours is naturally related to another on-going argument about generational differences. It is often difficult for researchers to distinguish between age-related and generational differences. A specific example is the anticipated difficulty of older workers in the area of IT skills (e.g. CEDEFOP, 2011). There could be an argument whether this issue is related to older age or is rather a generational effect due to the significant development and access to IT technologies in the last two decades. Overall, research findings on generational effects are highly controversial and limited by many variables. Undertaking a critical review of theoretical and empirical research on generational differences in work values, Parry and Urwin (2011) recommended further effort in disengaging cohort and generational effects from the impact of age and period.

Successful ageing at work

The concept of "successful ageing" suggests individual's good health and vitality over the life-span and, in this sense, is the individual's capacity to thrive. Historically, this concept has been of particular interest in biomedical research and healthcare. It has gradually developed with the development of the social theories of ageing, and has incorporated physical, cognitive and social functional aspects, which are believed to be influenced by lifestyle choices, behaviours and psychological factors (Franklin & Tate, 2008). One possible interpretation of successful ageing is in terms of successful adaptation and the notion that ageing is a developmental process and growth is still possible (Franklin & Tate, 2008; Ouwehand et al., 2007; Kanfer and Ackerman, 2004; Hansson et al., 1997; Abraham & Hansson, 1995). Life-span theories are a particular help when analysing the mechanisms and effects of ageing. They 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). As work represents a significant part of a person's life-span, the life-span approach has a valuable explanatory power in the analysis of the interaction between age and work characteristics (Truxillo et al., 2012).

The life-span theory of Selection, Optimization and Compensation (SOC) proposed originally by Baltes and Baltes (1990) is considered as one of the leading models of successful ageing. It is based on the belief that successful life-span development is a result of an individual's ability to allocate their resource in order to maximise age-related gains and minimise age-related losses (Kooij et al., 2010; Ouwehand et al., 2007; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Hansson et al., 1997; Abraham & Hansson, 1995). SOC suggests that individuals can successfully adapt to age-related changes and changes in the workplace through using three types of personal strategies: selection (e.g. reducing one's range of activities by selecting the most important tasks), optimisation (e.g. improving one's skills through training and development) and compensation (e.g. emphasising on one's strengths to compensate weaknesses) (Abraham & Hansson, 1995). There is good evidence that the use of SOC strategies can enhance workers' performance and well-being and becomes particularly important with age (e.g. Ouwehand et al., 2007; Zacher et al., 2011; Müller et al., 2012a). Thus, allowing and encouraging the use of these individual strategies could be one path for organisations to support their older workers.

Stereotypes and discrimination against older workers

The term "ageism" reflects the process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people based on their age (Inder and Bryson, 2007). Age discrimination was found to be the most widely experienced form of discrimination across Europe (Age UK, 2011). Stereotyping can have both positive and negative consequences (Barnes et al., 2009). Examples of positive stereotypes of older workers are "increased levels of loyalty", "reliability" and "job commitment". Sometimes, as a result of some positive images about older workers, they can be favoured in their access to certain types of work. However, it appears that older workers are most often negatively stereotyped (e.g. Posthuma & Campion, 2008). Recent research indicates that the six of the most common and damaging stereotypes about older workers are that older employees 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).

Negative 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 (Chui et al., 2001). This, in turn, may lead to older workers' withdrawal from the labour market. Many times the effects of age discrimination are hidden and masked by situations such as forced retirement or redundancy. There is good evidence that nearly all negative stereotypes about older workers are unjustified. For instance, it has been revealed that older workers provide longer and more reliable service to their employers, are not less adaptable, have fewer accidents compared to younger workers, often possess complex intellectual capacity, have good customer and interpersonal skills, have good learning capacity and motivation to learn (Inder & Bryson, 2007).

The type and prevalence of age discrimination can vary across types of employers, industries, jobs, countries and can be expressed through certain Human Resource Management strategies and practices (e.g. reduced recruitment and/or reduced training and learning opportunities for older workers) (Inder & Bryson, 2007; Robson & Hansson, 2007; Posthuma & Campion, 2008; Barnes et al., 2009; Van Dalen et al., 2009; CIPD & CMI, 2010). For instance, it is highly likely for older workers with specialist skills in skill shortage areas to be more valued by employers while this tendency does not apply to sectors with lower skills base and no shortage of applicants. Age stereotypes about older workers seem to be particularly strong in certain industries, such as finance, retail, insurance, technology, information services (e.g. Posthuma & Campion,

2008; Robson & Hansson, 2007; CIPD & CMI, 2010). A specific example is the ICT sector, where discrimination against older workers is particularly rampant even in a context of high skills gaps and shortages (AWPA, 2013).

There is growing international awareness of the value of older workers which has contributed to changes in employers' attitudes towards older workers and reduction of the numbers of age-discrimination events. However, recent studies indicate that employers are still not responsive enough to changing these attitudes. Van Dalen and colleagues (2009) conducted a comparative survey in four European countries (Greece, Spain, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom) on employers' attitudes and actions with regard to their ageing workforce. They found that with the exception of those from the United Kingdom, employers did not take any substantial measures to recruit and retain older workers, or to improve their productivity. Furthermore, a survey amongst employment organisations and older employees in the UK has found that only 14% of managers consider their organisation well prepared to cope with the issues caused by the ageing workforce. About 40% of older workers still considered themselves as being discriminated against because of their age (CIPD & CMI, 2010).

The relationships of older workers with their organisations

As organisations play a significant role in shaping one's skills, knowledge, motivation, and social relationships, they are an important social context for individuals. Thus, the quality of the employee-organisation relationship (EOR) and Human Resource Management (HRM) may have critical impact on older workers' well-being and performance (Wang et al., 2012).

EOR theory, based on Social Exchange Theory, the concept of the Norm of Reciprocity, and the Inducements-contribution Model suggests that employees are likely to reciprocate their input in the organisation based on their perception of the extent to which their organisation values them. Overall, if employees are satisfied with what the organisation provides, they will be more willing to reciprocate with their contributions to the organisation (Wang et al., 2012; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2007). Generally, the match between individual and organisational needs is believed to change with age because individuals tend to attach different values to what the employers offer in their different life stages (CEDEFOP, 2010). Therefore, a good match between older workers' needs and organisational needs can potentially support the extension of working lives. EOR can be further operationalised through two related constructs, namely "psychological contract" and "perceived organisational support" (POS). POS refers to an individual's perception of being valued and cared about by the organisation (Eisenberger et al., 1990; Wang et al., 2012). It was found through empirical research that POS is positively related to outcomes such as job attendance, performance, and affective attachment to the organisation (Eisenberger et al., 1990). In samples of older workers Armstrong-Stassen (2008) observed that POS mediated the relationship between training and development practices, hierarchical, and job content plateauing, and workers' intentions to remain in the organisation. The psychological contract is a subjective construct which represents "...an individual's belief regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that focal person and another party" (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994, p246). Among recent studies on the effects of the changes in the psychological contract on older workers, a publication by Bal et al. (2013) reported that the impact of Human Resource Management practices that encourage individual growth and development on older workers' outcomes at organisational level could be facilitated by changing the psychological contract between the worker and the organisation.

Strategic Human Resource Management (HRM) is an important tool for organisations to provide support to their workers. In particular, older workers are likely to prefer organisations which demonstrate their consideration of older workers through their HRM practices (e.g. Wang et al, 2012; Kooij et al., 2010; Barnes et al., 2009; Veth et al, 2011; Armstrong-Stassen, 2008). Fighting negative stereotypes and discrimination against older workers has become increasingly important for many organisations and is well reflected in their HRM strategies. In the last few decades there has been a significant shift in employers' attitudes and strategies towards older

workers from targeting them when labour reductions were required towards supporting the idea of positive ageing and more particularly, the utilization and retention of older workers. A practical indicator of employers' interest and attempts to introduce specific age-management practices is the occurrence of terms, such as "pro-age management", "age-sensitive management", "age-positive management", "age conscious HR policy", etc. The employment of "age-friendly" HRM strategies most of the time is encouraged by changes in the national policies and legislation (e.g. Barnes et al, 2009).

The extent of implementation and the forms of "age-friendly" HRM strategies vary significantly across countries, industrial sectors and organisations. Most examples of successful age-management are derived from the Western countries. Some HRM practices associated with older workers may include reduced working hours, flexible working options, adjusting job roles, refresher training, and extra annual leave and may aim to help older workers maintain their job performance at an acceptable level. Other HRM practices, encouraging older workers to undertake new projects, tasks, and job roles, learn new skills, and mentor/coach others on the job, may have rather a developmental (i.e. associated with growth and learning) than maintenance (i.e. related to maintaining one's status quo at work) effect on older workers and, thus increase their work performance and satisfaction. Furthermore, successful HRM practices may encourage some older workers to remain in the workforce longer and even return to work past retirement (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Barnes et al, 2009; Kooij et al., 2010; Veth et al., 2011; Bal et al., 2013).

Overall, age-related personal concerns have been extensively explored in applied psychology research. Consequently, there is much evidence to suggest that age-related individual changes shape older employees' behaviours and work preferences. Some older workers are likely to develop and apply successful ageing strategies that help them to manage effectively their late career. Employers are becoming increasingly conscious about the need to utilize the potential of their older workers and aware of benefits from using specific Human Resource Management strategies and practices to support and retain older workers. These tendencies are well demonstrated through the recently published HRM literature. However, the levels of implementation of such practices as well as their effect on older workers are still questionable which is partly reflected in the existing negative stereotypes and perceptions about discrimination against older workers.

METHOD

The three research questions formulated in the introductory section of this paper were addressed through a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with older workers and Human Resource managers in organisations in two European member states (one old – the United Kingdom and one new – Bulgaria) and in two languages (English and Bulgarian). Furthermore, we have focused on two industrial sectors – healthcare and information technologies (IT). These sectors were chosen because they are considered amongst the most significant for the European Economy as well as rapidly developing and, consequently, demanding bigger numbers of employees. In addition, the information technology (IT) sector is associated to a highest extent with innovation and the needs of continuous learning and work approaches' adjustment (e.g. Eurofound, 2011).

Sample and procedure

Two types of semi-structured interview guides (one for older workers and one for Human Resource managers) were developed in two languages (English and Bulgarian). Thus, we worked with the total of four interview guides. Both the guides for older workers and HRMs included background information sections as well as questions on the perceptions about older workers, the availability of equality & diversity policies and initiatives in organisations, overall Human Resource strategies and practices. There were also questions about people's opinions on what would help older workers to feel energised and learning at work and why should organisations

engage (or not) with HR practices tailored to older workers. In addition, sets of questions in the interview guides for older workers were focused on the perceived age-related changes in one's overall work capacity, work values and preferences, and approaches to work. The interview guides were validated through pilot interviews with older employees and HR managers from both countries.

A total of 17 employment organisations from both countries and from both industrial sectors were approached directly or indirectly via branch organisations and HR consultancies between September 2013 and January 2014. Organisations were given information about the study and invited to participate through email, phone conversations and/or meetings. They were offered copies of a summarised report with the results after the completion of the study. Ten (10) out of 17 organisations reacted positively (RR = 59%). Six (6) of these organisations were from the healthcare, 2 organisations - from the IT sector and 2 were IT departments in large retail and industrial organisations². We experienced significant difficulties in finding collaborators from this IT sector as most of the contacted larger organisations explained that they had just a few (if any) employees aged 55 or even 50 years and over. The collaboration with the UK healthcare sector organisations required further applying for research permissions through complicated and lengthy procedures. This caused a significant delay in our data collection process particularly with one organisation for which reason the data from the interviews with this organisation were not included in our report. Older workers were invited to participate in the interviews by their organisations through announcements on organisations' intranet and email. People who volunteered participation contacted directly our research team. Finally, 44 interviews (35 with older employees and 9 with Human Resource managers) were conducted in both countries and both sectors between November 2013 and April 2014. All the interviews were individual and most of them were conducted face-to-face on the premises of participants' organisations with just a few interviews over the phone. The duration of each interview was between 30 – 80 minutes.

Most of 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 – anonymised through the application of codes. The transcriptions of the interviews in Bulgarian language were translated into English. All the transcriptions were analysed in two steps – through a qualitative data analysis software (NVivo10) and further in depth analysis.

Participants

We interviewed representatives of 9 organisations. Five (5) of these organisations were from Bulgaria and 4 – from the UK, 5 organisations were from the healthcare and 4 – from the IT sector. All the healthcare organisations (apart from one small) were large size organisations with numbers of employees ranging from almost 1000 to over 3000. All the IT organisations were multinational large organisations with numbers of employees between 1000 and 3000. All the healthcare organisations were from the public sector and all IT organisations were private. In addition, all large healthcare organisations were unionised while none of the IT organisations recognised formally trade unions, and 2 IT organisations had their internal staff associations. In terms of their age profiles, healthcare organisations were characterised by significant proportions of older workers (55+) ranging from 20% to over 50% across organisations. Older workers in the IT sector were represented significantly less as proportions varied between 1, 5% to 12% with prevailing figures around the lower distributional limits. The larger figure (12%) is due to a UK IT organisation which has been recognised as exceptional with its good practices for retaining older workers. The analysis of organisations' gender profile revealed that all healthcare organisations had large numbers of female workers (varying between 60% and over 75% across organisations),

² For the purposes of this study we are going to address these as IT organisations.

while IT organisations were characterised with predominantly male staff (with proportions of male workers between over 50% to about 80%).

A total of 9 HR managers (1 person per organisation) and a total of 35 older workers (3-5 people per organisation) from both sectors (18 from healthcare and 17 from IT) in both countries (19 from Bulgaria and 16 from the UK) were interviewed. 30 of the participants were aged 55 years and over and 5 were 52 years and over. The mean age of the whole sample is 59 with mean age of 60.7 for the healthcare sub-sample and mean age of 57.5 for the IT sub-sample. Most of the interviewees were in middle and upper management jobs with figures of over 50% for the healthcare sector and about 75% for the IT sector. Overall, for both of the sectors and countries most workers (60-70%) had been with their organisations longer than 10 years and many of them for over 20 years. In terms of their job tenure, most (75%) of the IT workers had been in their jobs for 5 to 10 years while most of healthcare workers (61%) had been in the same job for over 10 years.

RESULTS

The empirical results from the interviews are presented below organised in three themes each of which addresses one of our research questions.

Stereotypes about older workers in organisations (What are the perceptions about older workers in their organisations?)

The themes in this section (Table 1) have been identified through a set of direct questions asking both older workers and Human Resource managers about whether and how older workers are different to younger workers. We have also used data obtained indirectly through interviewee's responses to other categories of questions and additional comments.

Table 1: Stereotypes about older workers (compared to younger workers) in organisations

Positive	Negative
Calmer (and more balanced) approach to work	More rigid
More loyal to the organisation (with stronger work ethic, more committed and engaged)	Less (or not) open to innovation (and can have a narrower perspective)/ less likely to suggest new ideas
More consistent, reliable and resilient	Less flexible and adaptive (can be resistant to change)
Better organised (more disciplined and composed)	Less willing (and capable of) learning new things/ need more frequent training to keep on track
More focused on the job itself and its quality; focused on detail	Less (or not) proactive
Capable of making better judgements	Slower
Professionally wiser; more capable of prioritising and planning	Struggling with modern technologies (IT)/ lacking IT skills
More capable of making (difficult) decisions/ handling critical situations; thinking strategically	With a higher risk of poor health
Better networkers (team workers)	Can be more expensive for the organisation
More considerate and empathetic	(Can be) less motivated
(Can be) more influential	(Can be) less educated

Overall, the results demonstrated that age stereotypes exist in organisations and older workers are perceived in both positive and negative terms. Positive stereotypes are mostly related to employees' knowledge and experience, work ethic, social skills, time management, organisation and planning skills, and complex strategic management and leadership skills. Many of these categories are associated with higher level occupations, such as management, leadership and consultant roles. Negative stereotypes tend to refer to areas such as innovation in organisations, flexibility and adaptation to change, proactivity, work motivation, learning, IT skills as well as to workers' (physical) health and qualifications. In addition, sometimes older workers can be seen as more expensive for the organisation compared to younger workers. These findings suggest that older workers would be more likely to experience disadvantages in work environments and roles which emphasise skills in areas in which older workers are stereotyped negatively. In contrast, older workers in organisations and occupations that value skills in areas in which older workers are stereotyped positively, would be more likely to view older age as an advantage in these contexts.

This observation was supported by some of the data about older job applicants' chance to be recruited by organisations. For instance, a male employee from an IT organisation in the United Kingdom said: "Not much I recon. Maybe at the very top, but at the middle levels I can't imagine they take many on". Another interviewee, a female worker from the healthcare sector in Bulgaria, noted: "...they have a chance. Maybe not everywhere, but in particular sectors". In addition, most Human Resource managers shared that their organisations tend to recruit older candidates and redeployed retired people in higher level professional and management roles as well as in areas of skills shortages.

Age-related changes reflected in work behaviours (What, if any, are the perceived age-related changes in people at work?)

The data in this section present older workers self-perceptions about the occurrence of age-related individual changes which are also reflected in their work behaviours. Most of the interviewed older workers admitted directly that there had been changes in their work capacity, motivation, and approach over the years. Even the people (mostly coming from the IT sector in both countries) who initially denied the existence of any age-related individual alterations, indirectly confirmed the presence of some changes in their work behaviours over the years. Only a few interviewees mentioned declining physical and cognitive capacity. However, all interviewees were likely to think that even if such declines occur, they are insignificant and do not have an impact on their job performance. In addition, the effects of the declines in physical ability and some cognitive functions (e.g. memory) are compensated (and overshadowed) by workers' improved knowledge and experience. Older employees cited many positive changes in their work capacity that are rooted in their increased knowledge, professional and life experiences. For instance, older workers are likely to consider themselves as being calmer, wiser, more confident, better decision makers, better communicators, more capable of dealing with difficult situations, and more capable of management and leadership roles than they were in their earlier careers. With regard to their learning capacity, most interviewees perceived themselves as continuously learning (formally or informally) and did not report any significant difficulties. However, for some interviewees the need to catch up with latest technological developments and learn new IT skills was perceived as a challenge. In addition, a few people thought that training and professional development should be a priority for younger rather than older workers. A (male) healthcare worker from Bulgaria said: "I am sending (to training) my younger colleagues. Young people should continue their training, should follow the new things in order to be able to develop themselves professionally".

Another theme which occurred naturally from the interview data is the change in workers' career development attitudes and conceptualisations of career success. There is a shift in career aspirations from progression on the organisational ladder to focusing on job quality and meaning.

For some people this is because in their late career they are likely to feel more confident and see themselves as developed professionals with complex skills and conscious about the qualitative aspects of work. One of our interviewees (male healthcare worker from BG) said: “Of course, it has changed because of the accumulated experience. Some things become more important than others”. Another person (female IT worker from the UK) explained: “I am actually more ambitious to do the job I really enjoy doing and get appreciated for than I am about looking for a promotion or getting at a different level”. For others career progression is not seen as a challenge anymore. A female healthcare worker from the UK shared: “I was at the top 15 years ago and I enjoyed the atmosphere there and the challenge, and I don’t need that so much anymore”. The shift in older workers’ career aspirations seem to be related to changes in future time perspective and work-life balance preferences. A male IT worker from the UK noted: “The shape of my ambition has changed. I have 10-12 years to go”. People in their late career are likely to admit changes in their work-life priorities. These changes may reflect higher health awareness. For instance, one interviewee (male IT worker from the UK) shared: “I challenge people who I think are working too long”. Overall, personal life tends to become more emphasised compared to work for older employees. A Bulgarian IT worker (male) said: “...I am looking forward to another path now – not so much related to work, but a personal one”. However, late career can still be perceived as an opportunity for personal and professional development. A male healthcare worker from the UK shared: “... I think there is more opportunity to get another degree”.

Success in late career seems to be highly associated with work’s meaningfulness and enjoyment. Many interviewees emphasised the importance they attributed to their jobs’ meaningfulness. Perceiving one’s job as meaningful was the main reason for a number of people to delay their retirement or to return to full-time work in their organisations. Work meaningfulness may refer mostly to job content or to have extended interpretations also associated (for example) with opportunities to add social value to one’s job and to transfer knowledge to younger generations of workers. A male healthcare worker from the UK exclaimed: “It’s almost a vocation, but not a job! I think it is important to recognise that it is such a caring and compassionate job...” Asked about what (if anything) makes him feel thriving at work, an interviewee from a British IT organisation replied: “I’d like to think that I have made some step changes, for example in disaster management”. Almost all older workers reported that they had undertaken formal or informal mentor roles usually related to helping younger workers to learn on their jobs and/or transferring knowledge to colleagues through succession planning initiatives. Workers also shared that they often volunteered and appreciated being in these roles because they felt useful, involved, respected and recognised in their organisations. In addition, older workers are likely to increasingly appreciate the opportunities to relate to others in organisations. 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 organisation mostly because he enjoyed the opportunities to communicate with colleagues and that the need of relating to people had increased when he got older. Asked about what would make him feel energised at work, an IT worker from the UK replied: “I want to feel part of the team and the organisation. I like to be in the office, to communicate, banter and be part of things”.

Overall, older workers are likely to perceive the existence of age-related individual changes. This finding confirms previous findings that many of the differences between younger and older workers are rather related to age than generational effects. Furthermore, our interview data demonstrated that many older workers begin using successful ageing strategies that help them to manage effectively their late careers. These strategies are focused on compensating for decreased capabilities through emphasising on age-related developments. For instance, older workers are likely to select carefully and prioritise better their tasks (selection strategy). A British IT worker (male) shared: “I hold fewer things in my head at the same time than I used to, so I do things in sequence rather than parallel”. Another approach is to seek for maximizing one’s capabilities (optimisation strategy). A female healthcare worker from Bulgaria mentioned: “One becomes

more cautious...”. People may also use pragmatic strategies such as asking for help (compensation strategy). In addition, sometimes these strategies are used in combinations. One of our interviewees (a female IT 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, optimisation and compensation strategies). The interviewees who reported the use of successful ageing strategies also reported higher levels of autonomy in their jobs and opportunities to have input in their job design and setting performance standards. This suggests that higher job autonomy may encourage the use of successful ageing strategies in the workplace.

Desired organisational support (What type of work environment and organisational support older workers consider beneficial for their well-being and performance at work?)

In this section we present results from interview data obtained from both older workers and Human Resource managers with regard to the types of organisational support considered by older workers as valuable for their wellbeing and performance at work as well as about the types of organisational support perceived as available for older workers in their organisations. In addition, we offer some insights about older workers’ and Human Resource managers’ views on the engagement of organisations with age-awareness Human Resource strategies and practices. The most frequently occurring themes related to the types organisational support desired by older workers are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Desired organisational support for older workers

Theme	Description
Work meaningfulness	To have access to meaningful and interesting tasks
Social cohesion	To be given opportunities to work in teams and relate to other people in organisation
Knowledge transfer	To be provided with opportunities to mentor/transfer knowledge
Feedback	To be given opportunities for direct and constructive communication/feedback from line managers
Compensation, Recognition and respect	To be provided with access to good benefits systems with bigger focus on healthcare and extra holiday
Work-life balance	To have access to flexible working options
Job autonomy and (fare) performance evaluation	To be given opportunities to contribute to their job design and setting performance standards
Inclusion in decision making	To be heard and given opportunities to contribute to the design of organisational HRM policies and practices
Training and Development	To be provided with (equal) access to training and development opportunities

Overall, the themes presented above correspond to older workers’ perceptions about the age-related changes in their work preferences. Furthermore, interviewees who had access to some of the forms of organisational support they valued were more likely to consider themselves as happy with their wellbeing and performance at work as well as inclined to wish to stay with their organisations past retirement, compared to people who did not feel supported by their organisations. For instance, one of our interviewees (a female IT worker from the UK) said: “Ultimately some people prefer to retire generally because they don’t like what they do or because they are not treated very well. I like what I do and I am treated well”.

Our analysis of the perceived Human Resources management (HRM) strategies and practices (in areas such as recruitment, flexible working options, job design, training and development, performance evaluation, compensation, feedback, recognition and respect, and pre-

and post-retirement options, etc.) available for older workers in their organisations revealed that the availability of relevant practices and older workers' access to them vary significantly across organisations. Even when available, such practices are often not clearly communicated with employees. Although many older workers do not consider themselves as discriminated against, there are some areas (e.g. as recruitment, training and development) in which older workers clearly experience disadvantages compared to younger workers. For instance, although all organisations have abolished compulsory retirement age, older employees in some of the organisations still feel vulnerable to "redundancy rounds". Furthermore, we asked both older workers and Human Resource managers "Why would organisations engage (or not) with HRM practices for older workers?" Results indicated that Human Resource managers were likely to answer mostly referring to the category "This is not an issue". For instance, "The ageing workforce has not hit the market yet" or "Older workers are easier to manage", or "There is no demand". Most Human Resource managers also shared concerns about breaking the anti-discrimination law by using practices for older workers. However, most of the answers given by older workers were likely to refer to a different category - "Lack of awareness". For example, "Organisations do not believe that they can benefit from older workers", "Organisations do not understand the needs of older workers", and "This issue is not communicated enough in the society". Older workers also shared concerns about financial difficulties, high unemployment rates at national levels, and existing age-discrimination. These findings suggest that there is a mismatch of older workers' and Human Resource managers' perceptions about the need of and the rationale behind HRM practices for older workers.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Results from this study reveal that age-stereotypes still exist in organisations and that sometimes these stereotypes may have a negative impact on older workers. Our data confirm previous findings from psychological research that there are some age-related changes in individual capacity, values and approaches that shape older workers' expectations towards the types of work environment and organisational support they want. These expectations are not just towards maintaining one's status quo at work, but also refer to development aspirations. Workers with access to HRM practices they value, are likely to think that there is no need for organisations to follow age-diverse management approaches. In contrast, older workers with limited access to "desired" HRM practices in organisations are likely to consider the implementation of age-diverse management approaches (with particular sensitivity to older workers) as important. Furthermore, there is a need for improved dialogue between organisations and their older workers. This is particularly obvious through the areas of discrepancy between HRMs' and employees' perceptions about the need and availability of good HRM practices.

Based on the insights from this study, we consider it important to continue investigating the discussed themes and particularly the fields of mismatch of organisational support needed and organisational support provided for older workers. Furthermore, it will be valuable to explore in depth cross-cultural, cross-sectorial, cross-occupational, and gender effects through combined qualitative and quantitative approaches.

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