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Research Article

Managers' Perceptions of Older Workers and an Extended Working Life in Sweden -

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ABSTRACT

Raising older workers' participation level is a key objective in many countries. It is important therefore, to deepen the knowledge regarding older workers' work situations.

The objective of the present study was to describe how managers perceived older workers, and an extended working life, in Sweden.

Seven focus groups, with a total of 26 managers, were conducted; with participants coming from municipal care, or from private companies. Data was analyzed using content analysis.

Five categories emerged in the analysis: Work capacity, Education, Technical devices and ergonomics, Organizational and technological changes, and Sustainable and extended working life.

Managers' attitudes range from positive to negative, confirming previous research, and strengthening the evidence. However, managers in the present study emphasized differences between blue and white collar workers' ability to extend working life. Furthermore, these managers thought that there were greater differences between different individuals than between different age groups.

Keywords: Age management; Aging workforce; Managerial attitudes; Sustainable working life; Work capacity

INTRODUCTION

The Nordic countries, and most of the industrialized world, are confronted with aging populations, that are in better health than previous generations [1,2]. In Sweden, people traditionally retire around 65 [3] but from a health perspective, it should be possible for many of them to work longer [4]. The actively working part of the population must, in the near-term future, support the non-working and growing group of aging citizens [5-7]. Raising the participation levels of older workers is, therefore, a key objective in most countries, and it is important to obtain knowledge concerning older workers' work situations. There are many factors that are known to act in favor of a sustainable and extended working life, and an important one is managers' attitudes and perceptions towards aging workers [8-14].

Older employees were perceived by managers as being less effective and greater opponents of changes and flexible performance, than younger workers [10,15,16]. However, the results of a Swedish survey of managers' attitudes to older workers showed that more than half (52%) of employers thought that there was not a big difference between older and younger workers' ability to cope with changes [17]. Studies [18,19] have also shown that managers had negative attitudes towards older workers when it came to believing in their competence; but newer studies showed that managers, to some extent, found their older workers to have a higher competence than younger workers [20]. The results of two surveys of employers' attitudes towards aging workers [18,19] showed that the majority of employers thought that their aging workers had valuable competence, were careful, loyal to the company, rarely took sickness absence, and were particularly suitable for supervising new colleagues. There is additional research showing no performance differences between older and younger workers [21,22]. The biggest negatives managers saw with older workers were the older workers' ability to perform physically demanding work [21] to cope with a high work pace, a heavy work load, or difficult working hours, and adjusting to new technologies [12,20,21,25,31]. Older workers were also seen as being less keen and willing to learn [10,17,19,23] but older workers have been given less access to both external and internal education [14,19].

Of the employers in one of the Swedish studies, 41% reported that it was important to keep their employees until the age 65, but only 14% wanted to keep them for longer [16]. However, in another Swedish study of employers' perception of older workers, they concluded that "it is more about motivation, interest, and personal ability, than about age" [38].

Taken together, it seems as if managers mainly are resistant to older workers, but in recent studies, it seems that a positive change in attitudes among them is underway. However, more research on employers' and managers' attitudes and perceptions towards older workers are needed [24]. The awareness of the likely impact of an aging population on the labor market may have increased, and managers' attitudes towards older workers may have changed, and it is, thus, important to explore managers' attitudes to older workers today. Therefore, the aim of this present qualitative study was to describe how managers perceived older workers, and an extended working life, in Sweden.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A qualitative design was used in order to capture and describe the managers' attitudes. Focus groups were conducted and analyzed using content analysis.

Participants

The study population were 26 first line managers in the south of Sweden, recruited from municipal elderly care, and large private manufacturing and construction companies; thereby including managers' attitudes towards older workers in both the public and private sector, blue- and white-collar professions, and in both female- and male- dominated workplaces. Fourteen of the managers were men, and twelve of them were women, of an age range from 42-70 years old (median 50), managerial experience ranged from two to more than 30 years. The principles of the Helsinki Declaration were followed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The regional ethical review board in Lund, Sweden, approved the study (Dr: 2013:722).

Data collection and Procedure: Contact persons in the organizations were approached via a letter containing information about the study. The contact persons who consented to participate, on their organizations' behalf, handed the information letter to presumptive participants, who gave their consent to participate. Seven focus groups with 3-5 participants from the same organization (three for participants from municipal care, and four for participants from private companies) were conducted in neutral surroundings by the authors. The purpose of each focus group was to start a dialogue between the participants, in which the aim was that participants should stimulate each other to an open discussion within the frame of the study topic. The moderator gave information about the purpose of the study, its estimated duration (approx. and maximum 2 hours),

that the participants could cancel the interview whenever they wanted to, that their statements would not be identifiable to any person, and that everything being said during the session would be audio-taped, transcribed, and treated confidentially. The focus group moderator encouraged participants to talk to each other based on an interview guide. Examples of questions given include: Describe advantages and disadvantages with older workers in your organization? What can contribute to an extended working life for your older workers?

Data Analysis: The analysis was carried out based on a qualitative content analysis. Repeated readings of the interview transcripts were made until an overall idea of the content emerged. Different meaning bearing units were highlighted in relation to the purpose. Condensing and coding the meaning bearing units, getting them grouped into categories to cover the contents of the interviews, followed [25]. The authors continuously discussed the interpretation of the interviews and went back to the transcripts in case of disagreement.

RESULTS

Five categories emerged during the analysis, describing the areas where managers verbalized perceptions and experiences associated with older workers and an extended working life: "Work capacity", "Education", "Technical devices and ergonomics", "Organizational and technological changes" and "A Sustainable and extended working life". The categories are illustrated with quotations identified as Organization (Org) 1-7.

Work Capacity

Many managers expressed that their older workers' work capacity was strengthened by their experience and competence. They could, for example, transfer practical professional skills and act as mentors for younger workers, and for inexperienced workers of all ages. They were especially suitable for this due to their long work experience, their personal security as individuals, and their professional way of acting and handling challenges in working life. Some older workers with profound working life experience were regarded as essential for the company, especially on the white-collar side. A common attitude among the managers was that older workers were loyal and committed to their work organization, their customers, and their colleagues.

"Older workers are much more loyal towards their managers. If there is a need for extra staff, for example on a weekend shift, and I have to call/.../the older worker answers the phone and takes on the shift, whereas the younger worker often turns me down and says/.../call someone else, I am having my day off today" (Organization 7).

Some managers said that workers up to 60 years of age, in general, perform 100 % in terms of production. After this age, a breaking point for blue-collar workers was spoken about, when a need for adjustments arose. This opinion was most prominent among those whose workers have had physically demanding work during the majority of their working life. Managers expressed the necessity for these blue-collar workers to retire at the age of 60-62, due to their bodies being worn-out, for instance, in professions such as assistant nurses, carpenters, and mechanics. Health problems experienced by these older workers were arthrosis, and general pain in neck-shoulder-spine and knee areas. Some managers regarded long-term sick leave to be more frequent among older workers than short-term sick leave. Other reported the opposite, sick-leaves of all sorts were less frequent among older workers. Furthermore, they appreciated older workers not having to stay at home to take care of children,

as their younger colleagues often had to. When it came to quality of work performed, managers perceived some older workers to work at a slower pace, but this was well compensated for by high quality in the outcome, as well as by trustworthy deliveries.

"Well, we work in teams, in general, and nobody would get away with delivering at low quality, one would be told off by their colleagues, be sure of that/.../and frankly, a construction worker, he is worn-out by the age of 61/.../but often stays in the workforce until 65" (Org 1).

Managers verbalized the opinion that white-collar workers stay hungry for new tasks all through working life, but also that, as a group, older white-collar workers tend to have a preference for taking on a roll as a specialist in their specific field, rather than taking on organizing major new projects within the organization. Among the group of blue-collar workers, managers perceived a feeling of reluctance for additional and more complex working tasks that increasingly have been taken on. Some of the managers thought that many of their older workers would prefer going back to their traditional working tasks, the core of their work, if they could. Additionally, some older workers were perceived as preferring working shorter hours more frequently (<5h), instead of longer shifts (>8h). In the white-collar sector, older workers were spoken of as being capable of working as hard and for as many hours as the rest of the labor force.

"In the group of older white-collar professionals, I experience a preference amongst the ones over 60 for taking on specialist roles due to the cause of wanting to leave working tasks that contains comprehensive responsibilities within the organization. The person is less hungry for challenges and more in favor of taking on work closer to the core of their work performance" (Org 4).

Some older workers benefitted from their work experience in times of high work load, or challenging work situations, while others were regarded as less capable of handling present high demands for efficiency in production. Managers discussed that over the last 10 years, the workload for all workers, regardless of position and area, has increased, and further, that this development and demand for higher efficiency, especially in the field of geriatric home-care, and on the industrial floor, had put extra strain, especially on their older workers, giving them less time for recovery in between tasks during a shift. Managers expressed various opinions regarding older workers' capacity to handle stress, with the most common opinion being that it comes down to individual personalities and coping strategies of handling challenges in working life, rather than being a matter of age.

"I can perceive a tendency towards not liking new working tasks; you are less open to accepting them. When new work tasks are being introduced, especially those containing a certain level of complexity and being out of the usual routine, my older workers cannot handle the situation" (Org 6).

Education

Many managers stated that they, in general, made no difference between age-groups when it came to offering education. Contrarily, many managers also stated that on an operative level, they change their way of acting when offering an older worker education. They verbalized that they would rather spend education for workers with more years left in working life, for economic reasons. A great deal of the managers had the opinion that somewhere around the age of 60, the older workers in general became less motivated for receiving

education than the rest of the workforce, but additionally emphasized that the individual older worker's attitudes and interests mattered most, and that it depended more on the individual's character than age.

"We do not offer education to our employees according to chronological age, this is not a selection criteria/.../experience is an asset, but knowledge is to be considered as constantly getting out of date. That is the way it is. We spend most of our educational budget on the workforce with the most years left in working life" (Org 2).

Technical devices and ergonomics

Overall, managers agreed that all workers regardless of age were expected to use technical devices and ergonomic techniques in their daily work. They highlighted that they did not take the age into account when needs for utilities and implementation of ergonomics came up. Opinions differed among the managers regarding perception of compliance and interest in technical devices and ergonomics among older workers. Some found older workers reluctant, and said that they preferred to do as they had always done to a wider extent than younger workers. Sometimes, this could cause a cultural conflict between the older members of a team and the younger workers with a fresh education, with a more positive attitude towards the benefits of using technical devices and ergonomics. Others said that their older workers naturally felt the need for using utilities and correct ergonomics due to their recognition of their physical limits, if present. The most common attitude expressed was that the older workers' attitudes and interests mattered most and, once again, depended more on the individual's character than age.

"There is an attitude amongst the older members of a team towards others that they should work without using technical devices. However, it can also be regarded as a matter of personality, because there are also younger workers less keen on using technical devices, as well as older workers having to turn to the help of lifting devices due to pain and feelings of not having the physical strength to manage without/.../maybe the formal education of the older workers focused little on ergonomics, in comparison with today's education programs" (Org 7).

Organizational and technological changes

The majority of the managers did not think that older workers had difficulties with organizational changes. When new information and communications technology systems (ICT) were introduced, some of their older workers needed more time to implement them in their daily work, and moreover needed a skilled tutor to turn to for a longer period of time in comparison with other workers. They also expressed that it often proved to be a matter of interest, and former experience of using technology, for example cell phones in private life, rather than age. The compliance with using and benefitting from technical advances also was correlated to the older workers' level of education. On the other hand, some managers did experience older workers leaving the workplace before normative retirement age due to changes within the organization, such as the introduction of new ICT-based systems. Some also regarded workers over 55 as being less willing to adapt to other organizational changes, such as changing their physical workplace and collegial setting. Managers referenced this to their perception that older workers depend greatly on familiar collegial relationships, and environmental settings, to feel comfortable and secure at work. They also regarded older workers

as being less flexible during organizational changes than other age groups, but added that the same group of older workers later on could express positive experiences from reorganizations.

"I have not seen anybody having to leave their employment due to new technology being introduced; it has only taken them a little longer to learn it" (Org 3).

"Furthermore, I think it is also a matter of former education, take the ones over 50 with less formal education on the white-collar side in comparison with white-collar workers with formal training, as for example engineers, the latter managing the implementation process when computers were introduced at a much higher speed" (Org 1).

"Changes within the organization can be troublesome for older workers/.../it is harder for elders to handle changes that affect their security in comparison with when they were 25" (Org 7).

Sustainable and extended working life

In some of the managers' views, the possibility of putting older workers in another position within the organization, and giving them more flexibility in work tasks, could contribute to a longer working life. Simultaneously, they expressed that this option was possible only for a few individuals usually, because it would lead to extra strain on the remaining workers, and hence to a decline in production. They said that every worker has to be able to produce at 100%, or leave, due to present demands of efficiency within the organizations. Until about five to seven years ago, there were opportunities to offer part-time or contractual pensions to employees over 60, but these possibilities often no longer exist due to new company policies. Many managers stated that being able to offer part-time work to their older workers would benefit both parties. This applies mainly to employees in the blue-collar sector; in white-collar professions, a slightly greater flexibility was perceived, older white-collar workers could continue as a specialist, act as a support for younger managers, etc.

The majority of managers perceived that the effects of an extended working life differed for blue-collar and white-collar workers. For many blue-collar workers, the years after 60 until normative retirement age are a struggle, due to bodily decline. The managers experienced that their blue-collar-workers were usually looking forward to retirement and hence, had no interest in staying active in the workforce. If they had to, many managers would predict an increase in early retirements and long-term sick leaves among this group of employees, or the negative effect of having unmotivated workers staying on only for economic reasons. On the white-collar side, they did not see these effects, due to their workers not needing to physically labor. Having this group active after normative retirement age would, rather, have the positive effect of managers getting access to a larger work force with experience that could be used as specialists, mentors, and advisors. On the white-collar-side, managers saw no other challenges than the aging workers' own motivations for an extended working life lasting as long as they remained in good general health. Aging workers in the white-collar professions were perceived by their managers as having full work capacity many years after 60, and beyond normative retirement age, as long as they themselves felt it meaningful to keep working, and as long as their cognitive functions were intact.

"Five to seven years ago, positions or alternative activities were made up/constructed within the workplace/.../in times of solid economy for the organization it works well on everybody's behalf, but in a slender organization, this is not possible/.../at the age of 65,

if only we could offer more possibilities like part-time or alternative work tasks” (Org 7).

“And there is a conflict and a dilemma for us managers that we cannot take on an employee over the age of 67 in a full time position if he/she only can work 6 h/day. We have not come that far in our ability to adjust our schedule and working tasks. I had quite a lot of cooperation with the Swedish Work Environment Authority, and have heard their suggestions on how to adjust, but I cannot manage it today, maybe in the future” (Org 5).

“On the blue-collar side, it would be disastrous/.../the workers bodies are not fit enough to cope with the physically heavy work demands” (Org 2).

On the blue-collar-side, major challenges with an extended working life were summarized as: how to make unmotivated workers over 65 produce at 100 % with their declining health, present presumed low economic status, and fear of facing an even worse financial situation after retirement. The managers stated that they had the utilities they needed to offer a lower physical load during working time thorough technical devices, but clearly pointed out their organizations’ need of tools to prevent stress symptoms of a psychosocial character within this group of employees.

Quite a few managers expressed that they saw a contradiction between keeping older workers in the workforce after normative retirement age, and the large number of unemployed in the rest of the workforce, with special reference to the younger population today struggling to enter the workforce.

“We will have to deal with individuals in the workforce over the age of 65, or more. That is the reality. We will have to face empowering them to deliver and function with their ill-health, presumed bad economic situation, and low income prospects after retirement. We do have access to technical devices and they are developing, but the tools and strategies for facing the psychosocial and somatic aspects-how can we as managers support our workers in this field?” (Org 6).

“Their work capacity is declining. They are slowing down and we have to adjust the tasks for some, and we can do this to a certain extent, but there is a breaking point... We are here for a reason and that is to produce and deliver” (Org 2).

DISCUSSION

Principal results

Managers in the present study verbalized many attitudes regarding older workers’ work capacity, such as that their profound experience is essential for the organization, that they are loyal, and having trustworthy deliveries with high quality in their production. Managers said that they made no difference between age-groups when it came to offering education, but added that they preferred to spend education on the workers with the most years left in working life. Some of the managers perceived their older workers as being less motivated for participating in education. Opinions differed regarding perception of compliance and interest in using technical devices and ergonomics among their older workers. In general, the managers did not experience older workers as being less compliant with changes, except for changes connected to new technology. Generally, the results showed that managers perceived greater differences between persons than between different age groups. The managers perceived

no problems for white-collar, but saw problems for blue-collar, workers working beyond normative retirement age. Transfer within the workplace, offering alternative work tasks and/or part-time jobs were possibilities that could contribute to an extended working life.

Strengths and limitations of the present study

In the present study, focus group interviews were used to capture different perspectives through interactive discussions supported by open questions. The aim was to recruit participants, i.e. managers, heterogeneous in age, gender, ethnicity, and professional and leadership experience, in order to deepen and broaden the discussions. These mentioned factors were represented among the participants, except ethnicity, due to all the managers being Swedish. In future studies, managers with different nationalities and experiences from leadership in other work life settings could strengthen the results. A strength during the analyzing process was that the authors had different professions and, hence, work life experiences. A major weakness of the present study is its broad focus. The credibility, transferability, as well as the dependability aspects could benefit from making a similar study with managers and employees in a more specific setting (for example older managers attitudes towards older workers in blue-collar female- dominated workplaces). Furthermore, attitudes are hypothetical and hard to capture. When asked, the managers are most likely to answer correctly according to conventions, but may well act differently on a daily basis, which was considered during the data collection and analyzing process.

The results in relation to other studies

Previous studies [15-19,21,23] showed that employers perceived that older workers in general had valuable competence, took great responsibility, were loyal, and were not taking sickness absences. The results of the present study confirm those results and strengthen the evidence.

The findings of the present study showed that the managers perceived older workers as being less keen to learn new things, and less keen to adjust to technological changes. There is, however, no support in the literature that older workers are less keen, or less motivated to learn new things, or more resistant in handling technological changes [26].

The most interesting result of the present study was that the managers perceived no problems for white-collar, but did for blue-collar, workers working beyond normative retirement age (65 years). They saw performance differences between older blue- and white-collar workers, but no differences in performance between younger and older white-collar workers. The findings for white-collar workers are in line with the findings of another study (Hovbrandt, Håkansson, Carlsson, Albin, and Nilsson. In manuscript) of mainly white collar workers who were working beyond the age of 65, who were challenged by their work tasks and were still working because they enjoyed it.

The managers also described older blue-collar workers, especially construction workers and assistant nurses, as physically worn-out. According to previous studies, older blue-collar workers are worn-out by hard work and are not, for health reasons, able to work until 67 [3], which is the statutory retirement age in Sweden. However, early retirement in this group had decreased between 2004 and 2011, probably mostly because of economic incentives [27]. This means that blue collar workers are forced to work longer, even though they are worn-out, to obtain a decent living situation.

On the other hand, white-collar workers have better health than blue-collar workers [28] but early retirement in this group has increased between 2004 and 2011 [27]. Our conclusion is that, even though they are able to work longer, they do not want to do it, and they have the financial ability to choose not to.

In general, the managers in the present study perceived greater differences between individuals than between different age groups. This is in line with the results of another Swedish study [17] and the conclusion in the World Labour Report [29] which stated “the average difference in performance between age groups is typically significantly less than the variation within each age group” (p.47). Furthermore, more than one other study have come to the conclusion that work capacity is not related to age, but instead to physical, mental, environmental, and psychosocial factors [10,12,14,26,30-32]. Based on this, it seems that the need of good working conditions, i.e. a good fit between work requirements (content and environment), and the ability of the individual, is important throughout the working life to maintain a sustainable working life for all.

Implications and future research

Actions will have to take place to change managers' negative attitudes to older workers. Managers will also need to be persuaded that older workers are an investment, rather than a barrier. One such action could be increasing knowledge through information diffusion, or via education.

Managers in the present study also stressed the importance of being able to offer older workers part-time work. Part-time work could enable more people to work longer, even if they have physically and mentally demanding work. Furthermore, part-time work could make it possible for older workers to have the time and energy to do things outside the workplace, such as traveling, and socializing with friends (Hovbrandt, Nilsson, Carlsson, Albin, Hakansson. In manuscript), which are self-care activities that may prolong working life.

Workplace strategy interventions, such as adaptations in working-hours, time schedule, physical- and mental workload, putting people in other positions, and educational offerings, with an overall aim of obtaining balance between work capacity and the demands of delivery in production, but also balance between work and private life must take place to extend the older worker's working life while considering his/her individual needs and assets.

More knowledge is needed regarding the factors behind attitudes towards older workers on societal, organizational, and individual levels, and about the effects of age management interventions.

CONCLUSIONS

Managers' attitudes range from positive to negative, confirming previous research and strengthening the evidence. However, what's new in the present study is that the managers emphasized the differences between blue- and white-collar workers. Furthermore, they perceived greater differences between different individuals than between different age groups.

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