



Employers' Attitudes Toward Older Workers and Obstacles and Opportunities for the Older Unemployed to Reenter Working Life

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed at identifying the attitude-related barriers that older unemployed, job-seeking workers (50+) face when they endeavor to reenter the labor market and to investigate employers' attitudes and perceptions of older workers. Two studies were conducted. In study 1, interviews were undertaken with 26 unemployed persons and 24 representatives of other stakeholders, including social partners and officials representing the Social Insurance Agency (FK) and the Public Employment Service (AF). In study 2, the attitudes among private sector employers were studied by carrying out a questionnaire survey (N = 147). The interview results showed that many unemployed job seekers had experienced negative age-related attitudes among employers. This observation was supported by other stakeholders. Perceived attitudes to older workers and lack of updated competence were considered crucial. The questionnaire study showed a mixed picture concerning employer attitudes. There was a statistical difference between older (>50 years) and younger employers; older employers believed that older women wanted competence development to a greater extent. There was also a significant difference between female and male employers' opinions; female employers, in particular the older ones, assessed that older women wished competence development to a greater extent. These differences were not found with respect to views on older men. About half (52%) of the employers had the opinion that there was no difference between older and younger employees with respect to the ability to cope with changes or learning new things. However, younger female employers (but not older female employers) considered that older employees had greater difficulties with changes or learning new things. It is concluded that negative attitudes to older workers with respect to competence development tend to be most common among younger employers.

KEY WORDS

Aging / attitudes / employability / older workers / unemployment / employers

Introduction

In many countries around the world, including the EU member states, there is a demographic upcoming crisis that is often said to be a threat to the welfare systems. In a European perspective, Sweden has a comparatively high work participation in the

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older population: 70.5% of Swedish men and women between 55 and 64 years of age are still working (Eurostat 2011). Nevertheless, it is emphasized that also in Sweden it will be necessary that more individuals continue working up to and after official pension age, which is currently 61 years (optional 67 years). In this situation, it is important to analyze groups of older people who do not work but who may wish to do so: what prevents them from reentering the labor market after having been made redundant or after long-term sick leave?

In the literature, a main focus has been on identification of the factors that make a person employable and on the concept of employability. According to the European Commission, "Employability is generally understood as the capacity for people to be employed and relates to the adequacy of their skills but also to incentives and opportunities offered to individuals to seek employment" (CEC 1997). However, the concept "employability" does not have a universally accepted definition. It has mostly been used to describe an individual's capacity to keep or obtain employment, from a social and psychological perspective (e.g., Fugate et al. 2004, Garsten and Jacobsson 2004). The following dimensions of employability have been suggested by van der Heijde and van der Heijden (2005): occupational expertise, anticipation and optimization, personal flexibility, corporate sense, and balance. They define employability at the individual level as "the continuously fulfilling, acquiring or creating of work through the optimal use of competences."

There is a distinction to be made between employability in this sense and how employability is perceived by the individual. For this reason, Berntson (2008) applied an alternative definition: "Employability refers to an individual's perception of his or her possibilities of getting new, equal, or better employment." Perceived employability in a general population is positively related to and predicts self-efficacy, and it has effects on a person's health and well-being (Berntson and Marklund 2007). Berntson (2008) concluded that employability is not primarily a self-evaluation, but that it depends on individual as well as situational factors.

Garsten and Jacobsson (2004) put forward that the discourse on employability is a consequence of the market orientation in society. This has put pressure on individuals to be adaptable to market needs and to engage in life-long learning. Both the EU and the OECD focus on the individual and his or her characteristics and attitudinal changes besides changes in supporting systems and structures (Jacobsson 2004).

There are experiences and research studies that indicate that there are negative stereotypes about older people and their work that impair older people's chances to get and keep their jobs (SOU 2012:28). What are the barriers that older workers (50+) face when they endeavor to remain in or to reenter the labor market? This question was addressed in a study of the effects of the demographic developments on the Swedish labor market, commissioned by the Swedish government to the National Institute for Working Life (Kedefors 2007). It was concluded that barriers could be grouped into four main categories: (a) rules and regulations, (b) health related, (c) competence related, (d) attitude related (Holmer et al. 2010). Among the situational factors that affect employability, attitudes among employers were found crucial. Negative attitudes toward older workers in general may make it difficult for an older job-seeking person to remain employable, whereas the opposite may be true if an employer has a positive attitude, which for instance involves giving older applicants a chance by inviting them to job interviews. Not giving older applicants a fair chance when they apply for a job may in fact

violate the EU directive “for equal treatment in employment and occupation” (Council Directive 2000), addressing both direct and indirect age discrimination in working life.

It is a misconception that employers are in general resentful with respect to older workers; rather, the pattern is more complicated. In the United Kingdom, employers were found to hold balanced views on older workers, valuing factors such as experience, reliability, productivity, and creativity (Taylor and Walker 1998). In a comparison between employers’ attitudes and actions regarding the position of older workers in four different European countries, it was noted that there was a lack of measures to recruit and retain older workers; only in the United Kingdom employers seemed to recognize older workers as a valuable asset (Van Dalen et al. 2009). In the Netherlands, employers held favorable attitudes toward older workers with respect to their perceived productivity and reliability (Henkens 2005). However, in these studies, there was also a conception among employers that older workers were difficult to train, that they resisted technological change (United Kingdom), and that they showed a lack of adaptability and resistance to learn new things (the Netherlands). According to the Swedish National Social Insurance Board (2001), about 50% of Swedish employers thought that younger people were better educated and that older ones were more resistant to changes at the workplace; about 20% thought that younger people were more productive. Employers in male-dominated workplaces were more negative to older workers in all three respects compared with workplaces with a more equal age structure or that were dominated by women.

It is interesting to compare results from scientific studies with respect to the performance of older workers to the age stereotypes that color how older workers are in fact managed and received in working life. The term stereotype refers to generalized beliefs about members of a group (e.g., older workers). The human being is affected by age and aging in many ways, impairing the possibility of many individuals to continue working up to, or above, normal pension age. The fact that there are age-related physiological and cognitive changes, which affect all human beings, does, however, not imply that there is a general relationship between age and performance at work (Greller and Simpson 1999, Ilmarinen 2006, Waldman and Avolio 1986). Salthouse (1997) concluded that the loss of cognitive function, and a negative influence thereof on job performance, may be balanced by a positive relationship between age, experience, and job performance. Older workers often show better performance than younger ones due to, e.g., lower turnover, lower absenteeism, higher work satisfaction, and higher commitment. In fact, different combinations of knowledge demands and information processing demands may entail positive, negative, or no relationship at all with age (Warr 1994). Moreover, work ability may be sustained among older workers by appropriate action at the workplace level (Ilmarinen 1996).

Since competence factors have been found to present severe barriers for situational employability, employees, regardless of age, should not be valued according to the “depreciation” model but should be seen as long-lasting valuable assets (Yeats et al. 2000).

How is age constructed in an organization? There are relations between employers’ attitudes toward older workers and how the attitudes affect practices. Outcomes such as recruitment, training, and promotion practices have been found to be associated with attitudes regarding, e.g., perceived trainability, creativity, cautiousness, and physical ability of the older workers (Taylor and Walker 1998). Chiu et al. (2001), who stud-



ied attitudes of employers in the United Kingdom and in Hong Kong, noted that older respondents tended to have a more positive attitude than did younger ones with respect to the adaptability and work effectiveness of older workers. Stereotypical beliefs affected employers' attitudes toward retention, training, and promotion of older workers. Also in the Netherlands, it was found that managers who were older and in more frequent contact with older employees tended to hold more positive views; they also supported early retirement more strongly (Henkens 2005). It may well be so that employers' attitudes toward older workers are colored by their past exposure to older workers.

There is limited support for a notion that the type of organization influences the attitudes toward older workers, although Henkens (2005) found that organizations that had a large proportion of highly educated workers tended to be more positive to older employees. Attitudes were in general more negative in the local governmental than in other sectors. In a study of 905 managers in public service, Nilsson (2011) found that most respondents adhered to the stereotypes that older people are slower, are less open for change, and have lower competence and that they are negative to adoption of new technologies. On the other hand, positive values expressed included that the older employees were more careful and that they had attained a life competence that made them apt to be supportive to younger employees and to new recruits.

The present studies

A majority of previous studies undertaken relevant to the concept of aging and work participation concern the continued employability of a person who has a job already, whereas relatively few concern specifically the situation of the unemployed and their chance to reenter and to remain active in the workforce. Only little has been published on the specific dimension added by age in this context. The aims of the current studies were to evaluate the attitude-related barriers that older unemployed, job-seeking workers (50+) face when they endeavor to reenter the labor market (study 1) and to investigate employers' attitudes and perceptions of older workers (study 2).

Materials and methods

Study 1: Interview study

The aim of this investigation was to identify perceived barriers hampering the possibilities to reenter working life for persons above 50 years of age, after having been made redundant. An interview study was undertaken with 26 problem owners (unemployed persons) over the age of 50 and 24 representatives of other stakeholders, including social partners and officials representing the Swedish FK and the Swedish AF. Among the problem owners, there were 9 women and 17 men. The average age was 58 years. Among the stakeholder representatives there were 14 women and 10 men. Their average age was 46 years.

The problem owners and actors were picked on the basis of availability by the task force officials from the FK and AF and the social partners. Every prospective interviewee was called up earlier by the interviewer and was informed about the survey.

Anonymity was granted. If the respondent agreed to participate, he or she chose the place for an interview. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted about 2 hours. The interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. Directly after completion, the verbatim transcripts were analyzed. Subject-specific background data and responses to the questionnaire were written down and edited anonymously into an Excel spreadsheet. In the present analysis, we focused on attitude-related factors and competence.

Study 2: Employers' attitudes and perceptions of older workers

The aim in the second study was to investigate employers' attitudes and perceptions of older workers, especially with regard to competence development, factors that may influence older workers' possibilities to stay at work, and their general attitude toward older workers.

Procedure and participants

The employers were selected through a random sample procedure from the member register of the Swedish Confederation of Enterprise (a private sector employer organization) in the southwest part of Sweden. The participants were listed in the register as employer representatives. They had high positions in the companies (CEO, personnel managers, etc.). The participants responded to a web-based questionnaire. Each employer received an e-mail that consisted of information about the study and also an Internet link to the web page where they could access the questionnaire. In the e-mails, the purpose of the survey was explained and confidentiality guaranteed. As the employers logged onto the web page, an authorization check was performed, and the employer's answers were stored in a database where the subjects were anonymous, i.e., it was not possible to track which subject had answered what questionnaire. The questionnaire was accessible for a period of 3 weeks, and three reminder e-mails were sent.

A sample total of 147 employers responded to the web survey. The most frequent branches were trade, manufacturing, construction, and transport. The average age among the employers responding was 47.8 years ($SD = 9.5$). Of this sample, 50 participants were women and 97 were men. For further analysis, the employers were divided into subgroups of age and sex (see Table 1).

The average age among employees in the companies was 40.3 years ($SD = 5.9$). There was a large variation in terms of the number of employed women and men. Approximately 55% had fewer than 10 female employees and about 5% had more than 100 female employees; 23% of the companies had fewer than 10 men and about

Table 1 Employers (respondents to questionnaire) divided into age and sex categories.

	Younger than 50 years	50 years or older
Women	$N = 25$	$N = 25$
Men	$N = 54$	$N = 43$



8% had more than 100 men employed. This indicates that respondents in the survey represented male-dominated as well as female-dominated workplaces.

Measures

In the current study, we focused on employers' attitudes toward older workers in the private sector. This study was part of a larger study about older workers. The survey questions not addressed here concerned various demographic data, ability to individualize tasks, pension, etc.; thus, some survey questions were not primarily related to the aim of the current study. Here we focused on general attitudes toward older workers (open-ended question, i.e., the employer answers the questions in his or her own words), if the company had employed older workers in the past 2 years (workers' age was divided into three categories, plus the response "have not employed any 50+"), competence development and retraining (e.g., do older workers, men and women, want competence development; five-point scale), and the most common reasons for older workers to leave work before age 65 (approximately 15 alternatives, where a maximum of 3 alternatives could be marked such as "inadequate competence," "physical illness," "mental illness," "sufficiently financially independent to leave working life early," and "family and spare time interests"). It was also possible to write comments to several questions.

Analysis

Data management and analysis was performed using the statistical software program SPSS 18.0. For comparisons between different groups, the Mann-Whitney U-test and Kruskal-Wallis test (including pairwise comparisons) were used. Nonparametric statistics were used because of non-normally distributed variables and scales of measurement. The level of significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Results

Study I: Interview study

General attitudes

There were many reports from the unemployed interviewees and other stakeholders that negative attitudes were common, not only among employers, but in governmental agencies as well. Stakeholders of different backgrounds had similar experiences of how older applicants could be treated, sometimes in a wider context. This may be illustrated by quotes from two of the interviews:

"Older people disappear often in organizational restructuring, new owners. They become redundant – don't fix new supervisors. Companies have policies, they may want to rejuvenate, find older employees not enough flexible, don't take competence into account. When

there are structural changes, job seekers with odd names, pregnant women, older people are marginalized. When they employ people they have a picture for whom they are looking, and applications from older people are not read. I have heard: 'we were looking for a younger person'. Women are never in their primes: they get children, or they have children, or the children have moved out, and then they're too old.' (AF)

"Companies have said that they have employed 50+, and they were not satisfied. Barriers are lower education, old education, not being new and fresh. The asset is experience, but it's not valued. Employers have sacked older people since they are aged, tired, and approaching pension age; this they tell the employees directly, but not when a trade union representative is present. There is no acceptance to become older. They prefer a younger person, that's standard." (trade union)

Some job seekers had the experience that many recruiting companies did not explicitly want people over age 50 and that there were personal attitudes, sometimes related to the age and sex of the interviewing person, that played a role.

"You feel attitudes clearly. In job interviews the interviewer is 30-35 who feel threatened from older people. I have talked to two supervisors, one my age, one younger. The younger one felt threatened, whereas the older one fought for me. I was the same when I was that age, when I employed people." (unemployed, 57, male)

Negative attitudes were also met in governmental agencies, for instance in the Swedish AF. Job seekers, social partners, and other actors had all perceived negative attitudes toward the 50+ not only among employers and AF officials but also among recruiting officials in the temporary work agencies. The attitudes perceived were both explicit and implicit.

"Job counselors have been arrogant, nonchalant, they don't care, when I was there the counselor had his feet on the table and talked private matters on the phone. Age is a barrier." (unemployed, 63, male)

Negative attitudes among officials of agencies may be colored by past experiences with finding jobs for older applicants: hence the job-seeking person tends to be seen and met not as an individual, but as a member of the 50+ age group.

In many cases, negative experiences had made unemployed interviewees develop a view that they were no longer employable and a negative attitude to work.

"You don't have the tools – there are no openings for you to come back, there are no positions waiting for you. People who have been unemployed for a long time don't consider themselves employable, they think so, even if there is no reason for it." (FK)

"You can read in an ad that they are looking for younger people, you get a feeling that 60 years is being too old for employers. No one replies; I have not been interviewed. I write down my age, I think that I could get a job also as an older person. You are motivated because you have to live, you need money. In the beginning it was easy and I was ambitious, but now that I have applied for jobs and have not been called to interview, then optimism is fading, you lose competence and get older. There are attitudes among employers." (unemployed 60, male)



Competence

In the study, respondents were asked if they had experienced competence-related barriers that hampered return to work. Almost half of the respondents thought that the development in working life was such that continued education was a must in order for the workforce to stay employable. Low competence influenced the perceived employability of the unemployed. It was found that the most common aspect highlighted by all groups of respondents was a lack of updated technical abilities, particularly concerning operation of computers, and lack of familiarity with currently used computer programs. It was found that the generational aspect played an important role among those over 50 with respect to e-skills.

“Employers have declared that it is a problem if you are not familiar with computers. Older people are not enough used to operating computers. It is common that they don’t know computers.” (AF)

“Education to-day is perishable. Trades that used to exist have disappeared. I’m educated in the CAD system, but now there are different things – technology has changed.” (unemployed 57, male)

To some extent, competence barriers tended to be a generation problem; older interviewees often showed an apprehension to learn new technologies. Both the unemployed and the actors expressed that digital illiteracy was a major problem for an older labor force when it came to understanding and using new information and communication technologies. There were reports indicating that there had not been enough competence development in order to ascertain employability:

“It is up to the individual to see to that you are updated, that you take responsibility for your own competence development. There are agreements about performance appraisal talks; that’s good. It focuses the individual and his or her responsibility.” (employer representative)

But if the employee is not articulate enough about his or her needs, there is an obvious risk that no competence development takes place. Sometimes employers may not provide the resources required. And if an older person wishes to take courses at the university, there are no opportunities to receive the state subsidies or loans that younger persons are granted.

“You cannot participate in courses since you have to pay for it yourself. And you are not entitled to unemployment subsidies if you study. Lack of competence for the unemployed, you may have commenced working immediately after upper secondary, you have experience, but no papers that show your competence; most people wish to study but they cannot do so since they have to pay for it themselves.” (FK)

Attitudes concerning seniors’ capability and willingness to learn new skills were highlighted by some respondents (job seekers and actors alike). Representatives of the social partners had the experience that employers held that older people were not as adaptable to change as younger colleagues. They were also considered less interested

to learn new things than younger people, which implied that they were not taking advantage of offers to develop their competence.

“Techniques are difficult, older people have problems to change. New programs, technical developments, it may look hard. It’s not a reason to give in, but it may be causing sick leave. It is a question of attitudes with the individual, you must be given time to adapt, might be difficult.” (trade union)

Comments and conclusions

In conclusion, competence- and attitude-related barriers were highlighted by a majority of interviewees, older unemployed, and other stakeholders as well. There were many reports that employers were perceived resentful with respect to employment of older jobseekers, because of alleged lack of competence, not being flexible, and afraid of new technologies. Such experiences tended to be negatively related to the perceived employability of the older jobseekers.

Some observations made in study 1 concerned perceived attitudes of employers with respect to

- providing access to competence development
- characteristics of the interviewer in relation to the job applicant
- views on flexibility and willingness to learn new things.

These observations were further addressed in study 2.

Study 2: Employers’ attitudes and perceptions of older workers

Recruitment of older workers

As to the employment of older employees, 54% of the employers answered that they had employed people aged 50–59 years in the past 2 years. Approximately 11% said that they employed new staff people in the age group 60–65 years in the past 2 years.

General attitudes toward older workers

At the end of the questionnaire, the employers had the possibility to express general attitudes concerning older employees. Employer attitudes as a whole give a somewhat ambiguous picture, but a majority of the answers were largely positive. Some quotations (divided into negative, neutral, and positive attitudes) illustrate this:

Negative attitudes:

Older workers ...

“... find it hard to learn new things and think they know best in every situation”

“... are rarely interested in competence development, are less educated and are less interested”



“... become a problem in times of change”

“... can't cope with a high work pace, a heavy workload, difficult working hours, and working evenings and weekends”

Neutral attitudes:

Older workers ...

“... are not in focus as such. We look at the professional competence we need and that the person is good for the team”

“... highlight the need for active policies, offering de-escalation together with competence transference to the younger employees”

“It is more about motivation, interest and personal ability, than about age. It is good to have a mix of ages in the company”

Positive attitudes:

Older workers ...

“... are a bank of knowledge of immense importance for the company”

“... have great competence which is important to take advantage of”

“... take a greater responsibility for the company, are loyal and rarely sick and are very motivated to work”

“... has a lot of work related experience and knowledge that is very important for the company”

“... possess great values and a great portion of informal knowledge”

“... they have life experience”

Competence development and retraining

According to the survey, competence development is seldom targeted at a specific age group, but can rather be seen as driven by the workers' needs. Almost 90% responded that only little training specifically aimed at older employees had been carried out over the past 2 years. This is reflected in the following quotes:

“All competence development aims at enabling employees to work, not because of age, but according to need”

“No targeted competence development for 50 years or older, the same for all staff”

“There is no need to make a difference because age”

“Competence development is given regardless of age.”

Regarding the employers' opinion if older workers (women and men, respectively) wanted competence development, the results indicated no major differences between preferences of women and men. Approximately 20% of the employers answered that older workers (both women and men) wanted competence development to a large extent.

The employers were then categorized into different groups. First, employers were categorized into age: those who were aged 50 years or older and employers who were younger than 50 years. The results were as follows.

- There was no difference between older and younger employer's opinions regarding men's (workers) preferences about competence development. As regards women's (workers) preferences about competence development, there was a significant difference between older and younger employers' opinions (standardized test statistic = 2.11, $p < 0.05$); older employers assessed that older women wished competence development to a greater extent.

When the employers were divided according to sexes the results showed:

- There was no difference between female and male employer's opinions regarding men's (workers) preferences about competence development. However, as regards women's (workers) preferences about competence development, there was a significant difference between female and male employers' opinions (standardized test statistic = 2.00, $p < 0.05$); female employers assessed that older women wished competence development to a greater extent.

The most marked difference between employer age and sex sub-groups was found for the combinations "older female employers" and "younger male employers":

- "Older female employers" assessed that older women (workers) desired competence development to a greater extent (standardized test statistic = 2.83, $p < 0.05$).

Employers were asked if they thought that older employees had greater difficulties with changes or to learn new things/skills (e.g., reorganizations, introduction of new technology), compared with younger employees.

- Almost half (46%) of the employers regarded older employees as having greater difficulties with changes or learning new things compared with younger employees, whereas 52% of the employers thought that there was not a big difference between older and younger employees.
- There was an almost (marginally) significant difference between employers aged 50 years or older and employers who were younger than 50 years as regards if older employees had greater difficulties with changes or learning new things (standardized test statistic = 1.955, $p = 0.051$), where younger employers considered that older employees had greater difficulties with changes or learning new things. There was no significant difference between female and male employers regarding this question.
- Comparisons between subcategories of employers (combination of age and sex) showed a significant difference between these subcategories with respect to if they considered that older employees had greater difficulties with changes or learning new things (test statistic = 10.23, $p < 0.05$). The pairwise comparisons showed a significant difference between "older female employers" and "younger female employers" (standardized test statistic = 3.19, $p < 0.01$), where "younger female employers" considered that older employees had greater difficulties with changes or learning new things.

Employers were also asked how older workers' competence and experience were utilized. It was found that transfer of competence between older and younger workers



often takes place through organized mentor programs or as a natural part in daily communication and cooperation between older and younger workers. Examples included

- Mentor program
- Apprenticeship
- Instructors or tutors
- Mixed teams in projects with older and younger employees together
- Working next to an experienced person

Retirement

The employers were asked about their opinion as regards the most common reasons for older women and men leaving working life before the age of 65. The employers rated the alternatives rather equal for males and females, respectively. The most common reasons were (a) workers have been sufficiently financially independent to leave working life early (about 53% selected this category), (b) the workers' physical illness (about 44%), and (c) because of family and spare time interests (about 39%). Only a small proportion of the employers stated "inadequate competence" as the reason for older workers quitting working life before the age of 65 (about 3% selected this category). The most common pensionable age was just over 64 for both men and women.

Discussion

The main focus of the present research was to investigate the competence- and attitude-related barriers that the older unemployed face when they endeavor to reenter the labor market and to investigate employers' attitudes and perceptions of older workers (e.g., with regard to competence development and retiring). The results related to barriers will be discussed, as well as attitudes toward older workers. Limitations of the present study will be considered. Finally, the implications of the present research and directions for future research will be suggested.

Competence-related barriers

We found in the interviews that a large portion of barriers hampering the older people's return to work life were competence-related or related to negative attitudes among employers. They are situational factors that reduce the chances of the older unemployed to return to work.

Furthermore, we found different aspects connected to competence-related barriers, some of them age neutral but some age specific. The skills have to be updated continuously so as to make the individual's competence compatible with the technical developments. In other words, the individual has to have access to competence development, but he or she must be willing to learn anew all the time. Here we found that many older people lacked the motivation required. Taylor and Unwin (2001), investigating the incidence of vocational training in different age groups, found that whereas significant

barriers to training were encountered by older workers, this was rather due to employer decision making than to individual preferences. But it is worth noting that access to competence development and actual participation in competence development are different things.

Training and competence development is a critical activity for an effective and efficient workforce. An interesting finding in the present study was that a relatively small number of employers reported that they had competence development specifically aimed at older people, i.e., aged 50+. Hence, companies seem rather to invest in competence development irrespective of age. Many employers declared that opportunities for learning and competence development were given to all, regardless of age, and that they did not treat older workers as a special group, neither negatively nor positively. It seems that many employers are prepared to invest in competence development also for older workers if they see a return on the investment, as suggested by Yeats et al. (2000). The findings of the present study seem to be consistent with those of Loretto and White (2006), who found that employers had no upper age limits for opportunities for training.

Interestingly, older employers assessed that older women (but not men) wished competence development to a greater extent. Thus, the results indicate that older employers may have a rather positive view for older workers' competence development and training aspirations. These results comply in part with the findings of Chiu et al. (2001) and Henskens (2005), who noted that older employer representatives tended to have a more positive attitude to older workers (e.g., training). Further analysis showed that female employers assessed that older women wished competence development to a greater extent. This finding is partly in agreement with Chiu et al.'s (2001) finding, which showed that female respondents had more favorable attitudes to training older workers. Sharing demographic characteristics (Hogg and Vaughan 2011) may lead to a more positive and sympathetic assessment of older workers (Chiu et al. 2001). However, an alternative hypothesis might be that this result partly reflects the employer's experience of older workers rather than just age differences among employers.

In the present study, the employers were also asked if they thought that older employees had greater difficulties with changes or learning new things compared with younger employees. Just over half of the employers believed that there was no difference between older and younger employees. But about 46% of the employers believed that older employees have greater difficulties with changes (e.g., reorganizations) or learning new things. This proportion is comparable with the study performed by the Swedish National Social Insurance Board (2001) regarding employer attitudes to older workers (55+). They found that 53% of the employers believed that older workers had more problems to adapt to changes in the workplace. Thus, the present study and the study by Swedish National Social Insurance Board show a relatively good agreement in this respect. Moreover, a very recent and extensive population survey, directed at employers in Sweden, showed that slightly more than half of the employers believed that older workers are less adaptable to reorganizations (SOU 2012:28). In this new Swedish survey, there was also a specific question if employers think that older workers learn slower (e.g., new technology) than younger workers. The results showed that about 80% of the employers believed that younger workers learn faster. In this national survey, the differences between sectors of the labor market were relatively small. A study by Solem (2011) indicates that one of the major divides in employers' attitudes concerns public/private



sector managers. Because study 2 was conducted in the private sector, care should thus be taken when generalizing the results to other sectors (e.g., public sector). From the results of the recent Swedish survey (SOU 2012:28), however, it can be concluded that also in the private sector, negative views on the adaptability to change and ability to learn new things are prevalent. There may be culturally inflicted attitude differences between Swedish and Norwegian employers; national differences between employer attitudes have been reported by, e.g., Van Dalen et al. (2009) and Henkens (2005). In Norway, reported employer attitudes toward older workers had improved between 2003 and 2007 (Solem 2011), whereas no major improvement could be traced between the two Swedish surveys (2001 and 2012).

It can be assumed that the answers reported mainly reflect how quickly younger/older workers can learn new things, even if the purpose in part is the ability to use new technology. The speed is here perhaps subordinate – the important thing is the ability to acquire and use new technology.

The finding that there are widespread negative views among in particular younger employers, with respect to older workers' ability to learn new things, is of note. However, this view seems to be in contrast to results of current research as to the cognitive abilities in different age groups. First, work often requires integrated cognitive skills, in which experience can compensate for other deficiencies (e.g., Salthouse 1997). Second, as pointed out in a major review for the Swedish Pension Age Analysis Commission (Johansson 2012), according to different test results, no significant cognitive deterioration has been found in young older adults, i.e., in those aged 60 to 70 years. Thus, lack of cognition cannot be an argument for retirement unless the job requirements are especially high, concerning, for example, psychomotor and perceptual speed (Johansson 2012).

Our results indicate that there are widespread negative stereotypes about older workers – negative stereotypes that may impair older peoples' chances to remain in or to reenter the labor market. Such negative stereotypes may lead to prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviors and practices toward older people, e.g., get fewer opportunities for job interviews. Therefore, a deeper understanding regarding age stereotypes is vital to promote positive attitudes toward older workers. It is important to find effective strategies to encourage older people to remain engaged, to be motivated to continue to work, and to be active members of the workforce. To achieve effective human resource strategies requires a change in employers' views about the value of older workers. It is important to take a positive psychological perspective on older workers (Peterson and Spiker 2005).

Ageism: problems and remedies

Negative attitudes among the jobseekers themselves were reported as a serious problem by many interviewees, lacking self-esteem and motivation due to a general feeling of being too old or too unskilled to qualify for employment. They had become subjects with low situational employability (Berntson 2008). Several interviewees described that they had initially been optimistic about finding a new job and had been ambitious, but following negative experiences with employers, optimism had faded. This was a picture that was supported also by other stakeholders, including labor union representatives as

well as representatives of the FK and the AF. These observations indicate that negative attitudes to older workers as shown by individual employers may initiate a negative process that makes the older unemployed progressively more and more discouraged and passive. Such a process, once it has started, may be difficult to change. The negative attitudes may lead to the social exclusion of older workers and also may lead to self-fulfilling prophecies when those who are subject to negative attitudes behave accordingly (van Dalen et al. 2009).

Negative stereotypes associated with older workers may be one form of ageism in the workforce. Ageism is about prejudice and discrimination against people based on their age. Older workers may internalize these stereotypes and can form an unfavorable self-image that can be manifested as low self-esteem at work (Hogg and Vaughan 2011). Older workers are aware that employers and younger workers may judge and treat them stereotypically, and thus, they worry that through their behavior and job performance these stereotypes may be confirmed – it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Hogg and Vaughan 2011). This is related to the social-psychological concept named *stereotype threat*, which refers to “the fear of confirming others’ negative stereotypes about one’s group that makes it more difficult for people to perform up to their potential” (Kenrick et al. 2002:383).

In the interviews carried out in the present study, there were many reports that negative age-related attitudes as experienced in meetings with employers had affected the perceived employability of the older job seekers negatively. We believe that it is important to develop and practice strategies to reduce these negative stereotypes. This requires both short- and long-term actions (e.g., supervisor training on aging issues, multigenerational teams, and job redesign). These findings support the idea of the creation of an organizational culture that appreciates older workers (i.e., changing attitudes; Loretto and White 2006). As older workers remain employed, it is needed to realize the strengths and challenges inherent in multigenerational workplaces. One way to change attitudes to older workers is to increase the competence of management on aging issues. This organizational approach is referred to in the literature as *age management*. Ilmarinen (2006) defines age management as follows:

“Age management requires taking the employee’s age and age-related factors into account in daily work management, work planning and work organization; thus everyone—regardless of age—can achieve personal and organizational targets healthily and safely.” (Ilmarinen 2006: 120)

Furunes et al. (2011) point out that it is essential that managers at all levels are involved in order to put age management into practice. Social support given by supervisors may serve as a protective factor (“buffer”) for older workers against the negative attitudes that they may be exposed to at work. Age management can be seen as an opportunity and a challenge for the future.

It should be kept in mind that there are also positive attitudes among employers, for instance the view that older workers are more conscientious, experienced, and dependable (Loretto and White 2006). In the present study, both positive and negative attitudes regarding older workers were identified. A majority of the employers’ answers were in fact mostly positive regarding the older workers, for example, with respect to their great knowledge, competence, responsibility, their loyalty, and rarely being sick. The negative



opinions included that older workers had difficulties to learn new things, that they were rarely interested in competence development, and that they cannot cope with a high work pace. A conclusion is that the attitude of employers, particularly the younger ones, remains a key issue to address in an endeavor to increase the possibilities for the older unemployed to remain in the labor market.

Methodological comment

We have chosen two different methodological approaches in study 1 and study 2. The reason is that in the mapping of perceived barriers, the qualitative approach seemed more adequate, whereas in the employer attitude study, it was considered advantageous to base the conclusions on a wide set of respondents.

It is of note in study 1 that barriers identified by the older unemployed themselves corresponded well with those put forward by representatives of the trade union, the Swedish FK and the Swedish AF. This result confirms the relevance of the findings. It also indicates that in mapping barriers at a group level, it is relevant to interview stakeholder representatives.

In study 1, the respondents were picked not randomly but based on availability by representatives from the Swedish AF; the subjects were participating in job-seeking activities at the time being. This indicates that the sample may not include the views of unemployed persons who may be less active in job-seeking activities. The sample size ($N = 24$) was also considered too low to allow stratification into males and females, type of occupation, length of unemployment, and age. We have limited the analysis to identification of types of situational barriers specific to the 50+ age group rather than focusing on aspects relating to the individual person.

In study 2, the set of respondents to the questionnaire distributed to employers may not be representative for the entire labor market, since members of the employer organization concerned are to a large extent large and medium size enterprises; therefore, generalizing results to small companies (as well as to public sector employers) should be done with care.

Suggestions for future research

A deeper understanding regarding age stereotypes is vital to promote positive attitudes toward older workers. Future research should include the following:

- Interviews of employers who have a positive attitude toward older workers (e.g., Peterson and Spiker 2005). What constitutes the positive contributory value of older workers?
- Different categories of workers. Do employers hold different views with respect to older workers when it concerns skilled or unskilled workers? Do workers hold different views with respect to older workers when it concerns skilled or unskilled workers? Attitudes to older workers' ability to learn and adapt to changes are clearly related to organizational culture and age management (Ilmarinen 2006, Loretto and White 2006).

- The extent to which our findings could be generalized to other occupational settings, e.g., in the health-care sector, as suggested by Solem (2011).
- Age management interventions, using longitudinal design. How should responsibilities for age management be distributed, in different contexts?
- Longitudinal monitoring of the development of attitudes and employment prospects for older workers in the labor market.

Concluding remarks

The present study confirmed that lack of updated competence and negative attitudes in employers and in the older unemployed themselves constitute important barriers to continued work and preserved employability for many older workers. Experiences of negative attitudes among employers had caused discouragement and passivity in many older unemployed interviewees.

To a large extent, the perceptions of employers' attitudes as documented in study 1 agreed with the attitudes as reported by the employers themselves in study 2. Our results imply that there are indeed negative attitudes toward older people, but it would be wrong to say that such resentments are typical ingredients in the labor market at large. The picture is indeed more complicated, and it is possible that the significance of negative attitudes in the workplaces has been overemphasized, as suggested by Duncan (2003). Nevertheless, negative attitudes among employers do remain a major obstacle to reemployment of many older unemployed. An interesting finding was that attitudes toward older workers were gender specific, with respect to both the sex of the employer representative and the sex of the older workers. Our study indicates that it is in particular negative views in the younger employers with respect to older workers' ability to accept organizational changes and to learn new things that need to be addressed in an endeavor to improve attitudes toward older workers in Swedish working life.

In general, more people will need to continue working longer in life and therefore age diversity will be a natural feature in the future workplaces. Older workers are also healthier and more competent than ever. In the future, it becomes even more important to utilize older workers' knowledge and skills. If negative attitudes persist about older workers' ability to learn, etc., then older workers may continue to face obstacles to continued employment and to be less able to perform up to their potential.

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