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Attitudes toward elderly workers and perceptions of integrated age management practices

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This qualitative study investigates attitudes toward elderly workers and their work situation in different sectors, and explores perceptions and organizational measures that can enable an extended working life. Previous age management studies indicate that there are several interconnected measures and key areas of importance, and that there is a general need for strategies to strengthen sustainable age management at the organizational level. A structured content analysis was used to analyze data from focus group interviews with informants from a variety of organizations. The study identified three themes that highlight attitudes and perceptions of integrated age management practices: (a) contemporary policies and practices in the work environment; (b) social participation and attitudes; (c) experience and mentorship. These themes can form the basis of a good approach to an integrated age management strategy. Such a strategy can be achieved through intervention studies where research on sustainable working life meets the real problems faced by employees and managers.

Keywords: age management; older workers; sustainable working life; work environment

1. Introduction

1.1. Age management

The proportion of older workers in employment is increasing throughout Europe. Retirement ages are being postponed in an effort to adapt to the new demographic distribution and older people are encouraged to actively participate in the labor market as long as possible [1,2]. Future pensioners have indeed increased their preferred retirement age and adjusted to the new credo of late retirement, especially concerning higher-educated personnel [3]. The position of older workers has also improved in recent years, although managers are mainly interested in retaining older employees who have skills that are specifically required and not general [4,5]. Many organizations have been rather passive in practice since active age-conscious policies raise costs [6]. Employers would rather retain older workers than recruit them, and are expecting a larger cost–productivity gap; thus, they consider wage subsidies to be an effective measure to extend working lives [7]. In general, an experienced, skilled workforce is needed and, as a result, concepts of age management are requested by organizations and are motivating them to develop and maintain key skills and ensure knowledge transfer [8–11].

One way to understand age management and its intentions is to analyze the concept from three perspectives – the individual's, the company's and society's [8,10,12,13]:

- individual: empowerment to increase health, vitality and well-being;

- company: managing human resources to raise awareness and implementing best practices of age management in recruiting, training development and promotion, etc., in order to age adjust the workplace and retain more efficient employees by means of customized management;
- society: has a macroeconomic perspective associated with labor market policies, policy-makers and governments in an effort to prevent age discrimination and reduce demographic challenges.

1.2. Age management in practice

According to Fabisiak and Prokurat [8], for age management to be truly successful in any given organization it needs to encompass all age groups and provide age-specific support and incentives. Work ability and job satisfaction appear to be two obvious key elements when an employee decides to retire. However, people who experience their workplace as high in social cohesion are more likely to retire since these individuals do not require the social structures of work to experience social engagement and support [14]. Oakman and Wells [14] stress that, to be successful, an employer's human resource management (HRM) policy needs to take into account the complexity of retirement decisions and to recognize the importance of individual differences. Nilsson [10] clarifies what the individual considerations are in a theoretical model for a sustainable working life for all ages (the swAge model). In

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this model, the individual motives and considerations for continuing to work and the older workers' retirement decisions are based on: (a) their health in relation to the work situation and work environment versus health in retirement; (b) their personal economic situation in employment versus in retirement; (c) their opportunities for social inclusion in working life situations versus in retirement; (d) their opportunities for meaningful and self-crediting activities in working life versus in retirement [10,13].

At the company or organizational level, productivity and the budget are most important, and employees of all ages have to contribute fully to the productivity. In general, individuals' productivity levels increase until they reach 50–55 years of age. The subsequent decline is very slight and does not appear to be much of a problem for organizational productivity [15]. On the other hand, the risk of work environmental injuries and diseases increases with age due to mental and biological aging [10,16–20]. However, this risk has probably been mitigated, in part, as the result of improvements in the physical work environment that have taken place in recent years. Nevertheless, it is not only the physical work environment that matters for an extended working life. Successful age management at the organizational level should match the motives of the individual and be supported by legal requirements and policies at the societal level. Nilsson [10] theoretically connects individual considerations with four age management areas of importance at the organizational and societal levels: (a) promotion of good work health by measures in the design of the physical work environment and the mental work environment, with sufficient recovery and appropriate working hours and pace; (b) measures for economic security by promotion of the individual's employability; (c) measures for social inclusion and participation, for social support, to change attitudes to older workers and to increase diversity among managers, the organization and society; (d) measures to promote creativity, motivation by self-crediting activities, lifelong learning and development. Additional practical guidance with verified results for age management is of great interest.

An analysis of 83 case studies on age management [21] in eight European countries (Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, the UK) of both larger and smaller enterprises in the public and private sectors revealed that there was no general trend toward integrated age management in practice. However, the study presents a list of the dimensions of good practices (see Table 1). The dominating dimension is 'training, lifelong learning and knowledge transfer'. There are substantial overlaps between several dimensions, which is why Frerichs et al. [21] recommend more strategies to integrate workers of all ages in their employment rather than relying on isolated measures.

In a review, Čiutienė and Railaitė [22] highlighted the following areas: job recruitment, learning and knowledge

Table 1. Good practices, extracted from Frerichs et al. [21].

| Dimension | Number of cases | Distribution (%) |
|--|-----------------|------------------|
| Training, lifelong learning and knowledge transfer | 59 | 71 |
| Flexible working practices | 45 | 54 |
| Health protection and promotion and workplace design | 45 | 54 |
| Career development and mobility management | 40 | 48 |
| Employment exit and the transition to retirement | 37 | 45 |
| Job recruitment | 30 | 36 |
| Redeployment and retention | 25 | 30 |
| Awareness-raising, changing attitudes and diversity | 20 | 24 |
| Comprehensive approaches | 15 | 18 |
| Remuneration | 2 | 2 |

management, changing attitudes, flexible working practices, health management, workplace environment and ergonomics. The study also concludes that each of these age management areas is closely related to each other, but the authors specifically stress that changing attitudes toward older workers is a crucial element.

1.3. Attitudes

In practice, much of the responsibility for age management is at the organizational level where the literature offers both negative and positive reviews about older and younger staff [4,16]. Negative perceptions of the respective age groups are reflected in the latter's merits, e.g., that younger people change jobs while older people are loyal; that younger people are positive to new technology while older people are negative. A study by Furunes and Mykletun [23] of public-sector managers in a public hospital and an energy company shows that the managers perceive aging as contributing to increased managerial and interpersonal skills, to creative problem-solving capacities and to work moral. The results correspond to stereotypes of older personnel identified by Van Dalen et al. [24] and described as soft qualities of productivity including commitment to the organization, reliability and social skills. The productivity of younger personnel matches the stereotypes described as hard qualities, including flexibility, physical and mental capacity, and the willingness to learn new technology skills. The study also shows that hard qualities carry much greater weight than soft qualities in the evaluation of the productivity of older and younger workers alike. HRM undoubtedly plays an important role in staff issues; an

Italian study by Principi and Fabbietti [25] focused on the age of human resource (HR) managers and showed that they have a more positive attitude toward workers of a similar age. This did not seem to play a significant role, but there was a tendency to adopt early retirement schemes when the HR managers were younger [25].

1.4. Integrated strategies for age management

There has not been much emphasis on age management in the literature. One review stated that there were only three scientific publications between 2000 and 2013 that evaluated intervention studies to decrease the older workers' increased risk for injury [10].

There is a tendency to implement age management initiatives and show a greater appreciation of older workers in larger companies [25]. This makes studies in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) interesting as they are highly practically oriented with limited resources but with great growth potential from a macroeconomic perspective. These companies often encounter problems in recruiting qualified young personnel, in loss of older qualified personnel due to health problems or a lack of career prospects and because their possibilities to adopt age management measures are restricted due to limited personnel capacity and small financial resources [21]. Thus, practical guidelines and integrated strategies for age management under these conditions should be of great interest. A qualitative interview study of six Scottish SMEs shows that there are often good practices in age management, but that the SMEs lack structures and good examples [9]. The study concludes that relatively limited activities that offer new perspectives can trigger change in policy or prompt the SMEs to broaden their views about age management. The lack of strategy is also evident in a quantitative survey with 432 Czech SME companies, which shows that only 26.2% had adopted an age management strategy that addressed the age structure of their employees in a targeted manner [26]. At the same time, the companies recognized the need for age management and recommended retaining key employees with essential skills. Hence, the authors primarily recommend training and mentoring efforts to manage knowledge

transfer. The results are consistent with the case study by Frerichs et al. [21] and the theoretical review and analysis by Čiutienė and Railaitė [22].

1.5. Aim

The aim of this study was to conduct an in-depth qualitative survey to explore existing attitudes toward elderly workers and perceptions of organizational measures that could realize an integrated age management strategy in practice.

2. Method

A qualitative research design was chosen to identify and explore perceptions of organizational measures and strategies to be able to work sustainably to an older age. Data were collected from a variety of organizations, representing different branches, sizes and forms (public/private) to increase generalizability and obtain richer results. The study population consisted of managers, older workers, trade union representatives, occupational medicine personnel and HR personnel. They were from public organizations (POs) (municipal health care), large private companies (LCs) with more than 250 employees (constructing and packaging companies) and private SMEs with fewer than 250 employees (gardening and paper production) (see Table 2). Data were collected via focus group interviews. The purpose of a focus group interview is to stimulate and initiate a dialog between the participants in order to achieve an open discussion within the framework of the study topics and to generate rich material [27]. The SME interviews were not strictly of a focus group nature since there was only one participant involved; however, three researchers also participated, resulting in a group.

The managers at the organizations/companies were contacted by telephone, informed about the study and asked to participate. A letter with information about the study was distributed to the contact people at the organizations/companies. The contact person asked people with the desired profiles if they wanted to participate and provided them with an information letter. The presumptive participants were asked to give their informed consent to

Table 2. Study population.

| Participants | Organization and number of interview sessions | | |
|-----------------------------|---|--|---|
| | Public organizations, seven focus groups | Large private companies, seven focus groups from three companies | SMEs, interviews in two private companies |
| Older workers | 4 | 2 | – |
| Managers | 2 | 4 | 2 |
| Trade union representatives | – | 1 | – |
| Human resource personnel | 1 | – | – |
| Total | 7 | 7 | 2 |

Note: SME = small and medium-sized enterprise.

participate. It was not possible to recruit participants for all categories of focus groups. The large organizations could not find enough interested participants in all categories, and the SMEs were not big enough. The focus groups included 3–7 participants from the same organization/companies, and these as well as the SME interviews were carried out in neutral surroundings at the organizations/companies. Each interview session lasted 1–2.5 h. The interviews were of an exploratory nature based on the following initial question: ‘From your business perspective as well as your employees’ perspective, what opportunities and obstacles do you see regarding a postponement of the retirement age from the labor market?’

The researchers who conducted the focus group interviews were all familiar with the concepts of aging in relation to factors of importance for extending working life. Thus, the researchers were able to ask questions about various positions on the topic and stimulate discussions and reasoning among the participants regarding individual considerations, organizational conditions and social phenomena. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were analyzed with a descriptive procedure according to Malterud’s [28] method of systematic text condensation (STC). This is an elaboration of Giorgi’s [29] psychological phenomenological method, but developed as a pragmatic procedure focused on the experience of the participants as expressed by themselves. In the first step, total impression, all authors read the transcribed interviews to obtain a general sense of the overall material. The authors presented each theme by displaying illustrative quotes, and then presented a number of preliminary themes. During the second step, identifying and sorting meaning units, all transcribed text was systematically examined line by line to identify meaning units. Meaning units are, according to Malterud [28], text fragments containing some information about the research question. This coding process included identification and sorting of meaning units that at first glance can be linked to the authors’ preliminary themes. In this step, flexibility meant creating and adjusting themes, code groups and codes according to prominent meaning units. Here, a qualitative analysis program, NVivo version 11, was used to organize the material and made it possible to run queries on different keywords related to the themes and thereby detect related answers.

The third step, condensation, summarized the meaning of code groups into a condensate, which is an artificial quote that, as far as possible, retains original formulations of the participants. These condensates are presented in Table 2, showing which sources were connected to each condensate. In the final step, synthesizing, the data were reconceptualized. All of the authors returned to the original text to validate whether our syntheses and illustrative quotes indeed reflected the original context. Here, the headings for each category were re-evaluated, which is the

final result that will express a highlighted perception of the study’s contribution.

3. Results

The results from the structured content analysis are summarized in Table 3, where the distribution of corresponding meaning units is presented. In addition, a number of representative quotes have been selected to highlight the characteristics of the identified meaning units.

3.1. Characteristic quotes from corresponding meaning units

3.1.1. Contemporary policies and practice in the work environment

The law and policies established in the organizations sometimes counteract extended employment or recruitment of elderly people, despite the requested skills and experience:

I actually tried. We had some occasion where we needed skills, where I knew we had people who had retired and tried to get them in. I received a ‘no’ from HR, I was not allowed. (Manager, LC)

Honestly, the organization wants to bet on the younger one. They have many years left. Now we have laws and regulations that govern that trend. (Manager, PO)

The obstacles are actually the contracts and laws and other things that must be taken into consideration, and payroll systems and the bureaucracy and administration that you have to deal with in some way. And then there is Sweden’s Employment (Co-Determination in the Workplace) Act [30], which means you have to consult with the unions. But if there’s a will, there’s a way. It’s not necessarily an obstacle, but you have to take it into account. (Manager, SME)

The interviewees considered that the ability to work longer in physically stressful work required a good work environment. The organizations had seen positive developments with increased access to adapted technical aids. However, sometimes the aids were not utilized or they increased the productivity, which lead to even greater stress:

There is a completely different work environment today with everything in our plant including ventilation and light, heat and cold. The work environment in itself is amazing now. When I started working, occupational health care and safety engineers and such things did not exist. (Manager, LC)

Everyone in the company now has to wear safety goggles, gloves and so on, and it is clearly stated. Such things have improved the plant; fewer casualties today. (Union representative, LC)

There is much we can do that we don’t do today. The most important thing is that we have to settle down and think and be concrete, because we have a manager who demands a lot. We have every prerequisite for a good work environment for our employees. (Manager, PO)

Table 3. Distribution of identified meaning units that build up condensates and themes.

| Theme | Condensate | Distribution of corresponding meaning units | | |
|--|---|---|-----------------|------|
| | | Public organizations | Large companies | SMEs |
| Contemporary policies and practice in the work environment | Established policies makes it hard to keep elderly workers in the organization | – | 2 | 1 |
| | We have good possibilities to create a good physical work environment | 3 | 4 | 2 |
| | Flexible working hours (placement and length) enable or would have enabled adaptation of the work for a longer working life, and simplify the individuals' life puzzles | 4 | 5 | 1 |
| Social participation and attitudes | Physical health gets worse with time, but this is less important for white-collar workers, where it is instead a matter of mental attitude | – | 4 | – |
| | Elderly workers realize that their body pain is the result of how they worked when young. They were reckless and naive. This is also evident among younger workers. They repeat the same mistakes | – | 2 | 1 |
| | Many of the elderly workers have a reduced work quality and feel less dedicated | 2 | 2 | – |
| | Many of the elderly workers have a deeper commitment and see the work tasks as stimulating | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| | The notion that age is an obstacle is, above all, a mental obstacle | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| | Important to have a transfer of knowledge between the elderly and the younger employees, a mentorship, and that there are procedures for this that work well | 5 | 4 | 2 |
| Experience and mentorship | Important but difficult with competence development due to lack of time and different approaches between the generations | 1 | – | 1 |
| | Important to actively work on developing experience regardless of age | 1 | 4 | 2 |
| | Experienced healthy 50 year olds, optimal age | 1 | 2 | – |

Note: SME = small and medium-sized enterprise.

If the efforts for a good work environment have a proper impact, then it's possible that more people can continue working to a higher age, I would say. (Manager, LC)

There are so many technical aids, so you're not physically worn out; but then we've improved and increased the speed. We have that stress factor going on instead. (Manager, SME)

3.1.2. Social participation and attitudes

In physically demanding work, work ability is considered to decrease significantly with age, and disqualifies older people in competition with the younger ones. The focus group of union representatives and managers highlighted that getting old, with the increase of poor physical ability, may cause real suffering in some cases. Some realized that their bodily pain was the result of how they had worked when they were young, naive and reckless. Similar behavior patterns were evident among the younger workers as well:

If I can choose between a 30-year-old and a 65-year-old with the same qualifications, I will take the 30-year-old, because that person will last longer. (Manager, PO)

Then there are a lot of people in the construction industry who take painkillers in order to go to work. There are very many. I can count a few colleagues that I know who take pain relievers daily. (Union representative, LC)

Young people move fast, just the way I used to. You have good hearing, eyesight and feel good. But by 60 you have tinnitus because you did not use hearing protection, constant back pain because at 25 you lifted 60 kilos, no problem. It hurt a bit, but you ignored it. That's how it is. Then it's too late. A little 'macho'. It hasn't changed. I don't think so. (Managers, LC)

There was a clear perception, however, that work ability was individual. For white-collar workers in particular, it was not the physical limits but the mental attitude. One's mental attitude was considered very important and the established perspectives reinforced this. When age was considered an obstacle, it was above all considered to be a mental obstacle:

For white-collar jobs, it's very much a matter of whether or not you've already 'retired mentally'. Precisely. (Manager, LC)

When you pass 50, you're older. Then you're over the hill right away. Then it's over. (Manager, LC)

There's some staff who are considered to be seniors already at 40–45. But that's all in their attitude. (Manager, LC)

In general, you are not welcome on the labor market when you are over 55. It is in many employers' heads. If you don't believe in yourself, then it will be difficult. (Manager, SME)

Many of the elderly people have a deeper commitment to the job and think their work tasks are stimulating. One large company clearly expressed the value of loyalty to the company, as well as the two SMEs which, at the same time, highlighted the risk of investing in younger people who could suddenly up and leave:

What one can say is that many of those who are a little older have worked for many years at the company and may feel very loyal to it and to the products in their work. But it has to do with the number of years. Things become automatic with age, easy. It seems to me clearly, that it's about loyalty. (Manager, LC)

Many of those who are 20–25, they will find somewhere else to go. Then it's really a question of how much to bet on them. (Manager, SME)

3.1.3. Experience and mentorship

Generally speaking, it is considered important to work with competence development throughout one's entire working life. Age is not considered to be that important. If you have a strong commitment from the start, you could very well have gained experience quickly early on. A lack of commitment as you get older, however, can result in being behind the times and inexperienced in certain things, such as when new technology is introduced. It is also apparent that a mixed workforce is desirable, both in age and between genders. But it does not occur by itself; there must be a will and active leadership for this to happen:

You may have a very young guy who is very experienced. And if I'm completely inexperienced, then I am suddenly very young in comparison to him or her. So it's quite fascinating when you think about it that way. (Manager, LC)

You as a manager have to invest a lot in younger employees. You have to train them a lot. You have to make sure that they keep moving on and growing. Then when they reach 50, it's payback time for managers. We harvest the fruits of our labor. Then we don't have to push them so hard. They manage themselves. They work independently. They take responsibility for their own competence development. (Manager, LC)

They [mixed generations] complement each other. Generally, you have to work with it, I think. I mix the groups all the time, age wise and gender wise. For example,

women are much more careful in dealing with flower buds. (Manager, SME)

4. Discussion

The study shows a complex picture of how individuals and organizations relate to older employees. During the implementation and analysis of the interviews, it became apparent that the interviewees often had difficulty drawing clear conclusions, except that there is a need for more information and knowledge about the elderly in working life. At the same time, it was clear that the attitudes and ideas expressed were solid, based on many years of personal experiences or observations. The applied method of structured text condensation resulted in three themes, well founded in the interview material: (a) contemporary policies and practice in the work environment; (b) social participation and attitude; (c) experience and mentorship.

These three themes emerge clearly from the interviews but are also interconnected and follow a developmental reasoning. The initial theme, contemporary policies and practice in the work environment, clearly states that the physical environments have improved because of the technical development of industrial processes and technical aids. This is in line with general technical development where concepts such as Industry 4.0, digitization and re-industrialization advocate for increased productivity through intelligent systems and cloud-based technologies [31–33]. Health hazardous processes are automated and tools can often be adapted to their user, which makes the physical conditions in the form of muscle power less important. However, there is a risk that the gains generated by the development and reduced importance of physical conditions will be 'taken back' by higher demands on productivity and thus a more pressing mental work situation. An acceptable state of affairs has to avoid economic failure and unacceptable workload, a balance that may be difficult to strike [34] but is important for a sustainable work situation and working life, both in the short and long term. Even though employees in general have increased their preferred retirement age [3], this study confirms the need of supportive structures as shown in earlier studies [9,26].

The importance of mental health was captured in the second theme, social participation and attitude. The condensates and meaning units under this heading are not solely positive or negative. There are examples and perceptions showing that elderly employees sometimes have lost their sparkle on the one hand, but on the other can have a deeper commitment. These results are in line with previous studies of existing stereotypes [23,24]. What is clear, however, is that one's mental attitude is considered to be of central importance to work ability, especially for white-collar workers where experience and knowledge are considered more important than physical strength.

An interesting finding is that the study has generated a theme that distinguishes mental health from health in

general, and additionally connects to attitudes. There is a trend of worsening mental health at the same time as digitization increases in industry and society [35]. The development toward increased digitization promotes technology friendly attitudes, which Van Dalen et al. [24] define as hard qualities and where older workers are attributed poor skills according to established stereotypes. This new theme thus captures a current trend and at the same time emphasizes the problem of harmful attitudes about a poorly suited workgroup – the elderly.

However, the study results indicate that the elderly workers' frustration about younger workers repeating their mistakes and the elderly workers' commitment and loyalty to the company were profound. Consequently, the third theme, experience and mentorship, follows naturally – it captures the most common measurements and key areas in previous surveys: lifelong learning and knowledge transfer [21,22]. The theme can also strengthen the 'sense of coherence' among elderly workers which is crucial to our mental health [36]. In the interviews, there was an overall, clear view that different forms of mentorship are developing and beneficial to individuals and businesses. The importance of the continuous development of experience was also emphasized as a contribution to knowledge transfer between generations. The forms of mentorship, however, were somewhat unclear or undecided. Generally, a mixed age structure was considered desirable, and an organized mentorship where an experienced employee was appointed the mentor for a younger employee was thought to work well. But problems also arose as the result of time shortages and different approaches between generations. The present study indicates a positive attitude to an extended working life, but also some lack of action and inability to question policies and rules, often with reference to time shortages in general. Principi and Fabbietti [25] reported a tendency to implement age management initiatives and a greater appreciation of older workers in larger companies, and Frerichs et al. [21] argued that SMEs have restricted possibilities because of limited capacity and financial resources. However, this study indicates that larger companies can be in a dilemma with the addition of more bureaucratic features, while SMEs can take a more pragmatic view: 'If there's a will, there's a way'.

The possibility of working to a higher age is a complex and multidimensional issue that includes many factors at the individual, organization and society levels [8,10]. This study has verified the importance of those interconnected factors and key areas of importance to age management. This justifies an approach with a profound understanding of individual considerations and their implications for age management at the organizational and society levels, as is promoted by the theoretical swAge model [10]. Thus, to maintain a sustainable working life to an older age, it may be a good approach for integrated age management to work practically with the swAge model by focusing on

the themes that emerged in this study: (a) contemporary policies and practice in the work environment; (b) social participation and attitude; (c) experience and mentorship. The study indicates the need for increased knowledge and efforts to counter negative patterns and highlight positive examples. This can be done through intervention studies where research on a sustainable working life meets the real problems faced by employees and managers.

5. Conclusion

This study has not found any specific new measurements of importance. However, it has verified established interconnected measurements and key areas of importance in age management. This qualitative study has also identified three clear themes that highlight attitudes and perceptions of integrated age management practices for the benefit of employees and organizations:

- Contemporary policies and practice in the work environment: the organizations have good possibilities to create a good physical and flexible work environment that can enable an extended working life and simplify individuals' life puzzles.
- Social participation and attitudes: physical health gets worse with time, but this is less important for white-collar workers, where it is instead a matter of mental attitude.
- Experience and mentorship: it is considered important to work actively on developing experience, regardless of age, and mentorship is appreciated in general.

These themes are likely to form the basis of a good approach to an integrated age management strategy. This can be done through intervention studies where research on sustainable working life meets the real problems faced by employees and managers. There are several interconnected measurements and key areas of importance to age management as this study and the swAge model have presented. However, there is a general need for strategies to strengthen the use of the measurement tools for sustainable age management at the organizational level. It is the introduction of age management itself that is important. After this come a number of practical aspects that must be handled, which differ according to the conditions of different organizations, as well as of the individual positions. Thus, the key to successful age management is a customized integrated strategy. To design an integrated age management strategy, one has to apply a suitable approach to explore the organizational preconditions and the existing attitudes.

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