Dealing with an aging workforce: Locating threats and opportunities in corporate media

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Dealing with an aging workforce: Locating threats and opportunities in corporate media

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ABSTRACT

Although workforce aging is among the major challenges facing developed countries, organizational communication about this issue has received little scholarly attention. Drawing on a content analysis of corporate media, we reconstruct how Dutch organizations (N = 50) framed older workers’ employability during the period 2006–2013 in diagnostic (problem-definitions) and prognostic (solution-definitions) terms, and we trace the influence of corporate media types and organizational characteristics on these frames. Results reveal that organizations frequently highlight problems on the macrolevel (societal) and the mesolevel (organizational), while most solutions are located on the microlevel (individual). Using multilevel modelling, we found support for the expectation that the issue is more strongly problematized in internal compared to external corporate media, and that problems related to individual older employees are most pronounced in public sector organizations’ communication. Our findings highlight diverse ways in which organizations can communicatively address factors that hamper older workers’ employability.

Due to the aging and dejuvenation of working populations in developed countries, older people will become a progressively important part of the shrinking workforce (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2006). Despite that this development underlines the necessity of retraining and retaining older workers, employers are not eager to hire older workers, generally considering this group as a last resort (Billett, Dymock, Johnson, & Martin, 2011). This is not only problematic for individual careers but also signifies serious challenges for organizational and societal wellbeing. Older workers are increasingly healthy and capable of working longer, and they embody a valuable source of human capital, especially regarding experience and education. By refraining from sustainable employability policies, employers are not fully taking advantage of the business case to employ older workers and herewith put their future competitive advantage at risk.

Effective communication between employers and older workers, in which all aspects of working life at higher age are genuinely discussed, has been suggested to be necessary to foster the inclusion of older workers in organizations and prevent knowledge drain (Henkens, 2005). In communicating about obstacles and opportunities of an aging workforce, corporate media can translate definitions and expectations of how both managers and older workers should deal with employability challenges. In order to come up with novel approaches to managing aging in the workplace, scholars have, therefore, suggested that we need to enhance our insights into the origin of communicated images of aging within organizations (Van Selm & Van der Heijden, 2013).

Here, the concept of framing is of relevance, as Framing Theory addresses the question of how issues are presented (De Vreese, 2005) by the (un)conscious selection of certain aspects of reality, which can contribute to the promotion of certain problem or solution definitions (Entman, 1993). The meaning that individuals ascribe to issues and situations can be partly shaped by their framing (Benford & Snow,
Importantly, the way issues are framed, may influence workers’ acceptance of, and involvement with, the message (Fransen & Ter Hoeven, 2011; Lundy, 2006); attitudes towards older adults; and support for policy changes (Springer & Harwood, 2015). Likewise, external stakeholders may be affected by the manner in which organizations frame messages about social issues, making external corporate communication an important tool to require and maintain legitimacy (e.g., Barros, 2014). The main aim of this study then is to investigate how organizations communicate about barriers and solutions in the employability debate about older workers.

Furthermore, the implications of the employability issue beyond individual organizational boundaries and contexts raise the question how differences in corporate representations of the issue can be accounted for. In this study, we trace the influence of corporate media types and organizational characteristics on frames of older workers’ employability. First, we investigate frame variation across internal and external corporate outlets. A comparison between everyday representations prevailing in internal outlets, partly reflecting workers’ experiences (Coninckx, Gelders, Saelens, Stevens, & Verckens, 2009) and organizational attempts to strategically frame the issue externally, might reveal (dis)similarities in how organizations present the issue towards internal and external stakeholders. Second, we make an explicit comparison between organizations in different sectors. Few studies have analyzed the influence of sectoral differences in the adoption of sustainable age-policies (e.g., Armstrong-Stassen & Schlosser, 2008). Consequently, there are only limited explanations for cross-organizational differences in the extent to which workforce aging is proactively addressed, let alone communicated about.

By shedding light on the parts of the employability debate that organizations do and do not adhere to, this study is among the first to assess the extent that organizations—in their communication—acknowledge present and future challenges and discuss suitable solutions to address these issues (Anderson, 2013). Such an analysis is germane and timely, as it informs us about the extent that organizations communicatively respond to an increasingly pressing issue for all types of organizations as well as larger society. Of practical importance, this study offers recommendations on how organizations can adopt a more all-inclusive communication approach needed to cope with the multifaceted employability issue.

Data come from a content analysis of internal (employee magazines) and external (annual reports) corporate media of 50 Dutch private and public organizations over the period of 2006 to 2013.

**Framing theory**

How issues are presented in communicative texts is frequently studied with Framing Theory (De Vreese, 2005). Framing Theory builds on the rationale that meanings are not given or naturally attached to experiences, events or objects, but arise through interpretive processes mediated by various contextual factors (e.g., Benford & Snow, 2000). Frames are considered as schemes for both presenting and comprehending communication, which turns meaningless and unrecognizable happenings into perceptible events (Scheufele, 1999). Snow and Benford (1988) identified three core framing tasks: diagnostic (problem-definition and attribution), prognostic (solution-definition), and motivational framing (rationale for action). The latter core framing tasks are less germane to the identification of frames in corporate media, as motivational framing refers to a call to the arms from social movements to engage in corrective and collective action (Vliegenthart & Roggeband, 2007). Given our research interest in communicated challenges and solutions about older workers’ employability, diagnostic and prognostic frames fit well with our research goal.

The employability debate is multilayered and highly complex (Tikkanen, 2006). Recognizing this complexity, and following previous research (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training [CEDEFOP], 2010), we investigate diagnostic and prognostic frames located on the macro-, meso-, and microlevel of analysis. We first proceed with sketching the debate about older workers’ employability in more detail on these three levels. Second, in the subsequent sections, we argue how corporate media types and organizational characteristics effect variation in prognostic and diagnostic frames of older workers’ employability.
Levels of challenges and opportunities of the employability debate

First, on the macrolevel, several key problems and solutions regarding older workers' employability have been recognized. As is well acknowledged in (organizational) psychological literature, the employability potential of older workers is hampered by negative images of aging in society (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). Age-stereotypes are often seen as the cause of the tensed relation between factual demographic labor-market changes and employers’ resistance to hiring older workers. In most European countries reemployment probabilities are low, with the Netherlands being no exception (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2006).

To address these problems, changes in the regulatory framework are suggested. Dutch labor-market regulations historically strongly protect insider workers. However, to improve outsider (older) workers employability, it is stated that such employment protection measures should be abolished (OECD, 2006; Van Seln & Van der Heijden, 2013). Supply-side protection, such as tenure-based employment protection, is especially considered ineffective when it comes to stimulating the employability of older workers (Bovenberg & Wilthagen, 2008). In line with this, it is suggested that wage-setting practices should no longer be based on seniority principles, but on performance outcomes (Brouwer et al., 2012). However, changes in the policy climate are frequently contested and perceived problematic.

Actual changes in retention behavior of older workers are primarily dependent upon employers’ willingness and perceived need to do so (Vickerstaff, Cox, & Keen, 2003). This brings us to the second, mesolevel. The most challenging aspect of older workers’ employability on this level is the consequences of an aging workforce and the depletion of labor supply. Given the forecast of a decreasing labor force, organizations should pursue inclusive labor policies and invest in the maintenance of older workers’ productivity (see Euwals, De Mooij, & Van Vuuren, 2009). Fueled by the implications of demographic changes for individual careers and employment relations, the capability of workers to participate in a healthy and productive way until retirement, i.e., sustainable employability, is becoming increasingly important. To accomplish this goal, organizations are encouraged to implement life-long learning programs (Tikkanen, 2006).

Last, we move to the microlevel. Here, the focus is on the extent to which employability issues are attributed to individual skills and capacities of older workers. As noted above, older workers are generally perceived as less productive and healthy compared to their younger colleagues (e.g., Posthuma & Campion, 2009). To avoid deterioration of skills and health of older workers, it is suggested that employers should offer safety and health policies and provide appropriate training options (OECD, 2014). A less sustainable—but still popular—way to deal with older workers is to propose early retirement schemes (Van Dalen, Henkens, & Schippers, 2010). In addition, by offering job-rotation or training programs, organizations can set the stage for the fertile professional development of older workers. Table 1 provides an overview of the issues related to older workers’ employability on the macro-, meso-, and microlevel.

The above-outlined challenges and opportunities indicate the issue complexity of older workers’ employability for organizations. Given that so far no study empirically assessed how organizations communicatively deal with this issue, we pose the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How do organizations communicate about older workers’ employability in (a) diagnostic and (b) prognostic terms on the macrolevel (society) of analysis?

**RQ2:** How do organizations communicate about older workers’ employability in (a) diagnostic and (b) prognostic terms on the mesolevel (organizational) of analysis?

**RQ3:** How do organizations communicate about older workers’ employability in (a) diagnostic and (b) prognostic terms on the microlevel (individual) of analysis?
In addition to our explorative investigation of how organizations frame older workers’ employability, a central aim of this study is to trace variation in these frames. Specifically, we investigate the influence of corporate media types and organizational characteristics on corporate framing of older workers’ employability. In the following, we argue how frames will be affected by differences between internal and external media.

**Corporate media types: Internal versus external media**

In this study, we consider employee magazines as internal corporate media and annual reports as external corporate media. These types of corporate media differ considerably from each other with regard to their level of formality. As an important external channel to disclose social responsibility efforts (Bebbington, Larrinaga, & Moneva, 2008), annual reports are constructed in a strategic way and rely on rhetorical attempts to define reality. Especially when it comes to sensitive issues, annual report disclosures have been shown to use impression management (Neu, Warsame, & Pedwell, 1998). Although internal employee magazines also serve to improve the corporate image, they entail a stronger mirror function of everyday organizational life (Coninckx et al., 2009).

To understand how these differences between corporate media types impact the framing of older workers’ employability, the concept of ‘decoupling’ is of relevance. Decoupling processes refer to corporate attempts to maintain legitimacy, by disassociating organizational behaviors from core activities and actual practices (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Especially when it comes to sensitive issues, organizations have been shown to rely on decoupling in their communication in order to avoid associations with problems and focus on the solutions offered by the organization (Schultz, Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, Utz, & Van Atteveldt, 2012).

The work of Taylor and Walker (1998b) suggests that decoupling strategies might well apply to the issue of older workers’ employability. In their study on organizational policies towards older workers in the United Kingdom, the scholars demonstrated that a formal, paper policy of non-discrimination differed significantly from actual practices of managers on the work floor, who in practice might have continued to discriminate against older workers (1998b, p. 74). This example illustrates how the issue of aging workforces can take the form of a double-bind situation for organizations. In case employers (falsely) believe that older workers are less productive and more costly (Posthuma & Campion, 2009), they are likely to experience a dilemma between the need to...
stay financially competitive (Taylor & Walker, 1998a) and international policies and social pressures to adopt sustainable measures to deal with an aging workforce (see OECD, 2014).

We expect this conflict of interest between external pressures and internal problems to trigger decoupling processes, resulting in divergent framing in internal and external media. Specifically, being more formal in nature, we expect external corporate media to more strongly emphasize attempts to improve older workers’ employability, for example, by highlighting organizational policies to improve the health and education opportunities for their older staff. Put differently, with the aim to present a positive image of the organization towards external stakeholders, we expect that external corporate media will contain mainly prognostic frames. By voicing the strategic goals of higher management, organizations can present themselves externally as a responsive and responsible actor in the employability debate. On the contrary, we anticipate that employee magazines will more strongly resonate employee opinions and actual practices on the work floor. In this more informal corporate media type, there might be more room to express threats and perceived problems related to older workers’ employability. Hence, we hypothesize that the proportion of diagnostic frames of all frames will be higher in internal media compared to external media (H1).

**Organizational characteristics: Private versus public sector organizations**

Although all organizations eventually have to deal with workforce aging, the visibility and immediacy of demographic changes vary across organizational contexts (e.g., Pilichowski, Arnould, & Turkisch, 2007). With the aim to improve our understanding of how cross-organizational differences affect frames of older workers’ employability, this study explicitly compares public and private sector organizations. These sectors differ substantially in how they perceive and address issues related to workforce aging (e.g., Armstrong-Stassen & Schlosser, 2008). In public-sector organizations in OECD countries, workforces are ageing more rapidly compared to other sectors (Pilichowski et al., 2007). This makes the risk of knowledge loss particular pressing for this sector (Thomas, 2008).

Despite that this stresses the need for retaining older workers within public sector organizations, attitudes towards older workers are generally less positive in the (local) governmental organizations. Older workers’ reliability and adaptability are especially perceived more negatively in public sector organizations (Henkens, 2005). Potentially, this can be explained by the use of progressive salary systems in the public sector. Within European Union countries, on average, public sector older workers are found to enjoy a wage premium over comparable workers in private sector organizations (De Castro, Salto, & Steiner, 2013). Additionally, public sector older workers in the Netherlands benefit from relatively strong employment protection. As a consequence, job mobility among this group tends to be low, causing long working careers (Henkens, 2005; Henkens & Tazelaar, 1997). Whether this results in lower levels of motivation or productivity among Dutch workers in the public sector compared to the private sector is not clear. Yet, unease with the low job mobility and relatively high wages of older workers might well be reflected in public organizations’ communication. These concerns are associated with diagnostic framing elements on the microlevel, as they consider individual older workers’ skills and capacities. Hence, we hypothesize that public sector organizations compared to private sector organizations are more likely to frame older workers’ employability in terms of microlevel diagnoses (H2).

**Method**

**Sample**

Organizations in diverse sectors were contacted and requested to share their employee magazines and, in case not online available, annual reports, that were published in the timespan 2006–2013. Only organizations that employed at least 850 employees were contacted. A total of 50 organizations
participated. From these organizations, 80% is listed on the top 100 of largest employers of the Netherlands between 2011 and 2013 (Dekker, 2011, 2013). Following the Dutch Standard Industrial Classification (SBI) 2008, organizations were subdivided by sector. As displayed in Table 2, the sector Public Administration and Public Services is best represented ($n = 17$). The sample represents a good balance between private ($n = 24$) and public ($n = 26$) organizations. All the collected communication materials provided by the organizations were searched with a search string consisting of the following keywords: older workers and/or aging (within organizations /workplace) and/or (sustainable /lifelong) employability. This search resulted in 283 employee magazine articles and 151 annual reports issued by 40 organizations ($N = 434$). Hence, 10 of the 50 organizations did not actively communicate about the issue.

**Coding**

In this study, the unit of analysis was the employee magazine article or annual report. To code the material, several steps were taken. In the first inductive phase, diagnostic and prognostic frame categories were identified through qualitative analysis of a random sample of employee magazines and annual reports ($n = 100$). The dataset used is part of a larger project in which we additionally assessed news media framing of older workers’ employability. Our reliability sample is therefore partly based on news articles. The coding scheme and coding procedure were however completely equal.

A list of sensitizing questions was used to identify diagnostic frames (e.g., What is seen as the problem? Who is responsible for the problem?) and prognostic frames (e.g., What should be done to solve the problem? Which action is deemed necessary?) (For a similar approach see Vliegenthart & Roggeband, 2007). Additional coding units were analyzed until no new categories could be distinguished in the material. A distinct set of 11 diagnostic and 13 prognostic frames was identified, reflecting the multilayered nature of the employability debate (Tikkanen, 2006). The identified frame-categories were located at the macro-, meso-, and microlevel. In the second deductive phase, frames were coded during a manual quantitative content analysis by four human coders. A total of 1135 frames were coded. Coders were extensively trained. Reliability analysis yielded satisfactory results. Percent agreement for all frame categories was above 93%. Krippendorff’s alpha’s

### Table 2. Sample characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Companies</th>
<th>Employee magazine articles</th>
<th>Annual reports</th>
<th>Total items</th>
<th>Framing elements</th>
<th>Share of older workers*</th>
<th>Mean (SE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>.954 (.015)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy Supply</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>.97 (.011)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction Industry</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>.826 (.016)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.680 (.015)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport and storage</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>.994 (.014)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information and communication</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>.449 (.010)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial services</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>.587 (.008)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public administration and public services</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>1.124 (.007)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>1.358 (.008)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and welfare</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>1.095 (.005)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other services</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.822 (.018)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>1135</td>
<td>.976 (.270)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Sectors are based on the Dutch Standard Industrial Classification (Standaard Bedrijfsindeling) 2008. *A score of 1 indicates a perfect balance between young and old generations; values above 1 imply overrepresentation of older workers; values below 1 imply an overrepresentation of younger workers.
for individual diagnostic frames ranged between .61 and .85, and for individual prognostic frames between .61 and .88. These levels of reliability are in congruence with previous research in which complex categories were coded by multiple coders (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014). See Table 3 for an overview of the identified frames.

**Dependent variables**

**Diagnostic (vs. prognostic) framing.** To capture variation in the use of diagnostic frames relative to prognostic frames, the percentage of diagnostic framing elements relative to all framing elements is calculated \((189/1135 \times 100 = 16.7\%)\). Macrolevel diagnostic framing: The percentage of macrolevel diagnostic framing elements relative to all framing elements is used to capture variation in this dependent variable \((56/1135 \times 100 = 4.9\%)\). Mesolevel diagnostic framing: The percentage of the share of mesolevel diagnostic framing elements relative to all framing elements is calculated \((98/1135 \times 100 = 8.6\%)\). Microlevel diagnostic framing: We rely on the percentage of microlevel diagnostic framing elements, relative to all framing elements \((35/1135 \times 100 = 3.1\%)\). Macrolevel prognostic framing: We use the percentage of macrolevel prognostic framing elements relative to all framing elements \((116/1135 \times 100 = 10.2\%)\). Mesolevel prognostic framing: The percentage of mesolevel prognostic framing elements relative to all framing elements is calculated \((283/1135 \times 100 = 24.9\%)\). Microlevel prognostic framing: We use the percentage of microlevel prognostic framing elements relative to all framing elements to capture variation in prognostic framing on the microlevel \((547/1135 \times 100 = 48.2\%)\).

**Independent variables**

**External (vs. internal) corporate media.** This dummy variable indicates whether framing elements are derived from external (annual reports) (value 1) or internal (employee magazines) (value 0) corporate media. **Public sector (vs. private sector) organizations.** This dummy variable taps the public (value 1) or private (value 0) nature of organizations’ ownership. **Control variables:**

**Organizational Size.** Because organizational size is an important factor in explaining aging workforce management, retirement policies and behaviors (Loretto & White, 2006b), we control for this variable. We rely on the number of workers working within the organizations, as derived from annual reports and the database Orbis. **The Share of Older Workers.** Second, we control for the balance between older (50–60 years of age) and younger (30–40 years of age) generations within sectors and years, as a direct indicator of the urgency posed by demographic changes. A score of 1 indicates a perfect balance between young and old generations; values above 1 imply overrepresentation of older workers; values below 1 an overrepresentation of younger workers (see Table 2). Derived from Statistics Netherlands (2014).

**Analysis**

We combined different statistical techniques to analyze our data. In order to answer our research questions, we relied on descriptive statistics. To test our hypotheses, we relied on random intercept models. The formulated hypotheses address variables located at different levels of analysis, making random intercept models the appropriate choice of analysis (Hox, 2005). Our first hypothesis about the influence of corporate media type (H1) is situated on the lowest level of analysis (frames in external or internal corporate media), while our hypotheses about the influence of organizational characteristics (H2) is situated on the organizational level. Given this structuring in our data, for our analysis, we aggregated our data to monthly level observations for all frames for each organization. This allowed us to avoid missing values on the daily and weekly level, while overtime variation could still be accounted for (For a similar approach, see for example Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart (2009)). However, our data is not hierarchically nested, as different time periods may occur for one
Table 3. Diagnostic and prognostic frames on macro-, meso-, and microlevel.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Prognoses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Counteracting age-based stereotypes and discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age-based stereotypes and discrimination</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16.07</td>
<td>Negative stereotypes about older workers should be prevented or countered, for example, through the use of information campaigns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment among older workers</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>44.64</td>
<td>Stimulating employment of older workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protective employment measures</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12.50</td>
<td>Lowering employment protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage payment structures</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12.50</td>
<td>Alternative wage-structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage payment structures</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>Demotion or reduction of labor costs is suggested as a solution to improve labor-market mobility or to make older workers more attractive to hire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microlevel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Retaining protective measures and policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced productivity of older workers</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>8.78</td>
<td>Young, talented employees are needed in order to maintain the level of productivity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>Reducing the number of older workers, early retirement schemes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Developing the number of older workers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
Table 3. (Continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diagnoses</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Prognoses</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problematic health and wellbeing of older workers</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>42.86</td>
<td>Safety and health of workers</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>23.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older worker have a greater chance of dropping out due to illness and have higher/longer rates of absenteeism.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Occupational safety and health is perceived to be of importance to retain (older) workers' productivity.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stagnation and immobility</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17.14</td>
<td>Mobility, redeployment and job rotation</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>20.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older employees remain employed at the same organization and/or within the same job position for too long, causing skills erosion and stagnation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Older employees should maintain different job positions that better suit their age category. Job-to-job mobility programs are introduced or emphasized.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation conflicts and failure of inclusion of older worker</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25.71</td>
<td>Balancing generations and stimulating multigenerational workforces</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>11.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When different generations work together within one organization, this easily results in unease on the work floor and a lack of inclusion.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Older and younger workers should work together, age diversity within organizations must be fostered.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total microframing</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td>547</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total framing</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>16.65</td>
<td></td>
<td>946</td>
<td>83.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
organization, while each organization can also appear in several time periods. For this reason, we used a random intercept model with cross-classified levels. We employed linear regression multilevel models in STATA with three-level nested data: organizations, months, and frames. Ten organizations did not communicate about the topic and were excluded, leaving 40 organizations that were used in the analysis. In 14 of the 96 months, we did not find any frame, resulting in 82 months on the second level. In 25 occasions, frames were used multiple times by the same organization in the same time frame, leaving 1060 frames on the lowest aggregated level of analysis.

Results

Before we discuss the content of the different frames located on the different levels of analysis, we consider differences in the prominence of frames. Table 3 shows that, generally, prognostic frames \((n = 946, 83.4\%)\) are more common in corporate media compared to diagnostic frames \((n = 189, 16.7\%)\) \((\chi^2 = 1135, df = 1, p < .001)\). When comparing the different levels, it becomes apparent that diagnostic frames about older workers’ employability are mainly located at the mesolevel \((n = 98, 51.85\% \text{ of all diagnostic frames})\) and the macrolevel \((n = 56, 29.6\%)\) \((\chi^2 = 3.41, df = 1, p = .07)\). Compared to the mesolevel, diagnostic frames are significant less frequently located on the microlevel \((n = 35, 18.5\%)\) \((\chi^2 = 5.56, df = 1, p < .05)\). On the contrary, prognostic frames are most often located on the microlevel \((n = 547, 57.82\% \text{ of all prognostic frames})\), compared to the mesolevel \((n = 283, 29.9\%)\) \((\chi^2 = 350.7, df = 1 p < .001)\) and the macrolevel \((n = 116, 12.3\%)\) \((\chi^2 = 107.6, df = 1, p < .001)\). See Figure 1.

We now turn to the research question. We asked how organizations communicate about older workers’ employability in diagnostic frames on the macrolevel (RQ\(_{1a}\)). Here, we find most attention for unemployment among older workers \((n = 25, 44.6\%)\). Remarkably, age-discrimination is rarely acknowledged as a problem \((n = 9, 16.1\%)\). Labor-market policies receive even less attention. Only occasionally the maintenance \((n = 7, 12.5\%)\) or abolishment of protective employment measures \((n = 8, 14.3\%)\) is problematized. Finally, also wage structures \((n = 7, 12.5\%)\) are generally not discussed in diagnostic terms.

Regarding prognostic frames on the macrolevel (RQ\(_{1b}\)), we find most attention for measures needed to cope with unemployment issues of older workers \((n = 50, 43.1\%)\). Similar to the pattern of diagnoses, organizations do not frequently discuss labor-market policies in prognostic terms. Both the abolishment of employment protection \((n = 33, 28.5\%)\) and maintenance of protective measures

Figure 1. Diagnostic and prognostic frames on macro-, meso-, and microlevel.
and policies (n = 28, 24.1%) receive relatively limited attention. Finally, least attention is paid to demotion as a means to target the rising productivity-wage gap (n = 3, 2.6%) and policies to counter ageism (n = 2, 1.7%).

We now move to diagnostic frames located on the mesolevel (RQ2a). Here, we find that organizations mainly stress the implications of an aging workforce for individual organizations (n = 82, 83.7%); this is followed by the consequences of loss of knowledge for the organizational wellbeing (n = 16, 16.3%). Regarding prognostic frames on the mesolevel (RQ2b), organizations mainly emphasize the efforts they undertake to foster workers’ sustainable employability (n = 245, 86.6%); this is followed by the retention of knowledge (n = 38, 13.4%). We now discuss diagnostic frames on the microlevel (RQ3a). In comparison to the other levels of analysis, we find that organizations are cautious to report diagnostic frames on the microlevel. Problematic health and wellbeing of older workers (n = 15, 42.9%) is the most frequently used diagnostic frame on this level; this is followed by generation conflicts (n = 9, 25.7%). When communicating about older workers’ employability, organizations generally refrained from attributing problems to stagnation and immobility of older workers (n = 6, 17.1%) or their competences and qualities (n = 5, 14.3%).

Last, we discuss prognostic frames on the microlevel (RQ3b). Most attention is paid to education and training opportunities (n = 185, 33.8%); this is followed by policies to safeguard the health of workers (n = 126, 23.9%), mobility, redeployment, and job rotation programs (n = 113, 20.7%) and the need to balance generations and stimulating multigenerational workforces (64, 11.7%). The recruitment of younger workers (n = 48, 8.8%) and the reduction of the share of older workers via early retirement schemes (n = 11, 2.0%) are only occasionally framed as a solid solution to deal with future labor-market demands.

Hypothesis testing

To test our hypotheses about variation in frames of older workers’ employability, we now turn to the results of the random intercept models explaining frame variation across content and organizational characteristics (see Table 4, Model 1–7). Note that the control variable—organizational size—does not influence our dependent variables in either of the models. Table 4, Model 4, does, however, reveal a negative effect on the share of older workers employed in sectors on the likelihood that microlevel diagnostic frames are stated. This indicates that in sectors that employ a relatively large share of workers, the likelihood to find diagnostic frames is lower. For each unit increase in the share of older workers relative to younger workers, the chance to find microlevel diagnostic frames decreases by 8.66%.

We expected that the likelihood to find diagnostic frames would be larger in internal compared to external corporate media (H1). Model 1 explains variation in diagnostic frames relative to the use of prognostic frames. As expected, we find a negative effect of external corporate media on diagnostic framing. This finding indicates that external corporate media holds 18.63% less diagnostic frames compared to internal corporate media, keeping other factors constant. Models 2–4 display that external media is less likely to emphasize diagnostic frames on the macro-, meso-, and microlevel of analysis. We accept H1.

Last, we hypothesized that public sector organizations are more likely to frame older workers’ employability in terms of microlevel diagnoses compared to private sector organizations (H2). Model 4 shows support for this assumption. Generally, public sector organizations reported 4.59% more diagnostic frames compared to private-sector organizations, controlling for other variables.

Discussion

The question how do organizations communicatively deal with the issue of older workers’ employability has received little scholarly attention. The present study investigates how organizations frame
Table 4. Random intercept models explaining micro-, meso-, and macrolevel diagnostic and prognostic framing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Fixed part</th>
<th>Diagnostic (vs. prognostic) framing</th>
<th>Prognostic framing</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Macro</td>
<td>Meso</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
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<td>-18.635 (2.639)***</td>
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<td>.000 (0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Model 7</td>
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Random part

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<td>.037</td>
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</table>

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Note. Share of older workers and number of employees are centered at their grand mean. N level 3 (organizations) = 40. N level 2 (months) = 82. N level 1 (frames) = 1060.
the issue of older workers’ employability in their corporate media, and it traces the influence of corporate media types and organizational characteristics on these representations. The results presented indicate that the issue of older workers’ employability has become part of Dutch organizations’ communication strategies. This study reveals that organizations mainly emphasize the consequences of workforce aging on the mesolevel (organizational), and they highlight the positive efforts they undertake to maintain older workers’ employability on the microlevel (individual employee). They do this by communicating about organizational policies needed to tackle challenges of an aging workforce such as corporate programs to stimulate job mobility, educational programs, and health and safety policies.

Our findings reveal a mismatch between recognized diagnoses, mainly located on the macro- and mesolevel, and prognosis, mainly located on the microlevel. First, on the microlevel, corporate media encourage older workers, for example, to rotate jobs, and to take part in corporate programs that foster their health and knowledge. Yet, a clear rationale for the necessity to do so remains lacking in corporate media. Second, the focus on microlevel prognoses may give workers the impression that solutions located on the mesolevel (organizational) and macrolevel (political/societal) are of inferior importance. However, crucial solutions in the employability debate exceed the power of individual workers, as institutional and organizational factors are vital when it comes to fostering older workers’ employability (Loretto & White, 2006b). For example, labor agreements, such as wage settings, are negotiated in central bargaining agreements between employers’ and employee associations (Conen, 2013). Therefore, they exceed the influence of individual older workers.

In addition, our results indicate that corporate frames of older workers’ employability do not reflect the wide-ranging concerns of, and needed solutions for, today’s and tomorrow’s labor market (OECD, 2014). Our results demonstrate that when communicating about older workers’ employability, organizations are reluctant to highlight problems and more frequently focus on responsible policy measures. This does not necessarily indicate that employers’ retention and recruitment behaviors actually have changed. On the contrary, our findings show that organizations rarely communicate about policies with a more fundamental or controversial character in prognostic terms. For example, even though age-stereotyping is a prevalent phenomenon in the Netherlands and abroad (Van Dalen, Henkens, & Schippers, 2009), organizations are reluctant to identify this as a problem in need of suitable solutions when communicating about their own organization. Additionally, although adjustments in employment protection have been suggested as a means to cope with future labor-market supplies (OECD, 2006; Van Dalen et al., 2010), only a few organizations communicate about these policy types. The abolishment of accommodative measures apparently remains a delicate issue in the Dutch organizational landscape (Van Selm & Van der Heijden, 2013). Last, organizations are relatively reluctant to frame the improvement of older workers’ labor-market situation as a suitable solution. This finding is in line with actual employers’ practices in the Netherlands (e.g., Van Dalen et al., 2009). As a consequence, the position of outsider older workers remains relatively ignored in corporate communication.

These findings uncover a tension between strategic organizational goals and (external) pressures to improve the sustainability of older workers’ employability. More precisely, our results reveal a discursive tension between, on the one hand, resistance to discussing problems and alternative approaches to employment relations and labor agreements. And on the other hand, there is a tendency to emphasize good and responsible conduct in an effort to comply with governmental and societal pressures to deal with the issue of sustainable employability.

To resolve this tension, organizations presented the issue in a strategic manner, by weighing what they kept in and—maybe even more importantly—out of frame. That is, organizations highlighted good conduct and genuine intentions, framed in prognostic terms, such as their willingness to invest in training and education of older workers, while simultaneously silencing controversial issues, such as age stereotyping. In that way, organizations create a strategic ambiguity (see Eisenberg, 1984). This strategy may have helped organizations to avoid resistance of important stakeholders, such as employees, labor unions, and pressure groups, while at the same time appearing as a responsive and
responsible organization. Herewith, organizations actively constituted organizational meanings and practices with respect to older workers in and outside their organization (cf. Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004).

Our findings show that organizations by and large framed the issue along the lines of existing cultural believe systems, tapping into fixed preconceptions. That is, organizations used frames that promote the maintenance of generous employment protection and offering early retirement, which all resonate well with Dutch cultural and historical values of labor relations (Van Selm & Van der Heijden, 2013). Such cultural aspects of traditional labor-market institutions constitute the environment in which frames are created and meaning is made (Scott, 2003). At the same time, measures that break with conventional aspects of traditional Dutch approaches to work and employment, such as demotion (see Van Dalen & Henkens, 2015), were silenced. These culturally-resonant frames, moreover, seem to fit the strategic aims of the organization, allowing them to impart meaning to the issue of workforce aging along the lines of institutional traditions.

Furthermore, this study has demonstrated that corporate media types and sectoral differences explain variation in frames of older workers’ employability. Our analyses attempting to explain frame variation point to three interesting findings. First, considerably more diagnostic frames were identified in internal compared to external corporate media. As expected, organizations avoided associations between problems and corporate activities by highlighting the solutions and opportunities they offer. Arguably, corporate decoupling strategies to avoid associations with problems were less strong in internal media.

Second, we found variation across sectors in the manner that the issue of older workers’ employability is presented. Our analyses attempting to explain frame variation point to three interesting findings. First, considerably more diagnostic frames were identified in internal compared to external corporate media. As expected, organizations avoided associations between problems and corporate activities by highlighting the solutions and opportunities they offer. Arguably, corporate decoupling strategies to avoid associations with problems were less strong in internal media.

Third and last, although not anticipated, our results show that when a relatively large share of older workers is employed in sectors, organizations report less microlevel diagnostic frames. Thus, a relatively high number of incumbent older workers within organizations’ sectors decreased the salience of stereotypes about older workers’ skills, health, competences, and job immobility. This is in line with the Contact Hypothesis, which argues that, under optimal conditions, stereotypes about social groups, such as older workers, decreases when their familiarity increases (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Contact with older workers, thus, seems to be an important factor to improve older workers’ (perceived) employability, which points to the importance of intergenerational communication (Henkens, 2005). Given that in the coming years the number of older workers in all sectors will increase, these findings are hopeful.

As all Western organizations will eventually experience the consequences of workforce aging, the contributions of this study extend beyond the Dutch case. The presented findings add to the scholarly understanding of how organizations use frames to give meaning to workforce aging, which, in turn, may help to facilitate and manage demographic changes within organizations. The results suggest that organizations are paradoxically caught between resistance to fundamentally change existing organizational practices and labor agreements and the pressures from government and society to deal with the issue of sustainable employability (see also Billett et al., 2011). We have shown that organizations frame the issue in a strategic manner, using prognostic and culturally-resonant frames in (especially external) communication while silencing frames that problematize the issue or that break with current conventions. This allowed organizations to resolve the tension between pressures to comply with demands of dealing with workforce aging while simultaneously achieving organizational goals. A consequence of these conflicting interests is that actual practices often remain the same (Loretto & White, 2006a), leaving workers with vague cues about what is formally and informally expected (Conen, 2013, p. 74).
This study has a number of shortcomings. First, we only investigated large-scale Dutch companies. We, therefore, did not answer the question how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) address workforce aging in their communication material. Given that this is by far the largest group of organizations, this question deserves future attention. In addition, with respect to the generalizability of the findings, it should be noted that European countries vary with respect to policies aiming at age discrimination, retirement, and employment protection. We encourage future studies to investigate to what extent our findings hold in countries with different policies targeting older workers’ employability.

As noted by Tikkanen (2006), the issue of older workers’ employability demands a fundamentally different mindset of society, older workers, policy makers, and employers. To effectively tackle challenges of an aging workforce, the employability debate could benefit from a more honest organizational discourse about factors that hamper the chances of older workers inside and outside organizations. We encourage organizations to be more ambitious and take the risk to discuss sensitive topics and possible benefits and difficulties of adopting harder measures—such as changing wage-setting structures and altering employment protection (see also Van Dalen et al., 2009). In this way, organizations can be more responsive towards incumbent older workers about changes in labor structures, while simultaneously contributing to a stronger employability position of unemployed older workers.

References


