Images of older workers

Content, causes, and consequences

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Link to publication

Chapter 6

Managerial communication with older workers

Abstract

Managers are confronted with the challenge to support the employability of rapidly aging teams. Drawing on the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), in two studies we construct and test a conceptual model on communication barriers perceived by managers. More in particular, the model shows how managers' communication barriers to accommodate older workers' sustainable employability affects older workers' job performance and their access to promotion. From a set of qualitatively identified communication barriers, individual- and contextual-level barriers proved to negatively impact managers' perception of older workers' job performance and the intention to promote an older worker. The findings suggest that accommodative communication is needed to overcome the negative spiral of age stereotypes in a workplace context, and demonstrate the usefulness of extending the concept of accommodation from recipients' psychosocial needs to goal-oriented conversational needs in the workplace.

6.1 Introduction

The ability to adjust communication to the needs of others is critical to the success of conversations and the disempowerment of stereotypes in several domains of social life (Giles and Gasiorek, 2013), among which the workplace. The task to successfully adjust communication to the needs of organizational members is an especially daunting one for managers, who play a pivotal role in supporting the sustainable employability (hereafter: SE) needs of a rapidly aging workforce (Bal et al., 2015). As working lives are extending (OECD, 2014), it has become of growing importance that managers support older workers in preserving their wellbeing and employability along the way to retirement. Failure of managers to accommodate older workers' SE needs, – which relate to their health, professional development and work situation (Schoppers, 2014) –, may result in adverse consequences such as impaired performance, reinforcement of age stereotypes, and exclusion (Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser, 2008; Hansson, 2008).

The current problems associated with older workers' SE further high-

light the importance of managers' communicative support regarding the issue. In addition to, inter alia, strategic HR policies, constructive managerial communication is needed to break through the negative spiral of unequal access to training, promotion, and hiring opportunities that too often taint older workers' careers. At the same time, older workers are generally not motivated to extend working lives and invest in their SE (Hofäcker, 2015), a problem that has been partly ascribed to a lack of accommodation by managers (Leisink and Knies, 2011). Previous research shows that managers generally do not actively support SE needs – such as making explicit encouragements to take part in training programs – in conversations with the older workers they supervise (see Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser, 2008). As a consequence, older workers are frequently left in the dark regarding the importance and practical possibility of improving and sustaining their employability at later stages of their career.

Drawing on two studies, the current paper develops and tests a conceptual model of how managers' communication barriers to accommodate older workers' SE needs influences employability-related outcomes, namely; older workers' job performance and their access to promotion. To do so, we integrate two currently distinct bodies of research: gerontological-focused organizational studies and the literature on Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles et al., 1991). Previous research has started to investigate the influence of barriers to accommodative communication (e.g., Gasiorek, 2016), but has not yet incorporated the influence of contextual variables, nor investigated the process through which barriers to accommodation shape and impede recipients' employability opportunities. We use this model to demonstrate how individual and contextual-level barriers impede the access that older workers receive to promotion – a selection decision susceptible to the influence of age stereotypes. The study clarifies the imperative role of constructive managerial communication in dismantling the influence of age stereotypes in an organizational context. Furthermore, the findings allow us to provide recommendations on how to design an intervention that may help managers to improve communication on the topic, which is especially relevant in light of the attempt of European governments and employers to prolong, sustain and maximize older workers' labor participation. The study relies on a set of communica-

tion barriers that are theoretically grounded and qualitatively identified through in-depth interviews (N = 19) and subsequently quantified in a survey (N = 206) among Dutch managers to test the hypothesized relationships.

6.2 CAT and older workers' employability

The ability of managers to adjust their communication to the employability needs of aging workers has been recognized as a key managerial skill, yet; research into the topic remains scarce. To better understand how managers adjust their communication to the needs of their employees, the current study draws on the insights provided by the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT; Giles et al., 1991). CAT offers a framework for understanding speakers' adjustments in conversations, as well as recipients' perceptions and responses to such adjustments. To understand why and how speakers alter their speech in relation to their conversational partner, communicative adjustments are frequently studied in terms of linguistic and behavioral features (e.g., adjustment of speech speed, discourse management strategies) as well as psychological motives (e.g., managing social distance or facilitating comprehension) (Gasiorek, 2016). Both the demographic features of conversational partners, such as age (Gallois et al., 2005) as well as the position individuals occupy in an organizational setting, such as managerial or subordinate position (McCroskey and Richmond, 2000), have been shown to influence the process of accommodation. When communicative adjustments are aligned with the needs of the conversational partner, accommodation is reached.

As an extension to the CAT-literature, an emerging body of work has started to conceptually and empirically investigate the concept of non- accommodation (Gasiorek, 2016; Gasiorek and Giles, 2012; Giles and Gasiorek, 2013), defined as "communicative behaviors that are inappropriately adjusted for the participants in an interaction" (Giles and Gasiorek, 2013). As the recipients' responses to a lack of accommodation likely determine its negative effects, it is important to understand its sources and consequences (Gasiorek, 2015).

In the current study, we extend the concept of accommodation and apply it to the specific context of workplace conversations between man-

agers and older workers. That is, we translate CAT's theoretical premise from recipients' psychosocial conversational needs (subjectively defined by recipients) to specific employability conversational needs (defined by the literature on older workers' employability). We believe that in the applied organizational context – outside of intimate relationships (McCroskey and Richmond, 2000) –, the importance of employability conversational needs are especially salient. Following Giles et al. (1973) we do not conceptualize non- accommodation and accommodation as a dichotomy, but rather as a continuum, on which managers' position is the outcome of the relative strength of perceived communication barriers.

We define the conversational needs of older workers in terms of the key employability domains that require managerial support in order to sustain one's employability. Sustainable employability (SE) can be broadly defined as the extent to which workers can, and are willing to, perform their current and future work (Van Vuuren, 2011). This implies "that employees, continually in their working lives, dispose of actually realizable possibilities and the needed conditions to continue functioning in current and future work while maintaining health and well-being" (Van der Klink et al., 2010, p. 8). Older workers' employability needs differ from those of younger workers (Bal Kooij, 2015), and require active accommodation from managers on three key supportive domains: professional development, health, and job rotation[1](Schoppers, 2014).

First, managers should propagate opportunities for professional development and encourage workers to acquire skills and provide resources to do so (Longenecker, 2010). Second, managers should pro-actively address health-related issues in conversations with workers, and actively encourage healthy behavior. Last, managerial communication about the work situation, which is i.a. related to job rotation (i.e., variation in tasks and job positions) is needed to avoid experience concentration and a decline of work variety (Bal and Kooij, 2015).

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[1]Support for the work situation comprises more than just the encouragement of job rotation, such as facilitating ergonomic adjustments. In this study we focus on job rotation as an important aspect of managers' career guidance, which creates opportunities that support career development.

6.2.1 Managers' communication barriers

Our first goal is to investigate which communication barriers managers experience in accommodate older workers' SE. Extant literature suggests that managers experience communication barriers on the following levels: (a) the individual level (which relates to managers' stereotypes of older workers, as well as their communicative competence), and (b) the contextual level, concerning the environmental factors that may help or hinder managers' accommodative communication. We discuss this literature next.

Regarding communication barriers on the individual level, previous literature has extensively documented the widespread nature of negative stereotypes about older workers (Posthuma and Campion, 2009). Amongst other negative believes, older workers are generally stereotyped as not willing nor able to learn and develop (Gailliard et al., 2010). Ageist stereotypes have consequences for the accommodation of communication in the workplace (McCann and Giles, 2006) and beyond (e.g., Hummert et al., 2004). Group-based stereotypes can become activated in intergroup interactions, and may cause individuals to neglect individualizing information and arrive at incorrect conclusions regarding what a target knows and wants (Gasiorek, 2016). As a consequence, managers may accommodate to the stereotypes that they hold of older workers, rather than older workers' individuated SE needs. As workers' participation in training programs is largely dependent upon managers' encouragements (Hansson, 2008), the consequences hereof are troublesome. Indeed, there is evidence that access to training decreases strongly with age (Lazazzara et al., 2013), and that older workers' willingness to take part in training decreases if supervisors fail to provide developmental support (Van Vianen et al., 2011).

Second, low levels of accommodation may result from a lack of required skills and knowledge to adjust to others' communication needs, i.e., a lack of communicative competence. Managerial support regarding the issue partly hinges upon managers ability to accommodate older workers' SE needs (Leisink and Knies, 2011). Yet, the task to do so is challenging, as the issue is highly complex, and support not always appreciated; Especially longer-tenured workers may respond negatively to managers' suggestions to participate in training (Longenecker, 2010). Such negative responses may impede managers' sense of ability to mo-

tivate these workers to invest in their professional development.

Moving to the contextual level, previous research shows that certain issues related to SE are perceived as sensitive and therefore not talked about in a workplace context. When workers experience problems with, for example, the work pace, technological changes, or their health, they may not share this with their supervisor fearing that such information will harm his/her performance appraisals (Schoppers, 2014). This, in turn, makes it difficult for managers to adequately respond and accommodate.

In addition, access to financial resources as well as HR advice enables managers to support older workers (Furunes et al., 2011; Leisink and Knies, 2011), which demonstrates that "organizations have much leeway in setting the conditions that enable line managers to manage people" (Leisink and Knies, 2011). Based on the above-reviewed literature, we anticipate finding communication barriers to accommodate older workers' SE on the individual- and contextual-level of analysis. We ask:

RQ1   Which communication barriers do managers experience in accommodating older workers' sustainable employability?

6.2.2   The consequences of managers' communication barriers

Our second aim is to unravel the consequences of managers' communication barriers to establish the extent to which older workers can fulfill their task requirements, as well as the actual opportunities they receive in an organizational context that may foster their SE. The literature on CAT has documented the negative consequences of non- accommodation in several contexts. For example, a lack of accommodation by doctors may harm patients' health outcomes (Hewett et al., 2015). In addition, previous research has shown that non- accommodation in the form of patronizing talk directed at older adults implicitly conveys the notion of incompetence. This subsequently constrains older adults' opportunities to express their competence, as over time they begin to internalize the negative belief that they are incompetent (Hummert et al., 2004).

A similar process may occur in the applied organizational context. By reframing from accommodating older workers' employability, managers implicitly convey the message that older workers are not competent enough to be trained, take part in job rotation programs or join health promotional programs. The feeling of being part of an underperforming stereotyped group will induce processes of stereotype threat among older workers, which is associated with decrements in performance (see Camps and Rodríguez, 2011; Lamont et al., 2015). This process points to a self-fulfilling prophecy, where managers' communication barriers trigger the circumstances that contribute to the realization of the stereotype that older workers perform less (Henkens, 2005).

Previous research offers empirical support for the assumption that older workers' SE needs should be supported if one aims to maintain their performance levels. Only under the condition of high managerial support, older workers' work engagement and career success will be positively affected by organizational programs that provide employees with the opportunity to customize career trajectories (Bal and Kooij, 2015). The promotion of health in the workplace seems furthermore crucial for effective personal functioning. Last, previous research has convincingly documented the positive influence of managerial support on outcome variables closely related to job performance, such as older workers' career satisfaction, perceptions of organizational support (Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel, 2009), job satisfaction (Innocenti et al., 2013), and retention intention (Mountford, 2013). As communication with subordinates is a primary way for managers to express and fulfill their responsibilities, we expect that managers' communication barriers to accommodate the key domains of older workers' SE will negatively influence the extent to which older workers perform well in their job. We expect

H1   Managers' communication barriers to accommodate older workers' sustainable employability needs is negatively related to managers' perception of older workers' job performance.

job performance of older workers may negatively affect the promotion opportunities that individual older workers receive. If managers' older team members are not performing well, this may harm managers' overall evaluation of older workers' competence, and feed-

back into negative stereotypes that they hold of this group. Such reinforced stereotypes may, subsequently, have negative consequences for the appraisal of individual older workers, such as the decision to select an older worker for an internal job promotion. Negative stereotypes about older workers' competence and performance are seen as a driver of biased decisions regarding HR policies, such as access to training and promotion (Boerlijst et al., 1993; Maurer et al., 2008). Hence, in case general assumptions about older workers' performance influence decisions regarding individual promotion candidates this may further harm both the actual and perceived employability of older workers. We expect that:

H2   There will be significant indirect effects from managers' communication barriers to accommodate older workers' SE on the likelihood to promote an individual older worker (via perceived job performance of older workers).
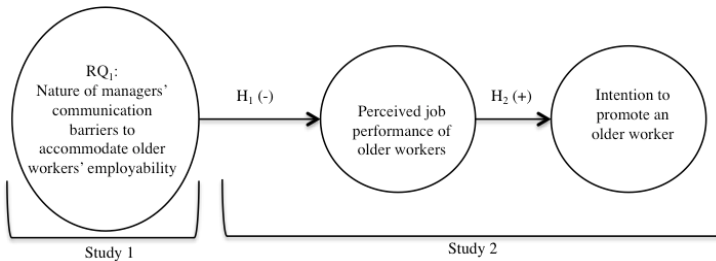

Figure 6.1: Conceptual model and study overview

6.3   Study 1

The first study aims to identify managers' barriers to accommodate older workers' SE. We consider the depth and richness of qualitative interviews necessary to identify managers' perceived barriers and gain an understanding of the circumstances that trigger their emergence. In

both studies older workers are defined as those above 50 years of age (McCann and Giles, 2006).

6.3.1 Method

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule, as this provides the structure to inquire theoretical preconceptions while allowing for open questions and follow-up queries (see Appendix). The questions were structured at the individual and contextual-level of inquiry, and focused on the key supportive domains of older workers' SE (professional development, health, and, job rotation). On the individual level, questions were structured around managers' perceptions of workers' behaviors and competencies with regard to SE, and the extent to which managers felt empowered to stimulate older workers' SE. Second, contextual level inquiries focused on the extent to which managers' felt legitimate and comfortable to discuss the key domains of SE, and concerned the extent to which organizational features and routines helped or hindered managers in addressing older workers' SE.

Sample. Managers were recruited in several steps, using purposive sampling with a maximum variation strategy (Marshall, 1996). It was deemed vital to select managers from a diverse set of organizations to unravel the influence of contextual factors on the emergence of barriers. In a first step, six managers were recruited from organizations that are considered pioneers in the Netherlands with regard to SE (Cuelenaere et al., 2009). In a second step, this sample was complemented with managers from organizations in diverse sectors and of diverse sizes. Data collection and analyses were alternated in iterative steps. The recruiting of managers continued until collecting additional new data did no longer result in the emergence of new dimensions or explanations (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The final sample consists of 19 managers, who supervised at least one subordinate above the age of 50. Due to time constraints of the interviewees, in three occasions managers were interviewed in pairs of two. On average, managers were between 30 and 59 years of age, with four managers being younger than 50 years of age. Of all managers, seven were female. Managers indicated that they supervised between 10 and 80 employees. Please consult Table 6.1 for additional sample features.

Table 6.1: Sample information Study 1

Interview	Interview subject	Interview date	Organizational type	Time interview
Interview1	Manager1	January 28, 2016	Waste management	47:20
Interview1	Manager2	January 28, 2016	Waste management	47:20
Interview2	Manager3	February 2, 2016	Knowledge transfer	21:52
Interview3	Manager4	February 7, 2016	Insurance	43:28
Interview4	Manager5	February 9, 2016	Insurance	44:03
Interview4	Manager6	February 9, 2016	Insurance	44:03
Interview5	Manager7	February 18, 2016	Insurance	35:25
Interview6	Manager8	February 29, 2016	Insurance	35:46
Interview7	Manager9	March 3, 2016	Energy	48:52
Interview8	Manager10	March 3, 2016	Municipality	53:46
Interview 9	Manager11	April 1, 2016	Vocational education	40:44
Interview 10	Manager12	April 6, 2016	Professional education	40:10
Interview 11	Manager13	April 12, 2016	Vocational education	35:00
Interview 12	Manager14	April 13, 2016	Vocational education	44:03
Interview 13	Manager15	April 14, 2016	Vocational education	36:28
Interview 14	Manager16	April 20, 2016	Professional education	58:58
Interview 15	Manager17	April 26, 2016	Internet provider	32:00
Interview 16	Manager18	Mei 19, 2016	Spatial development	50:50
Interview 16	Manager19	Mei 19, 2016	Spatial development	50:50

Data analysis. All interviews were fully recorded and transcribed. Subsequently, the data was analyzed using a thematic theoretical approach to unravel barriers on the identified levels (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As our analysis was guided by analytical preconceptions about barriers located on the individual and conceptual level, we restrained from using a purely inductive approach. We engaged with the literature in an early phase of the analysis, and used this engagement as a means to sensitize the analysis for data features that may contribute to answering our research question (Tuckett, 2005). We focused on managers' perceived barriers in addressing and supporting SE during both formal and informal conversations with workers of diverse age groups generally and older workers specifically, and how such barriers were amplified, shifted or overcome across different circumstances. During repetitive steps, the transcripts were re-read and initial codes were generated. These codes were then collated into themes and reviewed in the ongoing analysis (see the Appendix for an overview of codes on different levels of analysis). Finally, themes were refined and renamed to generate theoretical maps on the identified levels. The final themes presented below were chosen based on (1) explanatory power or (2) commonality of response.

6.3.2 Results

Individual level

Barrier$_1$: Belief that older workers lack desire and ability to learn.

The first subtheme resolved around managers' negative perceptions about attitudes and abilities of older workers. Most managers indicated that as workers age, their interests in professional development declined, as it becomes harder to motivate them to participate in training. Manager1 expressed that s/he felt older workers "just don't feel like learning anymore". This negative perception about older workers' desire to learn was often intertwined with a pessimistic perception of the extent to which the training of older workers could actually be beneficial. In fact, some interviewees doubted whether older workers were capable of improving certain skills:

"It is more difficult for them [older workers] to remember all that stuff and to keep up to date". (Manager10).

As a consequence, some managers adopted a laissez-faire approach regarding older workers and professional training. In proceeding extracts, managers reported that they expected older workers to be proactive and take the initiative for discussing possibilities for professional development. At the same time, some managers indicated that there are no direct implications for workers who refrain from adopting such a proactive attitude and do not participate in any form of professional training. Others expressed that they *did* invite older workers to discuss training possibilities, but that if such encouragements were not met with enthusiasm, they would not insist. Notably, other rules seemed to apply to younger workers:

"I'm not backing out of that conversation, but where I am persistent with younger workers, I am not with older workers" (Manager9).

This extract illustrates that managers' responsibility for older workers' professional development is bound by older workers' own initiative. In fact, managers highlighted that it is up to individual workers themselves to undertake action to improve their employability, as

"*It is their own choice*" (Manager10).

Barrier$_2$: Lack of managerial power.

Relatedly, the data revealed that managers at times feel powerless in convincing older workers of the importance to participate in professional training. This sense of powerlessness was related to two subthemes. First, managers reported feeling disturbed by the lack of urgency experienced by older workers. Interviewees explained that older workers often mistakenly feel secure in their jobs, due to change fatigue or generous employment protection, which makes them ignorant for potential (external) threats to their employment position. According to the interviewees, this sense of security prevents older workers from adopting a proactive attitude with respect to their employability, which paradoxically decreases their current work ability and therefore future job security. Managers felt this unwarranted sense of security among workers hindered them from getting their message across:

"*It is quite difficult to really get through to them and make them aware of reality. While for some, time is really running out, and they should act now.*"
(Manager7).

In addition, the feeling of powerlessness stemmed from a lack of know-how. Some interviewees admitted that they struggled with how to adequately respond to the dejuvenation of their team, as they lacked the needed knowledge to do so ("*We are just figuring things out*", Manager5). This was, in particular, the case for managers of private sector organizations whom reported feeling caught between increasing productivity pressures and employability concerns of their aging team. Nevertheless, the analysis indicated that a number of managers did not doubt their own capability to effectively address the issue, and attached great importance to spending time addressing their workers' current and future careers during formal and informal talks. These managers emphasized that they highly valued their connection with their subordinates and that they invest a "*disproportionate amount of time*" in conversations with them (Manager13). Yet, these managers reported

that other managers do fail in this respect:

"*There should be more awareness among other managers. Currently, managers deal with it [SE] in completely different ways.*" (Manager9).

The consequences of such a lack of awareness among managers about the importance of the issue was conceived as detrimental for individual older workers' careers:

"*…People are entirely dependent on whether a manager takes the trouble to actually see their subordinates for what they are worth. If they don't, this has a severe detrimental effect*" (Manager13).

Contextual level

Barrier₃: Legitimacy conflict.

A different theme that emerged relates to the legitimacy boundaries that managers experienced in addressing issues related to the wellbeing and health of older workers. Managers expressed that issues related to older workers' health and personal lifestyle are difficult to openly discuss. They felt these issues belong to the personal domain of workers, and that it is not up to them to interfere. Manager11 would only address health issues with her subordinates when daily work tasks are affected by it:

"*Not everything needs to be shared within the context of the organization. I think it is too difficult to discuss this [health issues] because you have respect towards the other [….] But when it starts affecting daily work tasks… That's the boundary line. Once that line is crossed, we will talk about it. Even though that is very difficult.*" (Manager11).

Barrier₄: Time constraints.

Moving to the next barrier on the contextual level, managers expressed that even though they were willing to invest in their subordinates' future, the daily pressures of productivity overruled the opportunity to really make a difference. Managers indicated that they are held accountable for the results of today and tomorrow. The pressure to live

up to these expectations jeopardizes the achievement of the long-term target of sustaining workers' employability, because *"short-term goals are always more important than long-term goals"* (Manager3).

Barrier$_5$: Lack of organizational investments.

In addition, managers expressed that they do not succeed in improving older workers' SE due to a lack of organizational investments. Managers indicated that training programs offered by their organizations are generally not differentiated per age group, while knowledge and training needs vary across workers' lifespan. In addition, managers voiced experiencing difficulties in helping their workers find alternative job positions when they were no longer employable in their current position, as such positions were often simply not available within or outside their organization:

"We all believe it [SE] is important, but there is not a concrete plan in place to deal with it [....] How we act upon SE differs a lot across situations, and I do not feel that [organizationX] has a clear policy or vision in this respect. Or at least, I haven't seen it." (Manager11).

In response to the question which communication barriers managers experience in accommodating older workers' SE (RQ1), an overview of the identified barriers on the individual and contextual level is provided in Table 6.2.

6.3.3   Conclusion Study 1

Relying on qualitative interview data with managers, the study identified five communication barriers that hinder managers in accommodating older workers to sustain their employability. First, and consistent with previous CAT research which shows that the presence of stereotypes hinders processes of accommodation (McCann and Giles, 2006), the results show that negative beliefs about older workers' desire and ability to learn impeded managers' accommodation. Second, a lack of managerial power to accommodate was identified as an influential factor. This is in line with previous CAT-research showing that communication competency is needed to reach accommodation (Gasiorek,

Table 6.2: Overview of the interaction between barriers located on different levels of analysis and three key supportive domains of older workers' employability

	Individual level		Contextual level		
	$Barrier_1$: Belief that older workers lack desire and ability to learn	$Barrier_2$: Lack of managerial power	$Barrier_3$: Legitimacy conflict	$Barrier_4$: Time constrains	$Barrier_5$: Lack of organizational investments
Domain 1: Supporting older workers' professional development	X	X		X	X
Domain 2: Supporting older workers' health			X	X	X
Domain 3: Supporting older workers' job rotation				X	X

2016). Third, managers at times felt conflicted about their legitimacy to address health issues in conversations with older workers. Although we know from the field of health communication that certain health-related topics are perceived as sensitive and potentially embarrassing (Shomaker and Ashburn, 2000), previous work has not yet identified this barrier in the context of the workplace. Last, both time constraints and a lack of organizational investments in SE were identified as barriers located on the contextual level. This illustrates that managers' ability to accommodate older workers in turn depends on the support they receive in their organizational context.

6.4 Study 2

The goal of Study 2 was to trace the consequences of managers' communication barriers, as identified in Study 1, for employability-related outcomes.

6.4.1 Method

Based on the results of Study 1, a questionnaire was drawn up and distributed among a sample of Dutch managers recruited by a panel of a

Dutch research company (N = 380). Managers above 22 years of age[2] were allowed to participate if they supervised at least one older worker, and carried managerial responsibility for at least five workers – as we wanted to test our hypothesis among people that spend a substantial portion of their time managing human resources. We included two attention check questions – one at the beginning and one at the end of the survey – as we deemed it vital that respondents read the instructions well. 166 participants failed these checks[3], 7 respondents did not finish the survey and 1 outliner was removed, making the sample size 206. The average age of respondents was 47.74 years old (SD = 10.99); 34.5% were female. Almost all respondents (94.2%) worked at least 30 hours during a general week; 50.5% worked at a private-sector organization, and 13.59% worked at a public-private partnership organization. Most of the managers completed higher professional education (52.4%) and supervised older workers with secondary vocational education (34.9%) or higher professional education (31.1%). Most respondents indicated to have at least four days per week contact with older workers (76.7%).

Communication barriers

To quantify the identified barriers, multiple indicators measuring the barriers were drawn up. All indicators measuring the barriers were pre-tested (N = 33) and subjected to Principle Component Analysis and internal consistency tests. Based on these results, items were removed, altered or reformulated for the final sample[4]. All communication barriers were measured on a 7-point scale (*1 = disagree very strongly, 7 = agree very strongly*).

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[2] Too many respondents would fall out if people between 18 – 22 years of age were included, as they typically do not supervise older workers (Kulik et al., 2017).

[3] Two attention check questions were used. Respondents were informed that respondents at times do not read instructions carefully, and explicitly instructed to mark the answer category "inapplicable" following the question: *"How do you feel?"* and the answer category *"I don't know"* following the question *"How interested are you in television news?"* 133 respondents failed the first attention check, 33 respondents failed the second attention check. We excluded these people because individuals that are not able or motivated to read the instructions are likely also not able or motivated to read the text of the biographies used to measure the dependent variable "Intention to promote an older worker".

[4] The scales were pre-tested among a sample of 33 respondents recruited via a general online recruitment site (Crowdflower) and a student recruitment site (Communication Science and Psychology) (57.58% male, M age = 32.09 (SD = 11.73)).

Barrier$_1$: Belief that older workers lack desire and ability to learn. The items used to measure the extent to which managers believe older workers lack desire and ability to learn were partly based on (Maurer et al., 2008). Respondents were asked to answer 5 questions measuring both sub-dimensions. A second-order confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model was constructed by assigning the items to the two sub-dimensions (beliefs of older workers' a. desire and b. ability to learn), which were then assigned to the second-order factor "beliefs that older workers lack desire and ability to learn". Higher scores indicate stronger negative beliefs. The sub-dimension 'belief that older workers lack desire to learn' was measured using 2 items ($M = 3.34$, $SD = .09$, $\alpha = .83$, example item: *"The older workers that I supervise respond enthusiastic on my encouragements to take part in a course, workshop or seminar"* [reverse scored]). The sub-dimension 'belief that older workers are not able to learn' was measured with 3 items ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.09$, $\alpha = .84$, example item: *"Older workers have a hard time learning new skills"*). The CFA-model with a second-order factor representing the constructs beliefs of older workers' a. desire and b. ability to learn fits the data better ($AIC_{second-order factor solution} = 9504.24$, $AIC_{two factor solution} = 9510.74$).

Barrier$_2$:Lack of managerial power. Two items were used as indicators of the latent construct "perception of managerial power" to encourage older workers to participate in training and professional development. Higher scores indicate a lower perception of their ability to accommodate older workers ($M = 2.71$, $SD = .08$, $\alpha = .78$, items: *"I do not know how to make the older workers I supervise aware of the importance to continue learning and developing"*; *"I struggle with the question how I can best motivate the older workers I supervise to participate in work-related workshops or seminars outside working hours"*).

Barrier$_3$:Legitimacy conflicts. Two items were included as indicators of the latent construct "legitimacy conflict", which measures the extent to which managers experience legitimacy conflicts when talking to older workers about health-related issues. Higher scores indicate less perceived legitimacy to address health-related issues ($M = 3.52$, $SD = .09$, $\alpha = .81$, items: *"I experience talking about health-related issues with the older workers that I supervise as a breach of their private life"*; *"It is inappropriate to talk to older workers about their health"*).

Barrier$_4$:Time constraints. To measure the extent to which time

constraints impede managers' accommodation of older workers' SE, respondents were asked to respond to three statements regarding their available time for addressing older workers' (a) professional development, (b) health, and, (c) work situation. The item measuring lack of time to deal with older workers' training was removed due to problematic convergent validity. The two remaining items were assigned to the latent construct "Time constraints". Higher scores indicate less time to communicatively accommodate these domains of older workers' employability (M = 2.79, SD = .10, α = .95, example item: *"I have insufficient time to talk with the older workers that I supervise about job mobility"*).

Barrier$_5$: Lack of organizational investments. Respondents were asked to respond to three statements regarding the extent to which their organizations invests sufficiently in older workers' (a) professional development, (b) health, and, (c) work situation to measure the latent construct "lack of organizational investments in sustainable employability." Higher scores indicate low levels of organizational investments (M = 3.29, SD = .09, α = .87, example item: *"My organization invests sufficiently in the job mobility of older workers"* [reverse scored]). For a complete overview of the items, see the Appendix of this Chapter.

Mediator and dependent variable

Perceived job performance of older workers. Four items[5] adopted and adjusted from Williams and Anderson (1991) were used to measure the latent construct "perceived job performance of older workers". Managers responded to statements regarding the performance of their older subordinates on a 5-point scale (*1 = disagree completely, 5 = agree completely*), such as: *"The average older worker that I supervise adequately completes his/her assigned duties."* Higher scores indicate more positive judgments about older workers' performance (M = 4.01, SD = .04, α = .93).

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[5]One item proposed by Williams and Anderson (1991) was removed due to low factor loadings

Table 6.3: Correlations, means and standard deviations

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	M	SD
1. Barrier$_1$: Belief that older workers lack desire and ability to learn	1						3.512	0.082
2. Barrier$_2$: Lack of managerial power	0.538 ***	1					2.706	0.083
3. Barrier$_3$: Legitimacy conflict	0.028	0.261 ***	1				3.413	0.106
4. Barrier$_4$: Time constraints	0.290 ***	0.439 ***	0.160 *	1			2.794	0.097
5. Barrier$_5$: Lack of organizational investments	0.093	0.216 **	0.235 ***	0.231 ***	1		3.298	0.091
6. Perceived job performance of older workers	-0.468 ***	-0.494 ***	-0.071	-0.282 ***	-0.277 ***	1	4.013	0.043
7. Intention to promote an older worker	-0.299 ***	-0.253 ***	-0.088	-0.147 *	-0.137 *	0.237 ***	0.626	0.034

Note. $*$ $p < 0.05$, $**$ $p < 0.01$, $***$ $p < 0.001$.

Intention to promote an older worker. Last, managers' intention to offer an older worker a promotion was measured using a simulation and decision task. Respondents were asked to imagine that, due to the vacancy of a position, they could offer one of their subordinates a promotion. Respondents were informed that there were two candidates and asked to carefully read two short biographies about them. The two candidates had the same profiles, except for age: One candidate was born in 1961, while the other was born in 1988. The following was done to assured that the two candidates were equally suitable for the promotion and that only age affected respondents' decision; both candidates were male, worked an equal number of years within the organization, and had a comparable level of education. A pre-test showed that both candidates were seen as equally suitable for the job when the candidate's age was omitted from the biographies[6]. The year of birth of the candidates was randomly reversed across biographies, so that half of the respondents were exposed to the scenario in which candidate A was old and candidate B was young, while the other half was exposed to the scenario in which candidate A was young and candidate B was old. After reading the biographies, respondents were asked whom they would promote. The output was of the first scenario was re-scored, so that the choice for a younger applicant (0) could be compared to the choice for an older applicant (1) ($M = .62$, $SE = .49$). See Table 6.3 for an overview of the variables.

Data analysis.
To test the hypothesized relations between managers' communication barriers, perceived job performance of older workers and intention to promote an older worker, we use Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Analysis were run in R using the lavaan (latent variable analysis) library (version 0.5-20) (Rosseel, 2012), as this package allows for probit modeling of our binary outcome while testing for fit indexes and indirect effects. Coefficients were calculated using the Diagonally Weighted Least Squares (DWLS) estimator with robust standard errors (Muthén, 1984). To assess model fit, we inspect the following fit incremental in-

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[6]Participants were randomly exposed to either the biography of applicant A, or the biography of applicant B, and asked to rate the extent to which they thought the applicant is suitable for the job (*1 = not likely at all, 7 = very likely*). The experimental conditions did not affect participants' perception of the applicant's suitability for the job (Applicant A (M = 6.06 (SD = 0.19)) or job applicant B ($M = 6.06$ (*SD* = 1.8)), $t(31) = .014$, $p = 0.98$)

dices: Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI). Values above .95 indicate good fit (Hu and Bentler, 1999). In addition, we inspect the root mean square of approximation (RMSEA). Here, values below ≤ 0.05 indicate good fit (Klink et al., 2011). Last, to evaluate the fit of the hypothesized model we inspect the Weighted Root Mean Square Residual (WRMR), with the cut-off value of < 1.0, which is especially appropriate for models with dichotomous outcome variables (Yu, 2002).

Before we proceed to the hypothesized model, the a priori specified confirmatory-factor analysis (CFA) model was examined to inspect the discriminant and convergent validity. The CFA model fits the data well: $\chi^2(114) = 169.91$; CFI = .98; TLI = .97; RMSEA = .05 (90% CI: .03, .064). The results consistent with discriminant validity as factor intercorrelations are well below the threshold value of .85 (Kline, 2011). On the basis of this we can assume that the factors measure distinct constructs. In addition, Figure 6.2 shows that convergent validity was generally satisfactory, as most standardized factor loadings were above .70 (Kline, 2011). These results justify the further examination of the structural model.

6.4.2 Results

We shortly discuss some descriptive findings. Managers indicated that they talked with older workers about professional development and health at a median rate of every six months, and about job mobility at a median rate of once a year. Respondents indicated that they discussed professional development ($t(205) = 3.61$, $p < .001$), and job mobility ($t(205) = 2.96, p < .01$) more frequently with younger workers (resp. $M = 3.68$, $SD = .06$; $M = 3.50$, $SD = .07$) compared to older workers (resp. $M = 3.43$, $SD = .06$; $M = 3.29$, $SD = .07$). No significant differences were found regarding communication about health-related issues with older ($M = 3.36$, $SD = .09$) and younger workers ($M = 3.21$, $SD = .10$). Additional analyses, shown in Table 6.4, reveal furthermore that young managers and those who supervise low-educated older workers experience higher barrier strength.

Hypothesis Testing. We now proceed to the results of the hypothesized model. The model fits the data reasonably well: $\chi^2(134) = 153.99$;

CFI = 0.94; TLI = 0.92; RMSEA = 0.04 (90% CI: .025, .056); WRMR = 0.56. Table 6.5 displays the unstandardized parameter estimates of the model, and Figure 6.2 shows the standardized parameter estimates. The results show that three barriers are negatively associated with managers' perception of older workers' job performance; we find negative paths from $Barrier_1$ (the belief that older workers lack desire and ability to learn); $Barrier_2$ (lack of managerial power); and $Barrier_5$ (lack of organizational investments). Substantially this means that if the strength of $Barrier_1$, $Barrier_2$, or $Barrier_5$ increases by 1, perceived job performance decreases by respectively .23, .21, and .10. $Barrier_3$ (legitimacy conflicts) and $Barrier_4$ (lack of organizational investments) were not significantly associated with perceived job performance of older workers. These findings offer partial support for H1.

Next, we expected significant indirect effects from managers' communication barriers to accommodate older workers' SE on the likelihood to promote an individual older worker (via perceived job performance of older workers) (H2). First, as could be expected, we find a positive association between the perceived job performance of older workers and the intention to promote an older worker; when perceived job performance of older workers goes up by 1, the expected change in log odds is .75 (odds ratio = 3.46, SE = .94). We verify if $Barrier_1$, $Barrier_2$, and $Barrier_5$ contribute to the intention to promote an older worker via reduced levels of perceived job performance. First, the indirect (mediated) path from $Barrier_1$ (beliefs about older workers desire and motivation to learn) to intention to promote an older worker via perceived job performance of older workers was significant: B = -.17, SE = .07, p < .05. Next, the indirect path from $Barrier_2$ (lack of managerial power) to the intention to promote an older worker is significant: B = -.16, SE = .07, p < .05. Last, also the indirect path from $Barrier_3$ (organizational investment) to intention to promote an older worker is significant: B = -.07, SE = .02, p < .01. We conclude that $Barrier_1$, $Barrier_2$, and $Barrier_5$ contribute to lower probabilities to promote an older worker via reduced levels of the perception of older workers' job performance. Robustness checks reveal that the results hold when adding covariates (e.g., managers age, education level respondent, education level subordinate older workers, intensity level of contact with older workers).

Table 6.4: Differences in barrier strength across younger and older managers, and those who supervise low educated and highly educated older workers

	Age manager				Education level older workers			
	<50 years	≥ 50 years	$F(df)$	p	Low educated	Highly educated	$F(df)$	p
Barrier$_1$: Belief that older workers lack desire and ability to learn	3.74(1.19)	3.26(1.11)	9.08(1,204)	**	3.65 (1.11)	3.28(1.26)	4.79(1,204)	*
Barrier$_2$: Lack of managerial power	2.96(1.28)	2.429(1,04)	10.54(1,204)	**	2.81 (1.24)	2.53(1,10)	2.75(1,204)	†
Barrier$_3$: Legitimacy conflict	3.57 (1.54)	3.24(1.48)	2.58(1,204)	ns	3.29 (1.41)	3.62 (1.68)	2.22(1,204)	ns
Barrier$_4$: Time constraints	2.92(1.36)	2.65(1.43)	1.90(1,204)	ns	2.97(1.41)	2.49 (1.34)	5.69(1,204)	*
Barrier$_5$: Lack of organizational investments	3.44(1.30)	3.14(1.30)	2.91(1,204)	†	3.36(1.30)	3.18(1.31)	0.91(1,204)	ns

Note. † $p <0.10$, * $p <0.05$, ** $p <0.01$, *** $p <0.001$.

Table 6.5: Unstandardized parameter estimates of the probit Structural Equation Model predicting intentions to promote an older worker with managers' communication barriers.

Independent variables	Dependent variables	B	SE	P
Barrier$_1$: Belief that older workers lack desire and ability to learn	Perceived job performance of older workers	-0.231	0.081	**
Barrier$_2$: Lack of managerial power	Perceived job performance of older workers	-0.213	0.083	*
Barrier$_2$: Legitimacy conflict	Perceived job performance of older workers	0.056	0.037	0.133
Barrier$_4$: Time constraints	Perceived job performance of older workers	0.007	0.025	0.765
Barrier$_5$: Lack of organizational investments	Perceived job performance of older workers	-0.095	0.023	***
Perceived job performance of older workers	Intention to promote an older worker	0.745	0.150	***

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

6.4.3 Conclusion Study 2

In Study 2, we have quantified the communication barriers identified in Study 1, and traced its consequences for managers' perceptions of older workers' job performance as well as their intention promote an older worker. The results show that negative beliefs about older workers' desire and ability to learn, a lack of managerial power and low levels of organizational investments in older workers' employability was related to lower levels of perceived job performance of older workers and a lower intention to promote an individual older worker. These findings demonstrate that managers' communication barriers are associated with the extent to which older workers are able to perform well in their job, as well as the opportunities they receive to enhance their careers. The degree to which managers experienced legitimacy conflicts when talking about health-related issues, as well as the time constraints they experience in talking to older workers, was not associated with the perceived job performance of older workers. A potential explanation for this is that, compared to the other supportive domains of employability (i.e., development and work situation), managers have limited in-
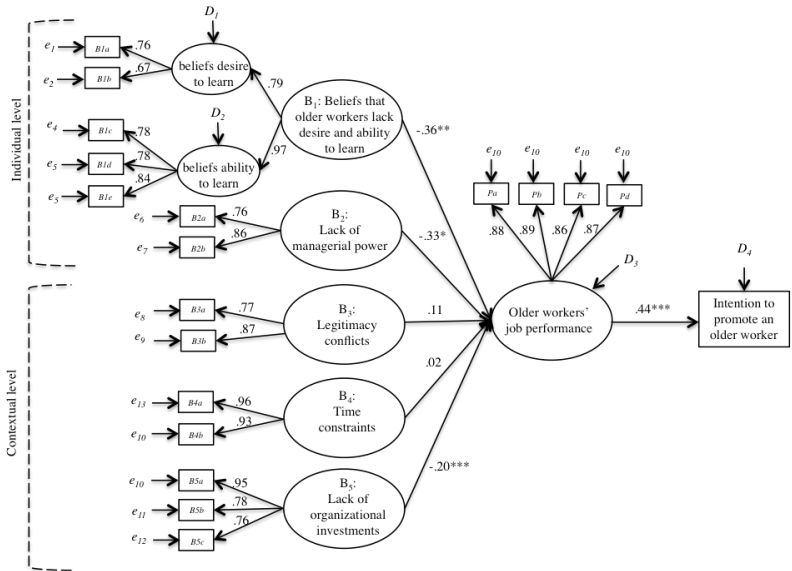
Figure 6.2: Standardized parameter estimates of the probit Structural Equation Model predicting intentions to promote an older worker with managers' communication barriers

fluence on how workers' health affects their perceived performance (as this may be shaped by workers' health history and habits). Second, as maintaining productivity levels receives high managerial priority, managers experience less hindrance of time constraints in case the perception of workers' job performance decreases, as they, whether or not under time pressure, have to deal with the issue.

6.5 General Discussion

Managerial communication plays a crucial role in helping older workers reach retirement age successfully, whilst sustaining their health and performance. Despite that previous research has frequently stressed the potential negative consequences of managerial failure to offer such

support, this is the first attempt to examine and quantify which factors hinder managers to successfully adjust their communication to older workers' SE needs, and identify the consequences thereof for the individual older workers they supervise. In a sequence of two studies, the paper identified and quantified managers' communication barriers to accommodate older workers' SE need, and demonstrated that individual- and contextual-level barriers negatively impact managers' perception of older workers' job performance, and in turn impede the likelihood that an individual older worker gets promoted.

A limitation of the current study is that older workers' perspectives were not included. In the CAT literature, the assessment of non- accommodation is generally made by the communication recipient. Yet, given the important role that managers fulfill in supporting older workers' SE, the perspective of manages was deliberately chosen as the focus on inquiry. Additionally, our cross-sectional design prohibits us to make strong claims about causality as both independent and dependent variables were measured at the same point in time; In fact, it is possible that lower perceived job performance of older workers further reinforced managers' communication barriers. Although this possibility should be acknowledged and further investigated, the here-tested hypothesized relationships were based on both theoretical and qualitative insights. We encourage future studies to unravel the causal relation between communication barriers and employability outcomes across time.

The presented findings have considerable practical potential. Practitioners and employers may use the here-proposed instrument for the assessment of SE management communication barriers to understand their managers' position on the continuum between non- accommodation and accommodation of older workers' SE needs. In addition, the results provide guiding principles for drawing an intervention that may help managers to improve communication on the issue. The results suggest that managers will benefit from a training in which they are informed about the manner in which they can best support older workers, as well as address sensitive issues in conversations with them. Such a training can also serve as a means by which the commonly held beliefs about older workers' ability and desire to learn can be openly discussed and called into question. In addition, measures should be taken on the

organizational level. The results suggest that organizations should financially invest in SE, by providing managers with sufficient time to address the issue and by offering HR-policies that target workers' job mobility, development and health.

Theoretically, we add to the study of intergenerational communication in the workplace and CAT in the following ways. First, we have shown that the Communication Accommodation Theory offers a useful approach to study employability-related conversations in organizational contexts. Where previous research has mainly considered conversational needs in psychosocial terms (Giles and Gasiorek, 2013), the here-presented findings show that – depending on the context – it may be useful to define recipients' conversational needs in terms of specific goals, such as what it takes to sustain one's career. This goal-oriented approach to accommodation offers a fruitful approach to understanding the successfulness of interactions in other domains of social life, such as health providers' accommodation to patients' recovery needs or social workers' accommodation to family members' need to solve financial problems. Second, this is among the first studies to trace sources of non- accommodation in a comprehensive manner, by looking at both barriers on the individual-, and contextual-level. Herewith, we contribute to the emerging work on why and how a lack of accommodation arises in several domains of social life, and with what domain-specific consequences (Gasiorek, 2016). Third and last, the presented findings suggest that communication adjustment is needed to breakthrough the negative spiral of age stereotypes in a workplace context (McCann and Giles, 2006; Mccann and Keaton, 2013), as communication barriers hinder (perceived) job performance and access, which in turn may strengthen negative stereotypes. Herewith, the findings further add to the role of communication in fostering the quality of life across the lifespan in several domains of social life (Gasiorek et al., 2015; Nussbaum and Coupland, 2004), among which the workplace (McCann and Giles, 2006).

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6.7 Appendix

6.7.1 Shortened interview protocol

Individual level

1. How do you experience the communication with the older workers that you supervise about
topics related to professional development, health, and, job rotation?
2. Can you describe a conversation with an older worker about SE?
3. What do you expect from older workers in conversations with them about SE?
4. Who is responsible for the SE of older workers?
5. How do older workers respond to your encouragements to improve their SE?
6. To what extent do you expect that older workers take initiative themselves to improve their SE?

Contextual level

1. Are there consequences of discussing SE-related topics for your relationship with the older workers that you supervise?
2. Do conflicts occur during conversations with older workers?
3. Do you feel comfortable discussing issues related to SE?
4. To what extent to you think that the older workers you supervise appreciate measures aimed at improving their SE?
5. Do you feel you have sufficient time to discuss issues related to SE with older workers?
6. What kind of measures does your organization provide regarding professional development, health, and, job rotation of older workers?
7. Do you feel your organization offers sufficient measures that foster older workers' SE?

6.7.2 Overview of first- and second order categories and communication barriers
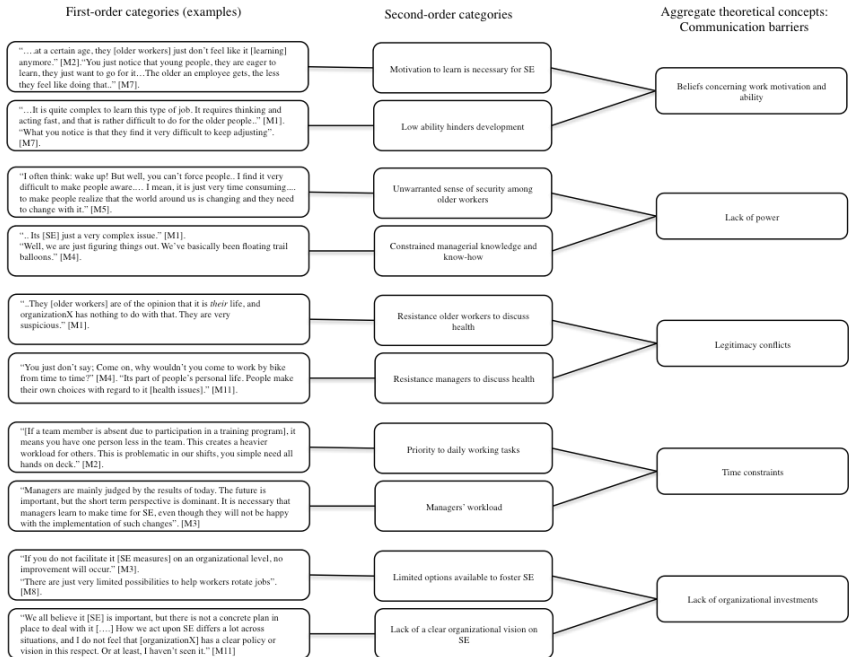

Figure 6.3: Overview of first- and second order categories and communication barriers