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In Search of the Older Worker: Framing Job Requirements in Recruitment Advertisements

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ABSTRACT

Older workers face problems in the labor market due to dominant beliefs about their abilities: they are perceived as reliable, trustworthy, and loyal, but also as less adaptable, less motivated, and less capable compared to younger workers. The mixed beliefs about older workers resonate with the stereotype of older people in society according to the Stereotype Content Model (SCM) of being warm but less competent and are reflected in news and corporate media. The present study contributes by approaching stereotypes about older workers' employability from a communication perspective. The study examines which requirements are communicated by employers in job advertisements targeting older job seekers, compared to those in job advertisements targeting general job seekers. This is done by using automated content analysis to inductively identify prominently advertised requirements, and to examine how these align with the older workers' stereotype. Additionally, interviews with recruitment experts are conducted to provide explanation and interpretation. Findings reveal that the persistent idea about older workers performing well on so-called soft abilities and poorer on so-called hard abilities is reflected in job advertisements targeting older job seekers, as these represent requirements related to hard abilities to a lesser extent, whereas abilities related to customer service are more often requested. The mixed beliefs about older workers are reflected in the expert perspective of recruiters too, although with some optimism that older workers' soft abilities fit well with employers' need for a social and responsible workforce. The study contributes to insights regarding the SCM and framing theory.

The issue of older workers' employability is high on the political agenda in many Western countries. This is caused by demographic developments of aging and dejuvenation, which implies a society that is characterized by a relatively lower number of young people compared to older ones. In the Netherlands, the population's proportion of people aged 65 years and older will increase from 19% in 2020 to 25% in 2050 (De Beer, 2020). The labor market participation of Dutch adults of 60 years and older has grown between 2010 and 2020, due to increased levels of education, improved health, and the rise of the retirement age (De Beer, 2020). Older adults are expected to stay on the labor market until at least 67 years old, and therefore this participation is expected to grow further in the years to come. At the same time, research shows a broadly held view that older workers are perceived as less able than younger colleagues to cope with the demands of complex and competitive contemporary organizations and that organizations tend to invest little in training and education of older workers (e.g., Boerlijst et al., 1993; Van der Heijden et al., 2009; Van Dalen et al., 2010b). In other words, older workers are facing problems in the workplace that are rooted in stereotypical

beliefs about their abilities (Bal et al., 2011; Conen et al., 2011; Perry et al., 2017; Posthuma & Campion, 2009; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006; Weiss & Perry, 2020).

Studies in the field of (older) workers' employability have shown that older workers are perceived as reliable, trustworthy and loyal, but at the same time as less adaptable, less motivated, and less capable compared to younger workers (Bal et al., 2011; Van Dalen et al., 2010b). Similarly, Karpinska et al. (2013) found that older workers are both positively and negatively perceived by employers. Positive perceptions are because of their assumed well-developed soft skills, defined as organizational citizenship behaviors, such as reliability and commitment, whereas negative perceptions exist because of older workers assumed lack of hard skills, such as innovation competencies and mental and physical capabilities (Karpinska et al., 2013, p. 1328). Soft skills versus hard skills have been defined in various ways, such as person-oriented skills versus task-oriented skills (Krings et al., 2011), intra- and interpersonal skills versus technical skills (Laker & Powell, 2011), and interpersonal qualities versus technical expertise and knowledge (Robles, 2012).

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In the present study, we aim to link stereotypical ideas about older workers to expectations regarding their work capabilities, and, therefore, some reflection is needed on how relevant concepts in this area, such as the concept of “skills” in the studies described above, relate to “abilities” that older workers are expected to possess. Sackett et al. (2017) define relevant concepts in this area as follows:

Generally *knowledge* has referred to facts a person knows; *skills*, to what a person currently can do; *aptitude*, to a person’s potential to learn, *achievement*, to what a person acquired after a given period of time; and *ability* has been used to mean all of the above.” (Sackett et al., 2017, p. 256)

Sackett et al. (2017) conclude that in the literature, a general distinction has been made between the potential a person has for learning and mental work (something ability-like) and what a person currently can do (skill-like). In the present study, we aim to address how perceptions regarding older workers’ mental and physical capabilities are reflected in the job requirements, and, therefore, we will use the inclusive term “abilities” to denote their expected capabilities.

Interestingly, stereotypical beliefs about the abilities of older workers do not reflect the actual performance of older workers as a group (Nauta et al., 2004; Ng & Feldman, 2012; 2013). In a methodologically rigorous meta-analysis, Ng and Feldman (2012) show that empirical proof is lacking for the idea that older workers are less motivated in their jobs, and, therefore, less forceful. The same is true for other prejudiced ideas: no correlation was found between the older age of workers and their willingness to change, dogmatic attitude, most health aspects, and work-life balance. Only with regard to two aspects, the correlation with age was found, indicating that older workers are slightly less willing to participate in training and career development, and that they suffer slightly more from heightened blood pressure and cholesterol (Ng & Feldman, 2012). However, the stereotype is persistent and widespread among employers (Krings et al., 2011; Oude Mulders et al., 2017), and communication through news and corporate media may contribute to this.

This paper, therefore, aims to approach the older workers’ stereotype from a communication perspective. Such a perspective provides a crucial addition to research on beliefs about older workers’ employability, as (corporate) media are influential sources in constructing and confirming stereotypes of particular groups, including older workers. Employers are active agents that communicate beliefs about older workers, at the work floor and in corporate communication outlets. In the current study, we investigate whether and how the older workers’ stereotype is reflected in employer communication, and more in particular in job advertisements. To understand the way in which age stereotypes foster or hinder the employability position of older job seekers, we examine what abilities are requested in job advertisements targeting older workers, and assess how recruiters and HR professionals reflect on older workers’ abilities and labor market position.

In the following, we will elaborate on the communication perspective by discussing theory on media influence, that is framing theory and the role of stereotypes in framing. Moreover, we will review recent empirical studies that use framing theory, and show how media

portrayals, both in news media and in corporate media, are an important source of labor market outcomes for older workers.

A COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

A communication perspective focuses on how prejudice and stereotypes materialize through communication (Kroon, 2017). Communication plays a crucial role in explaining workplace inequalities experienced by older workers (McCann & Giles, 2002). A communication perspective combines stereotypes about workers’ employability at the level of society, being mirrored in news and corporate media, with prejudice at the level of the organization, and their consequences for individual employees.

Framing Theory

Media are by no means a mere conduit for messages, but, instead, have an impact on the way in which topics and issues are perceived in society. The mechanism causing this impact has been described in framing theory (De Vreese, 2005; Entman, 1993). Framing has been defined as: “...selecting some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular definition of a problem, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). By selecting and emphasizing only certain aspects of an issue, frames evoke particular thoughts and interpretations of the issue (De Vreese, 2005; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). In this sense, a frame provides an organizing principle that helps individuals to make sense of an issue. Evidence shows a strong influence of framing on public opinion and the interpretation of issues (e.g., De Vreese et al., 2011). The occurrence of framing influence can be ascribed to the idea that individuals use shortcuts when they process information, and that frames make cognitions more easily accessible, at least temporary, and therefore will be used when evaluating the issue in question (Shen & Edwards, 2005). In sum, media frames may shape how individuals, including employers and older workers themselves, perceive and understand older workers’ capabilities and labor market position.

Stereotypes

Within framing, stereotypes have been conceptualized as powerful devices by which a frame can be identified (Van Gorp, 2005). Stereotypes are simplified versions of a particular social group or state of affairs that often include a prejudice. Individuals use stereotypes in everyday life situations in order to make quick judgments about others and to justify own behaviors. The Stereotype Content Model (SCM) developed within social psychology is insightful with regard to the older workers’ stereotype. The SCM describes two recurrent dimensions in group stereotypes: competence and warmth (Fiske et al., 2002). According to the model, a position on the dimensions results from interpersonal and intergroup interactions, during which individuals want to know how others relate to themselves or to their in-group (warmth) and how effectively other persons realize goals that they themselves or their in-group seek to achieve (competence). Out-group members are perceived as more competent to the extent that they are seen as more powerful and of high status, whereas they are perceived as warm and nice to the extent that they do not compete with others. The warmth dimension has been operationalized in

characteristics such as friendly, good-hearted, reliable, and sincere, whereas the competence dimension has been operationalized as being confident, capable, efficient, and intelligent (Fiske et al., 2002). When it comes to the position of older people as a social group on these two dimensions, this is characterized by a low level of competence and a high level of warmth (Cuddy et al., 2005). This position has been labeled as paternalistic (Cuddy et al., 2009; Fiske et al., 2002) and contrasts with, for instance, the envious stereotype identified with regard to groups that are seen as very competent but not warm or nice—a stereotype that may exist towards Young Urban Professionals (YUP) (see also, Cuddy et al., 2011).

Relating this to the literature discussed above on employers' negative perceptions of older workers' physical and mental abilities, and their positive perceptions of older workers' social abilities and responsibility, we see that employers comply with the general societal stereotype of older people, as being warm but less competent.

Krings et al. (2011) used the SCM as a framework for their study on age-discrimination in the context of work. In the study's experimental design amongst a student sample and a sample of HR professionals, the authors operationalized the warmth dimension into person-oriented job requirements and the competence dimension into task-orientated job requirements (Krings et al., 2011, p. 192). The study found that older workers were perceived as warmer but less competent compared to younger workers and that older workers were not preferred over younger workers even if the job mainly required warmth related qualities (Krings et al., 2011, p. 197).

Stereotypes in News and Corporate Media

As stated, stereotypes have been described as media framing devices. Empirical studies, using framing theory, have shown that the older workers' stereotype is echoed on news media portrayals and in corporate media, and in this way, the media framing of older workers contributes to the persistence of the stereotype. The studies revealed that stereotypical portrayals of older workers are present in newspapers and in corporate communication outlets (i.e., annual reports and corporate magazines), and are mixed in valence (Kroon et al., 2018). More specifically, in these portrayals, older workers are, on the one hand, praised for their mentoring qualities in sharing knowledge and experience, their commitment to task and organization, and their warm personality and reliability. On the other hand, older workers are portrayed as being expensive, technologically less savvy, less productive due to poorer health and less willing to participate in training (Kroon et al., 2018). Research also shows that stereotypical media coverage about older workers can have adverse consequences. Experimental evidence indicates that exposure to news in which older workers are portrayed as being friendly and loyal, but not innovation-minded, causes a decreased willingness in colleagues for choosing an older job seeker as a new team member (Kroon et al., 2016). At a more aggregated societal level was found that in years when more negative stereotypes were visible in the news, an increased number of age-discrimination claims were filed (Kroon et al., 2019). In addition, negative stereotypes of older workers may trigger low self-esteem and low performance in older workers themselves through a mechanism of self-stereotyping (Bai, 2014; Levy, 2003; Westerhof et al., 2010). Also, a negative image of older workers may lead younger people to consider their future career as a phase in life not worth looking forward to (Jopp et al., 2017).

Employer Communication

From a communication perspective, not only media framing through corporate and news media is deemed important, also employer communication is of crucial interest. By means of employer communication, organizations construct, confirm, and potentially transform their beliefs about older workers. Our study contributes by adding the role of employer communication, and more in particular job advertisements, to our understanding of the way in which age stereotypes foster or hinder the employability position of older job seekers. Job advertisements can be seen as instances of employer communication in which organizational values are communicated along with the profile of the ideal candidate (Allen et al., 2004; Walker et al., 2011). Today, jobs are increasingly advertised on the internet: on job boards or on networking sites. Among those websites, job sites that exclusively target older job seekers have been developed. Analyzing the content of job sites, and reflecting on these with HR professionals, represents a relevant angle provided by the communication perspective, as it offers an unobtrusive way for observing employer beliefs and expectations regarding the capabilities of older job seekers. In this manner, the communication perspective provides a valuable addition to studies addressing beliefs about older workers among employers that most often have been based on self-report survey data.

With respect to job sites catering to older job seekers, unclear is how these websites frame the type of jobs that older candidates are searched for, and to what extent these websites confirm or counter the older workers' stereotype. On the one hand, job advertisements might confirm the stereotypes in case the websites intent to appeal to self-stereotypes in older workers and emphasize that employers value older workers' soft abilities, such as loyalty and reliability. On the other hand, the job advertisements might present new views on older workers' capabilities, indicating that employers seek older candidates for other reasons. To be able to see which requirements are (and which are not) pronounced in job advertisements specifically targeted at older job seekers, the approach in our study is twofold. First, we compared the content of these job advertisements with job advertisements targeted at the general population in order to identify requirement types and differences. In order to do so, the following research question has been addressed:

RQ1. What requirements are described in job advertisements targeted at older and general job seekers?

To find out the underlying ideas about what requirements older workers searched for ideally would possess, we examine what type of abilities are emphasized or echoed, if at all, in job advertisements specifically targeted at older job seekers compared to job advertisements targeted at general job seekers. In line with the definitions of soft versus hard abilities discussed earlier, we will focus on interpersonal qualities as indicators of soft abilities and on technical expertise and knowledge as indicators of hard abilities. We expect that:

- H1a. Requirements related to soft abilities are more often present in job advertisements targeted at *older* job seekers than in job advertisements targeted at *general* job seekers.
- H1b. Requirements related to hard abilities are more often present in job advertisements targeted at *general* job seekers than in job advertisements targeted at *older* job seekers.

Second, we interview recruiters and HR professionals in order to explore expert reflections on older workers' abilities, labor market

position and possible measures that would help both older workers and employers. The aim here is to enrich the findings of the content of job advertisements, by providing insight into how recruiters and HR professionals reflect on older workers' abilities and labor market position. Therefore, we have addressed the following research question:

RQ2. How do recruiters reflect on older workers' abilities and labor market position, now and in the future?

METHODS

To empirically investigate how the requirements of older job seekers and general job seekers are addressed in job advertisements and by recruiters and HR professionals, we employed a mixed methods design of automated content analysis and expert interviews.

Automated Content Analysis

We used automated content analysis to compare the content of advertisements on job sites specifically targeted at older job seekers with the content of job advertisements targeted at general job seekers. More specifically, we relied on co-word occurrence analysis to inductively identify the most prominently advertised requirements in both types of job advertisements.

Data

Job advertisements specifically targeted at older job seekers were collected from job sites that are specialized in recruiting older employees, which concern both agencies and job boards. These agencies and job boards were found through search engines by using various search terms, until no new ones appeared. In defining older workers, different thresholds have been used in previous studies. A common definition that fits in well with the recruitment process is the one used in studies focusing on older workers *within* organizations. According to this definition, workers often qualify at 45 years as the older ones, as the focus here is on their age relative to their colleagues' age (Kooij et al., 2007). Similarly, in the recruitment process, it is about a candidate's age relative to that of other candidates, and we therefore adopt this definition and put the threshold at 45 years. Following this definition, we included nine relevant and active agencies and job boards in the Netherlands (These agencies and job boards apply different age limits [i.e., 45 plus, 50 plus, 65 plus]. With the exception of one agency that, in addition to job seekers aged above 50 or 65 years, also focuses on job seekers who are 40 years or older.), of which *Ervaren Jaren* (Experienced Years) is an example. The job advertisements offered on the job sites are from different sectors and for different types of jobs (e.g., jobs for lower versus higher educated people or jobs that are physically demanding or not); together representative of the jobs that are open to older job seekers. We have collected all job advertisements that were online available at each agency's or job board's own website at various times during a 6-month period, to increase the number of collected job advertisements. In this sense, we did not initially review the job advertisements, nor did we use certain exclusion criteria; the only job advertisements that were filtered out were a few duplicates. This resulted in a sample of 1,158 unique job advertisements targeted at older job seekers.

For our sample of job advertisements aimed at general job seekers, we selected job advertisements from different sectors and for different

types and levels of jobs, to strive for comparability with job advertisements for older job seekers. In practical terms, this means that we have selected job advertisements from 50 organizations (Appendix) belonging to the top 100 of largest employers in the Netherlands in 2015 (Dekker & Witteman, 2015). We have selected the first 50 organizations from the list, with a few exceptions due to (name) changes after a merger, the existence of subsidiaries with a strong focus on the Netherlands, or the lack of job advertisements on the website. We wanted this sample to be comparable in terms of size to the "older job seekers" sample, and as some of the selected organizations had many job advertisements available online, we decided to select the 20 job advertisements that were most recent in the week of data collection (from May 13, 2019 to May 19, 2019). These choices resulted in our final sample of 1,000 job advertisements targeted at general job seekers.

All job advertisements published on each agency's or job board's own website (for the "older job seekers" sample) or organization's own website (for the "general job seekers" sample) were extracted using a visual web scraper (*WebHarvy*). Per website, we first manually selected the relevant information to be extracted (i.e., job site, date, title of job advertisement, text of job advertisement), and based on this information we configured the web scraper. Subsequently, the web scraper used this configuration in order to recognize the patterns in the data and automatically collect all relevant data from the website.

Co-word occurrence analysis

In the co-word occurrence analysis, we have followed the approach of McLaren et al. (2018). We have two separate corpuses of job advertisements, the "older job seekers" corpus and the "general job seekers" corpus. For each corpus, we have compiled a list containing all words used in the job advertisements, arranged by frequency of occurrence. From these separate lists, we have selected the words that (1) are related to abilities requested from job seekers and (2) occurred more than 50 or 100 times, respectively. We have set the minimum number of times a word should occur in the "general job seekers" corpus higher than for the "older job seekers" corpus as the job advertisements aimed at general job seekers usually contain more words. This procedure resulted in 182 selected words from the "older job seekers" corpus and 193 selected words from the "general job seekers" corpus. These selected words from both corpuses were then merged, resulting in a final list of 269 words (76 unique words selected from the "older job seekers" corpus, 87 unique words selected from the "regular job seekers" corpus, and 106 overlapping words selected from both corpuses). These 269 words were included in a dictionary, and subsequently, all job advertisements were content analyzed on the basis of this dictionary, resulting in a document-term matrix that describes the number of occurrences for each word per job advertisement. In this matrix, rows correspond to job advertisements and columns correspond to words.

Next, we conducted a principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation to identify word clusters. These word clusters include words that occur often in the same context and therefore can jointly be considered to represent a certain requirement. Initially, the number of factors to extract was fixed at 10 for reasons of feasibility and interpretability. In a process of trial-and-error, based on different measures (i.e., eigenvalues, explained variance, screeplot) and theoretical

interpretation of the word clusters, we identified six factors that are indicative of coherent requirements or abilities. These factors together explain 13.8% of the variance in word use. Following common practice in this area, all words with a factor loading above 0.20 were selected to construct the factors (or requirements). We considered a requirement to be present in a job advertisement if at least three words (Since this decision is somewhat lenient, we also ran the analyses with a more stringent requirement to test the robustness of our findings. In these analyses, we considered a requirement to be present in a job advertisement if at least *four* words included in the factor occurred in the text. The results appeared to be largely the same, demonstrating the robustness of our results. We report further on this in the results section.) included in the factor occurred in the text (McLaren et al., 2018). Based on the joint meaning of the words, most notably of the words with the highest factor loadings, we formulated theoretically suitable labels for the requirements (Table 1).

Interviews

Qualitative expert interviews were conducted to enrich the findings of the automated content analysis by providing explanation and interpretation. In doing so, we gained understanding of the way in which recruiters specialized in recruiting older job seekers oversee and reflect on the causes and nature of stereotypical ideas regarding older job seekers, and consequences hereof for older workers' chances at the labor market. Expert interviews are defined by whom is interviewed (the expert) and what information is aimed for (expert knowledge) (Bogner & Menz, 2009). Expert interviews can either be exploratory in order to establish an initial orientation to a new or not yet defined field, or to develop a clearer idea of the problem (Van Selm & Helberger, 2019). Experts are attractive interviewees as their position in an organization provides them with practical insider knowledge,

network, and overview knowledge, and, therefore, can be interviewed as representatives for a wider circle of stakeholders (Bogner et al., 2009). Therefore, we interviewed the interviewees in their capacity of authorities in the field of older workers' employability (Flick, 2009), and focused on their ability to interpret the specific labor market context in which stereotypes held by employers operate. In this way, we rely on the knowledge and capacity of the interviewees to oversee and reflect on the views that are virulent in contemporary recruitment praxis. These reflections may also include possible solutions that might stimulate both employers' willingness to hire older candidates, and older workers themselves to maintain employable throughout their working career.

The experts in this study are recruiters and HR professionals in the recruitment field of older job seekers. Interviews were conducted by both authors, and a student-assistant who was trained in multiple sessions, including a mock interview. The interviewers used a semi-structured interview protocol, as this offered them theoretical guidance as well as the space to respond freely to the interviewees with follow-up questions (Appendix). The development of this interview protocol has been informed by the findings of the automated content analysis. The interview protocol was structured along five themes, which each included several initial questions and optional follow-up probes and queries that could be used to make interviewees clarify or specify their responses. An example of a theme that emerged from our automated content analysis of job advertisements is *capabilities of older job seekers or employees*. Within this theme, we asked the experts, for example, whether they recognized our finding that although soft abilities are mainly emphasized in job advertisements aimed at older job seekers, they are also sought because of certain competencies and the ability to learn new things (Appendix). Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour.

Table 1. Overview of Abilities: Outcomes of Varimax Rotated Factor Analysis

Abilities: Labels and Words	Total Variance Explained	
	Eigenvalue	% of Variance
Business operations abilities ($\alpha = .836$; $n = 46$ words) Insight, implementation, economic, result, senior, knowledge, business operations, developments, management, active, safe, plans, supports, advises, future.	12.927	4.806
Visionary leadership abilities ($\alpha = .833$; $n = 41$ words) Expertise, solutions, experience, responsible, team, strong, improve, develop, development, high, new, deliver, business, personal, in person	7.124	2.648 (7.454)
Customer service abilities ($\alpha = .831$; $n = 29$ words) Customer-friendly, representative, supportive, availability, facility, good, gladly, experienced, hands-on, clear, divergent, specializations, employable, handy, conscientious	4.882	1.815 (9.269)
Professional development abilities ($\alpha = .735$; $n = 32$ words) Ambition, grow, better, growth opportunities, learn, help, pleasure, together, many, nice, best, important, fast, naturally, fun	4.254	1.581 (10.850)
Social and collaborative abilities ($\alpha = .730$; $n = 18$ words) Collaborate, social, consult, care, caregiver, innovative, achieve, valued, diploma, alternate, oral, combine, future, problems, level	4.007	1.490 (12.340)
Communicative abilities ($\alpha = .685$; $n = 19$ words) Language, Dutch, command, English, communicative, point of contact, administrative, proficient, ambassadorship, level of thinking, secondary vocational education (MBO), controlled, attitude, institution, challenging	3.816	1.418 (13.758)

Sample

We used purposive sampling to select the interviewees (Charmaz, 2006). The most important selection criterion was that the interviewee had to work as a recruiter or HR professional in the recruitment field of older job seekers. Five interviewees were recruited from agencies from which we have collected job advertisements for the automated content analysis. These agencies are, per definition, specialized in recruiting older employees, although applying different age limits (i.e., 45 plus, 50 plus, 65 plus). Another interviewee was also recruited from such a specialized agency, but the agency was not included in our sample for the automated content analysis (This agency was not included in the automated content analysis because too few job advertisements were offered on the agency's website in the period of data collection. Despite the low number of job advertisements online, we argue that a recruiter from this agency is a valuable interviewee because the agency specializes in recruiting older workers and meets our definition of older job seekers.). Yet another expert was recruited from an elderly union. Finally, four HR professionals and other experts (two job hunters, one project manager, and one communication specialist) working for an older workers' activation program initiated by a large municipality were recruited. These four interviewees were interviewed in pairs of two. The final sample consisted of 11 interviewees, who all can be considered an expert on the issue of older job seekers. This number of interviews was set based on the results of our analysis process, which is discussed below. By alternating the conduct of interviews with analyzing the interview materials, we reached saturation on the main themes described, meaning that at this point, new data from the interviews did not add new insights to the analysis (Carlsen & Glenton, 2011; Guest et al., 2006). Therefore, the 11 interviews seem proportional to the interview themes described in the results section.

Analysis

Interviews, held in Dutch, were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed by both authors and a student-assistant to allow deep understanding of the material. Led by one of the authors, with intermediate reflection of and discussion with the other author, we used two phases of coding to analyze the transcribed interviews. Starting with a phase of open coding, we read through the interview materials in a systematic way and captured themes that emerged from the data (e.g., positive/negative capabilities of older workers, labor market developments, meanings of experience, generation differences). After identifying recurrent themes by one author, the other author reflected on the themes and assessed whether the themes were recognizable from the interviews, as well as whether important themes were still missing. In this sense, agreement on the coding was reached in consultation, which fits in with the qualitative and in-depth character of the interviews. Subsequently, we moved to the phase of focused coding. In this phase, we have sorted the codes by theme, and reviewed the themes by analyzing the extracts in more detail to determine whether themes should be put together or recoded, or subcategories and subthemes should be defined. Finally, the themes were extensively defined and described, and this is reported in the results section.

RESULTS

We will first discuss the findings of the automated content analysis before we discuss the results of the interviews.

Automated Content Analysis

We start by providing an answer to the first research question of what requirements are described in job advertisements targeted at older and general job seekers. From the co-word occurrence analysis, we identified six prominent requirements that are addressed in both types of job advertisements: business operations abilities, visionary leadership abilities, customer service abilities, professional development abilities, social and collaborative abilities, and communicative abilities (see Table 1 for an overview of these requirements including the words that—due to their factor loading—can be considered as most distinctive for a requirement). These six requirements can be divided into requirements that relate to soft or hard abilities. On the one hand, customer service, social and collaborative, and communicative abilities are related to the *soft abilities* category, as these are concerned with interpersonal qualities. On the other hand, abilities in terms of business operations, professional development, and visionary leadership could be categorized within the *hard abilities*, as these abilities concern individual mastery qualities (see also Kroon et al., 2018; Van Dalen et al., 2010a; 2010b).

To test the two hypotheses, we used chi-square tests of independence to see whether the prominence of requirements is different for the two types of job advertisements. Put differently, we compared the number of times a requirement was requested in job advertisements for older job seekers with the number of times a requirement was requested in job advertisements for general job seekers. Hypothesis 1a predicted that requirements related to *soft abilities* would be more often present in job advertisements targeted at *older* job seekers than in job advertisements targeted at *general* job seekers. As mentioned before, we identified three requirements related to soft abilities that were present in the job advertisements: customer service, social and collaborative, and communicative abilities. The relationship between the presence of customer service abilities and type of job advertisement was significant, $X^2(1) = 36.97, p < .001$. Job advertisements targeted at older job seekers were more likely to request customer service abilities than job advertisements targeted at general job seekers (Table 2). There also appeared to be a significant difference between type of job advertisement with regard to the requested ability to be social and collaborative, $X^2(1) = 265.17, p < .001$, but here job advertisements targeted at general job seekers were more likely to request social and collaborative abilities than job advertisements targeted at older job seekers. Finally, the relationship between the presence of the ability to communicate and type of job advertisement was also significant, $X^2(1) = 7.58, p < .01$, but again, communicative abilities were more often present in job advertisements targeted at general job seekers than job advertisements targeted at older job seekers. Hence, Hypothesis 1a was only partially supported, for the customer service abilities. We had to reject Hypothesis 1a for the other two soft abilities.

Hypothesis 1b predicted that requirements related to *hard abilities* would be more often present in job advertisements targeted at *general* job seekers than in job advertisements targeted at *older* job seekers. Three types of requirements related to hard abilities were identified in this study: business operations, professional development, and visionary leadership abilities. The relationship between the presence of business operations abilities and type of job advertisement was significant, $X^2(1) = 328.58, p < .001$. Job advertisements targeted at general job seekers were more likely to request abilities in terms of

Table 2. Main Results of the Presence of Abilities in Two Types of Job Advertisements

	Chi-Square Tests of Independence	Number of Job Advertisements in Which an Ability is Present			
		Targeted at Older Job Seekers (N = 1,158)		Targeted at General Job Seekers (N = 1,000)	
		n	%	n	%
Soft abilities					
Customer service abilities	$X^2(1) = 36.97, p < .001$	698	60.3	472	47.2
Social and collaborative abilities	$X^2(1) = 265.17, p < .001$	252	21.8	558	55.8
Communicative abilities	$X^2(1) = 7.58, p < .01$	380	32.8	385	38.5
Hard abilities					
Business operations abilities	$X^2(1) = 328.58, p < .001$	472	40.8	793	79.3
Visionary leadership abilities	$X^2(1) = 502.93, p < .001$	451	38.9	862	86.2
Professional development abilities	$X^2(1) = 437.03, p < .001$	438	37.8	823	82.3

Table 3. Robustness Check of the Presence of Abilities in Two Types of Job Advertisements

	Chi-Square Tests of Independence	Number of Job Advertisements in Which an Ability is Present			
		Targeted at Older Job Seekers (N = 1,158)		Targeted at General Job Seekers (N = 1,000)	
		N	%	n	%
Soft abilities					
Customer service abilities	$X^2(1) = 60.93, p < .001$	497	42.9	268	26.8
Social and collaborative abilities	$X^2(1) = 137.51, p < .001$	128	11.1	315	31.5
Communicative abilities	$X^2(1) = .01, p = .914$	256	22.1	223	22.3
Hard abilities					
Business operations abilities	$X^2(1) = 499.06, p < .001$	277	23.9	720	72.0
Visionary leadership abilities	$X^2(1) = 628.03, p < .001$	268	23.1	772	77.2
Professional development abilities	$X^2(1) = 617.44, p < .001$	217	18.7	719	71.9

business operations than job advertisements targeted at older job seekers (Table 2). For visionary leadership abilities, there appeared to be a significant difference between type of job advertisement as well, $X^2(1) = 502.93, p < .001$, and again job advertisements targeted at general job seekers more often requested abilities in terms of visionary leadership than job advertisements targeted at older job seekers. Finally, there also appeared to be a significant difference between type of job advertisement with regard to professional development abilities, $X^2(1) = 437.03, p < .001$, and this requirement was also more often present in job advertisements targeted at general seekers than in job advertisements targeted at older job seekers. Hence, Hypothesis 1b is confirmed.

To check the robustness of our results, we ran the analyses again, but this time a requirement was regarded as present in a job advertisement if at least four words (instead of three words) of the particular word cluster occurred in the job advertisement. As shown in Table 3, the results of our robustness check appeared to be largely comparable to our main findings, and therefore yielded the same conclusions regarding our hypotheses. The only exception was for the relationship between the presence of the ability to communicate and type of job advertisement, which was no longer significant in the additional analyses (Table 3). However, since Hypothesis 1a had already been rejected for this ability, this ultimately led to a similar conclusion as well. Hence,

overall, the results of these additional analyses confirmed the robustness of the findings of our study.

Interviews

In response to the findings from the automated content analysis, we conducted expert interviews to find out how recruitment professionals view and reflect on stereotypical ideas regarding the abilities of older job seekers virulent among employers and in recruitment praxis. First, we will discuss recruiters and HR professionals' reflections on how abilities of older workers are perceived by employers. Second, we will discuss how the experts consider these perceived abilities to resonate with labor market developments, such as a tight labor market, employer needs, and prejudice. Third, we will describe what recruiters and HR professionals see as typical obstacles for older job seekers, especially during the phase of applying. Finally, we will describe what age-related HRM policies and practices the experts consider as beneficial for both employers and older workers' position at the labor market.

Abilities of older workers

The recruiters and HR professionals emphasize, without exception, their expert view on older job seekers' value as being attractive

candidates for jobs in a wide range of sectors. According to them, older job seekers share a number of characteristics that, overall, relate to soft abilities. Many of these characteristics have to do with organizational citizenship. Examples are being reliable and loyal to an employer, being used to and accepting hierarchical order within the organization, and showing extreme low levels of sick days or other types of absenteeism.

“This building and construction company really likes to work with 50 plus candidates. They say: they [50 plus candidates] always give “act de presence,” are reliable, friendly, motivated, they do not walk out of the door immediately as soon as they can make a dime more somewhere else - these are things that are important.” [quotation 207]

“Young candidates responded to the question as to what they deemed important: equality – the absence of hierarchy. That is really different for 50 plus candidates. They are used to relations of authority and are loyal to their boss. That’s a difference, them being perhaps humbler so to say... thinking: well, if I get this task, I will just do it.” (quotation 88)

According to the recruiters interviewed, this work morale of older workers is further expressed by their flexible attitude towards working schedules and their solid work performance. That is to say, family life at home, without small children to be taken care of, offers more flexibility and willingness to work unpopular hours. Also, older workers do not wish for “hopping” from one job to another job, and, therefore, are considered workforce that can be counted on for a longer period in time.

“They [50 plus candidates] bring along life experience and know-how; also stability and not being a “job hopper.” They go for the long run.” [quotation 107]

Recruiters and HR professionals, further, characterize older candidates as excellent team players as they are socially able, polite, resilient, able to put things into perspective, balanced tempered and modest about their own achievements.

“I think that older people, for sure, do have a natural status in a group – in that they have a positive influence in a group of mostly young people. Youngsters amongst themselves can draw each other into the spiral of negativity, in which they consider every single thing as stupid, and do not feel like joining or doing something. The older person then goes: “Come on and behave – just treat each other with respect and hurry up doing your job”” [quotation 113]

Also, older candidates’ aspirations add to this. Recruitment experts see that older candidates do not aspire a career, but, instead, a pleasant work environment where they can perform in preferably meaningful roles. In this way, recruiters and HR professionals emphasize that older candidates generally are by no means competitors to younger workers.

“The good thing with retirees is their attitude of being a coach. They really are helpful, wanting to support you, without being a

competitor. I mean, they do not aspire the same career as young colleagues. And that is just a plus – they bring along peace, a certain degree of trust and confidence.” [quotation 148]

“We learned that older workers are not considered a threat by younger colleagues” [quotation 100]

In addition to these overly positive characteristics, the recruiters coin the issue of experience as more ambivalent. Having years of experience behind them makes that older candidates possess a lot of professional know-how, referring to both explicit and tacit knowledge about how procedures work best and tasks are easiest done. In addition, older candidates possess life experience by which they qualify as excellent mentors for younger colleagues. Both types of experience do, however, have a flip side. The recruiters explain that older candidates’ professional experience runs the risk of becoming outdated, especially in sectors such as IT, banking, and modern health care.

“In the previous period we worked with three candidates who unfortunately came back to us after a month. That was because they were considered not up-to-date enough with the technological developments needed... Especially in young and small IT companies this happens.” [quotation 67]

Another sentiment among the recruiters interviewed was that they felt that older candidates, in general, are digitally less savvy compared to younger colleagues, even though many older candidates are active on social media, such as Facebook and LinkedIn.

“What we see has to do with digitalization. Most older employees own a smartphone, just like anybody else, and use things like WhatsApp – but they are not as skilled as you and me. Many things that need to be done at the work floor, think of driver’s work, are digitally today. The drivers need to work with WhatsApp. That is an obstacle. Older workers take some more time to get used to such a thing at work, it takes longer before they grasp it, and they want to do things perfectly. That is something we notice” [quotation 124]

In addition, they explain that life experience can lead to stubbornness and skepticism towards modern ways of working, and to being more assertive about arrangements in the organization and its management.

“Experience is not always a plus ... having a lot of experience also implies being stuck without having an open mind towards new things. We now live in a fast changing world – and often employers have low expectations regarding older people’s ability and willingness to keep up with these.” [quotation 5]

Both aspects of the flip side may make that employers in some cases are reluctant to hire an older candidate.

Another issue discussed by recruiters and HR professionals refers to older candidates’ suitability for physically demanding jobs. Many jobs in health care or retail are physically demanding and, therefore, recruiters are sometimes cautious to mediate these jobs to older candidates. At the same time, recruiters tell that they try to find ways to accommodate for potential physical barriers as much as possible.

“Such as standing on your feet, all day long. That is something you need to be able to do – it can be too much. But some employers suggest placing a stool behind the desk and in this way being able to sit every now and then.” [quotation 98]

Summarizing, we see that recruitment experts emphasize the value of older candidates in terms of their soft abilities, i.e., their loyalty, reliability, and other forms of good organizational citizenship. Relating this to the content of job advertisements aimed at older job seekers, we mainly found an emphasis on customer service abilities with regard to the soft abilities. Regarding the hard abilities, recruiters and HR professionals emphasize the value of the older candidates’ know-how and life experience. At the same time, recruiters discuss these abilities as something older candidates need to update (digital skills, branch-specific know-how) or as something that employers need to be cautious about (physical capabilities). Low expectations regarding some of the hard abilities resonates with what we have found in the content of job advertisements targeted at older job seekers.

Labor market developments

In the interviews, recruitment experts also reflected on labor market developments, such as a tight labor market and employer needs. Recruiters and HR professionals mention the aging society, dejuvenation, and economic growth as explanations for why older candidates increasingly are discovered by employers as a reservoir of potential employees. Whereas 10 years ago, employers would be reluctant considering older candidates as valuable workforce, the experts stress that today the urgent need for employees makes that older candidates are no longer a blind spot, but, instead, become more attractive. During the interviews, it becomes clear that recruiters foresee two reasons older candidates are searched for: their readiness to work in part-time contracts in flexible hours, and their life experience and knowledge of human nature.

With regard to older candidates’ readiness to work in part-time contracts and flexible hours, recruiters and HR professionals refer to the growing group of retirees who look for a part-time occupation—and for which employers do not need to pay social benefits anymore. Retirees are interested in part-time work because of the additional income it generates, since some live from only an (incomplete) state-pension. Others like the opportunity of staying active in a job that is tailored to their wishes and needs, such as not working full-time anymore, working flexible hours, and bearing less responsibility. Yet other retirees emphasize the social aspect of being amongst other people.

Recruitment experts explain that in the growing need for flex workers, such as for jobs in passenger transport, package and meal delivery, or surveillance of student exams—older candidates compete with students. The lives of both students and retirees allow similar levels of freedom for combining flex work with other duties (at the students’ universities and in retirees’ families or voluntary work activities). However, according to the recruiters, older candidates are increasingly preferred over students for tasks that require knowledge of human nature, for example, in passenger transport of children with special needs, hospital patients, or elderly.

“Some employers really like working with 50 plus candidates. Especially in the shuttle service that drives persons from place

A to B. These are no nine-to-five jobs and employers ask for quiet people – it really is a pro to be a calm person, to empathize with elderly passengers, and also to drive in a calm fashion. The same goes for work in petrol stations: there they consider older candidates as being reliable, accountable, friendly, and not obsessed by their telephone.” [quotation 213]

“As an example: a driver vacancy. Probably nobody dreams of being a driver after retirement. But being a driver who takes challenged children to school ... it does not really take skills to drive – of course you need a drivers’ license – but it requires those soft skills, for example staying relaxed while driving and paying attention to the children in the right way.” [quotation 214]

“In companies there is a growing need for a large portion of flexible workforce for small and flexible activities and tasks, for instance in post and food delivery. These companies offer small jobs of four to five hours per day, three or four days a week. These jobs are attractive to retirees – not for those who have to make a living.” [quotation 216]

“A nice example is this baker who hired an older job seeker from Iran. The baker is very satisfied with his hire – as he told: “If I have to leave the shop for an hour, there is no problem anymore – I can easily leave the place in the hands of this man – he owned an ice cream salon himself, back in Iran.” [quotation 212]

Summarizing, we may conclude that recruiters and HR professionals foresee a win-win situation in the growing need for flex work that requires soft abilities on behalf of employers, and a growing group of retirees’ readiness to take up these flex jobs.

Reflecting on hiring procedures

According to the experts interviewed, older candidates, generally, find it hard to sell themselves and need coaching in this respect. Many have had long-lasting careers with the same employer and are not used to job searching activities or doing job interviews. According to the recruiters, modern ways of organizing job-events or hiring procedures do not always match with what older candidates are good at. Job events, such as job markets, are sometimes organized as a series of speed-dates between candidates and employers, resulting in 40 out of 200 candidates being selected. Other examples are pitch-events, at which candidates are expected to sell their qualities in front of a larger group of employers, or applying by means of a video-message. This means that presentation skills and social abilities have become increasingly important. The recruiters and HR professionals describe the older candidates as, in general, well-dressed and very well able of social conversation. At the same time, however, they are lacking some exercise in using these qualities in the job-seeking process. Therefore, coaching in doing job interviews is sometimes needed, especially when older candidates have been through many disappointing experiences that colored their self-confidence in a negative way.

“Many candidates have had a career with one employer and have been doing one type of work during their lives so far. By means of our training they discover what other talents and qualities they possess and how these could be used in another type of job.” [quotation 118]

Today, generally, job seekers are expected to apply online, uploading digital resumes and application letters, and sometimes the recruiting agency works with standard online application forms.

Recruiters and HR professionals sometimes encounter that older candidates fail to reflect on their own (un)willingness to keep up with developments and requirements of the modern labor market.

“Regularly, we meet candidates who are stuck in the past: angry at the world, all others are to blame except for themselves. The type of candidates not prepared to join training and, often, also lack social media- and computer skills. We try to make them realize that such an attitude is not appreciated by employers.”
[quotation 146]

Summarizing, the experts feel that older candidates may benefit from coaching and exercise in job-seeking activities, especially inasmuch as applying for a job today is done differently compared to how this was done many years ago.

Stimulation measures

During the interviews, the recruiters and HR professionals frequently referred to age-related HRM policies that would benefit both employers and older workers. More in particular, they emphasized the desirability of legislation and age-related stimulation programs that would accommodate employers in hiring older workers and bolstering older workers in keeping up with the hard abilities needed, in addition to soft abilities.

In order to accommodate employers in hiring older candidates, measures that reduce perceived risks are needed. According to the recruiters interviewed, these perceived risks are mostly based on stereotypical but persistent beliefs regarding the productivity and health of older candidates. Therefore, programs or bills aimed at compensating employers for possible health insurance risks, or offering a period of probation, would, according to the recruiters, result in an increase in hiring older candidates.

In addition, the recruiters interviewed make a plea for age-conscious HRM policies, by which workers aged 40 are stimulated to pause and reflect on their work career so far, and on how to keep up with or acquire the abilities needed for their position in the organization or labor market in the years to come. In this way, mid-career workers would bolster their employability. Some recruiters tell about older workers that were able of radically changing their working life.

“For example, a managing director who is now bus driver. He told: “no hassles and complex problems anymore, no targets anymore – no such things at all. I drive around in my bus and couldn’t care less.’ Others start doing artisan work, such as building wooden boats or designing and sewing fashion.”
[quotation 203]

Summarizing, recruiters and HR professionals emphasized the need for HRM instruments and policies that, on the one hand, reduce the perceived risks for employers of hiring older candidates, and, on the other hand, stimulate the sustainable employability of older workers in the workplace.

DISCUSSION

Our study shows that the requirements in job advertisements could be summarized by six factors, that mirror *soft abilities* (i.e., customer service, social and collaborative, and communicative abilities), and *hard abilities* (i.e., business operations, visionary leadership, and professional development abilities). The older workers’ stereotype of being good at soft abilities but poorer at hard abilities is reflected in the content of job advertisements targeting older job seekers. That is to say, in job advertisements on websites aimed at older job seekers, the requirements reflect hard abilities to a lesser extent than those in advertisements targeting job seekers in general. In addition, for customer service abilities, we found that this requirement was more prominently asked in job advertisements targeting older job seekers, whereas communicative and social and collaborative abilities were more prominent in job advertisements targeting job seekers in general. This means that in employer communication, the assumed abilities of older workers are framed in a stereotypical way, comparable to the older workers’ stereotype found in news and corporate media such as annual reports and corporate magazines. This shows that the older workers’ stereotype is present and used by employers to the extent that the stereotype is communicated in order to reach out to potential employees.

Our study, moreover, showed that recruitment experts agree that older job seekers are valued for shared characteristics that, overall, relate to soft abilities. With regard to other abilities, recruiters value older candidates’ know-how and life experience, but, at the same time, these need to be kept up-to-date. Further, we found that recruiters and HR professionals see a win-win situation in the growing need among employers for flex work that requires soft abilities, and a growing group of retirees who likes to take up these part-time jobs. Also, we found that older candidates benefit from coaching and exercise in job-seeking activities, as applying for work today is done differently compared to many years ago.

The importance of the ability to service customers, as found in the content of job advertisements targeting older candidates, is reflected in the interviews as well. Recruiters value older candidates especially because of this ability, that is related to life experience and knowledge of human nature and makes that older candidates are favored in passenger transport, client services, and other jobs with much interpersonal contact. This probably is good news for older workers’ chances at the labor market, as due to their excellence in customer service, older candidates may become increasingly attractive to employers and even preferred over younger candidates.

This finding and the previous one regarding the growing need for flex work are interesting as they resonate with studies on the modern labor market indicating that person-oriented qualities have become increasingly popular, as these are considered key requirements in modern workplaces (Hennekam, 2015; Goodwin & O’Connor, 2012). That is to say, older workers’ perceived soft abilities are considered beneficial to older workers’ potential value at the labor market (Hennekam, 2015), or even seen as an asset older workers have to offer to employers (Goodwin & O’Connor, 2012). According to Hennekam (2015), in many organizations, a shift has occurred towards mobile and team-based workplaces, in which communication, collaboration, integrity, empathy, reliability, and friendliness are increasingly important. These modern workplaces ask for people possessing soft abilities and,

employers may therefore, be motivated to attract older workers. The shift in workplace characteristics goes hand-in-hand with an overall shift towards a more service-oriented economy, in which interpersonal and customer orientation is increasingly important (Hennekam, 2015). As a consequence of this, Hennekam (2015) signals that employers might be particularly interested in employees' social abilities.

At a critical note, however, older workers' options might be limited to jobs that are unattractive to other groups of job seekers, because of the limited hours and the flexible character of the working schedules. Billett et al. (2011) signal that employers tend to turn to older candidates only as a last resort, in order to fill vacant "dead-end" jobs. On the other hand, older job seekers who place more value on socio-emotional goals in the workplace, such as having an enjoyable and emotional meaningful job or working around people they like, might prioritize and value other aspects of work than younger colleagues do (Fasbender & Klehe, 2019).

Theoretical Contribution

Our findings are also interesting from a theoretical point of view as they add to insights on the older workers' stereotype. As explained earlier, in a study on the effects of media stereotypes about older workers on attitudes towards older workers, it was found that in news messages about older workers' capacities, the negative impact of incompetence (lacking hard abilities) outweighed the positive impact of warmth (having soft abilities) (Kroon et al., 2016). This was caused by the mechanism that incompetence beliefs resonate with implicit prejudice, which, in turn, leads to a negative attitude towards older workers. Our findings in the present study may indicate that the perceived soft abilities of older candidates are not automatically evaluated in relation to (a lack of) hard abilities, but rather are seen as a set of requirements in itself. We can only speculate on this, but this could mean that the general stereotype about older people in society, as conceptualized in the SCM, might not fully resonate with the older workers' stereotype in the context of today's labor market. More research is needed to examine how demographic and conjuncture changes may challenge the older workers' stereotype for the better. In particular, future research should focus on how, in an aging society, these changes might challenge the meanings and values assigned to the older workers' position on the dimensions of the SCM.

In terms of framing theory, we build upon extant literature that focuses on stereotypes as powerful devices by which a frame can be identified and expand it to the understudied area of job advertisements as an instance of employer communication. While previous studies have relied on self-report survey data in addressing beliefs about older workers among employers, we contribute by applying an automated content analysis and proved its success in identifying a rather implicit way of confirming and communicating older workers' stereotype by employers. In this way, we also contribute to the literature on *implicit* media frames (e.g., Hellsten et al., 2010).

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to this study. First, we strived for comparability between the samples of both types of job advertisements by selecting job advertisements from different sectors and for different types and levels of jobs. However, in terms of representativeness, we could not collect all information necessary to (quantitatively) specify

the number of sectors, types and level of jobs included in both samples. This is because not all employers, agencies, and job boards provide the same information in the job advertisements. In some cases, information regarding the sector, type, and level of job could be collected, but in other cases this information was not (explicitly) included in the job advertisements. This means that both samples do comprise a variety of sectors and job levels, but we cannot specify these variations in numbers.

Second, in this study, we did not account for the fact that job advertisements targeted at job seekers of all ages, generally, comprise of more text (i.e., contain more words) compared to job advertisements targeting older candidates. This difference may have influenced the presence of requirements present in the advertisements, as we considered an ability to be present if at least three words indicative of a factor occurred in the text. The more words a job advertisement contained, the greater the chance that certain words were present, and, in turn, the greater the chance that an ability was present. Job advertisements that comprise of more text (i.e., contain more words) have in that sense a greater chance of containing (at least) three words of an ability. However, the difference in size of the two types of advertisements is mainly due to a more extensive description of the hiring organization, and not necessarily to more space devoted to a description of requirements.

Third, in the content of the job advertisements and the expert interviews, the focus was mostly on lower-wage and part-time jobs. Issues encountered by job seekers in the higher segments, therefore, may have been underrepresented. In future research, this group should be included too, as job seeking may be similarly difficult in the higher segment, less supported by recruiters and by municipality programs, and probably more surrounded by taboos.

Practical Implications

Based on our findings, recommendations for both organizations and older workers themselves can be formulated. Our study shows that stereotypical ideas about older workers are present on job sites for older workers and in the views of experts in the field of older worker recruitment. In addition, our findings also show reason for optimism, and this optimism is related to the potential match between employers' need for a workforce that possesses social abilities and a sense of responsibility, and the growing number of older workers or job seekers possessing those abilities, especially customer service abilities. Both employers and older job seekers would benefit from HRM instruments and policies that support employers in hiring older candidates and stimulate the sustainable employability of older workers within organizations.

Based on our findings, organizations would do wise in increasing knowledge about older workers' abilities and aspiration in a realistic way, in order to prevent thinking and acting in terms of the general stereotype of older adults as being warm but incompetent. Raising this consciousness could be done by developing a communication guide that departs from realistic and up-to-date knowledge about older workers (Van Selm & Van der Heijden, 2013). Such a communication guide ideally would offer a tool for tailoring realistic messages about older workers through corporate communication outlets within organizations as well as aimed at publics outside the organization, including job advertisements. The more often older workers are portrayed in a

variety of work settings and jobs, including working in flexible contracts and in irregular working hours, the more often older candidates will be considered regular workforce, and the more is taken into account to protect their sustainable employability. The communication tool could provide guidance to managers in emphasizing realistic communication about older workers' abilities, by making visible their normality as well as their successes, and endorsing them as role models to other (older) employees. This can be done during everyday informal encounters at the work floor, by means of meetings, training programs, and personnel projects, but also by means of increasing their visibility in formal corporate communication outlets, and by hiring them in case of vacancies. This could eventually also help employees to distance themselves from the older workers' stereotype (e.g., Weiss & Weiss, 2019) or metastereotypes (e.g., Weiss & Perry, 2020).

In addition, organizations could more carefully focus on what older workers themselves seek for in different phases of their later working life. Our study showed that, according to the recruiters interviewed, older workers that start or keep working after pension age, seek work partly because of their need for meaningful roles and valuable social contacts, instead of aspiring a career. It would be valuable to examine the need for meaningful roles in more detail among older workers themselves, by analyzing whether this aspect is in line with the "meaning of working" model developed by Baltes et al. (2012). The authors reviewed life span theories and showed that career success means something different for older workers compared to younger ones. Whereas until midlife financial rewards and expectations are strong motivators in working careers, the impact of these aspects decline with aging. Baltes et al. (2012) explain that, based on the "meaning of working" model, this might partly be due to the economic factor of having less financial obligations in later life, but also the result of developmental choices made by older workers. Older workers increasingly seem to value balancing work and private life over monetary benefits or achievement motives. In a similar vein, other scholars argue that for older workers, achievements in employment become less important after having spent several decades in work and having already achieved many career and life goals (Fasbender & Klehe, 2019; Heckhausen et al., 2010). Furthermore, work in the lives of older employees is valued because of the positive social interactions it offers, and the sense of meaningfulness (Baltes et al., 2012). This might be explained by the idea that aging goes together with an intensified focus on those relationships that provide emotional closeness (Carstensen, 1992). Also, Hennekam (2015, p. 1125) found that older workers' focus increasingly is towards feeling needed and respected as a member of an organization, and a sense of adding value to the organization, whereas Beal (2016) argues that organizations need to understand that older workers are looking for positive contacts with colleagues and feeling valued for what they have to offer to the organization. Therefore, older job seekers do wise in putting emphasis on their excellence in social abilities and responsibility when applying for work, as these abilities are welcomed by employers and resonate with employer beliefs about older candidates.

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APPENDIX

Shortened interview protocol

Theme 1: Interest for Older Applicants and Employees at Your Organization

1. What do you and your organization mean by an older job seeker or employee?
2. When did you and your organization get interested in older job seekers and employees?
3. What was the reason for this interest?

Theme 2: Capabilities of Older Job Seekers or Employees

1. What do you and your organization think is characteristic of capabilities of older job seekers and employees?
2. *Our analysis of job advertisements specifically targeted at older job seekers shows that, on the one hand, soft skills are important such as being involved, service-oriented and communicative, and having good mentoring skills. On the other hand, older job seekers are sought because of hard skills such as certain competencies and the ability to learn new things.* Do you and your organization recognize this? Which aspects do you and your organization recognize? Which not?
3. What differences do you and your organization perceive between older employees and younger employees (25 to 35 years)?
4. What differences do you and your organization perceive between older employees and employees in the middle age group (35 to 45 years)?
5. What role does health and well-being play?

Theme 3: Experiences With Older Applicants

1. What can you tell about your and your organization's experience with older applicants?
2. What do you and your organization think is characteristic of the job advertisements specifically targeted at older job seekers?
3. *In our analysis, we noticed that job advertisements specifically targeted at older job seekers often concern (small) side jobs or jobs aimed at lower educated job seekers.*

Do you and your organization recognize this? Which aspects do you and your organization recognize? Which not?

4. What differences do you and your organization perceive between job advertisements targeted at older job seekers and job advertisements targeted at general job seekers?

Theme 4: Age-Diverse Pairs, Teams, or Departments

1. Which aspects do you and your organization think are important if people of different age or generations work together?

Theme 5: Keeping (Older) Employees Employable

1. In what way do you and your organization keep older job seekers and employees employable?
2. Does this require different measures for older job seekers and employees than for younger job seekers and employees?
3. What challenges for the future do you and your organization see in the field of employability?

Names of the First 50 Organizations of the Top 100 Largest Employers in the Netherlands in 2015

Politie, Defensie, Rabobank, Albert Heijn (instead of Ahold), Belastingdienst, PostNL, Ministerie van Veiligheid en Justitie, KLM, Asito (instead of ADG Dienstengroep), NS, ABN Amro, UWV, ING, CSU Cleaning Services, KPN, Achmea, Philips, Gemeente Amsterdam, Facilicom, Royal Dutch Shell, VolkerWessels, Jumbo Supermarkten, Gemeente Rotterdam, McDonald's, Eveen (instead of Espria), Hago (instead of Vebego), Blokker (instead of Blokker Holding), Tata Steel, Erasmus MC, UMCG, Ministerie van Economische Zaken, BAM, Rijkswaterstaat, Transdev (Connexion and Veolia Transport), 's Heeren Loo, UMC Utrecht, ASML, Engie (formerly called GDF SUEZ), Dirk (instead of Detailresult Groep), A.S. Watson, Friesland- Campina, VDL Groep, Radboud umc, Eneco, NN Group, Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, Zuyderland (instead of Orbis Medisch en Zorgconcern; fusie Atrium), Parnassia Groep, Gemeente Den Haag, Vumc (because Rechterlijke macht did not have enough job advertisements).