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12 Attitudes of managers and older employees to each other and the effects on the decision to extend working life

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INTRODUCTION

Why do some people work to a greater age while others leave working life prematurely? Demographic change in many countries in the Western world, with the elderly making up a greater proportion of the population, may have consequences for the socio-economic system of those countries. In order to decrease the maintenance burden, some countries have discussed raising the pension age. It is important to examine and support positive factors that improve the work situation of older workers.

The decision to leave or extend working life is probably based on a combination of different factors. Previous studies have shown that people who feel that the organisation pays attention to them consider their work worthwhile and satisfactory (Höög 1985). Good relations to management and work colleagues increase productivity and motivation to work, while at the same time decreasing the incidence of illness (Herzberg et al 1959; Herzberg 1966). Older workers who perceive the working environment as attractive, and as an opportunity for stimulation and socialising, stay in working life for longer (Seitsamo et al 1997; Ilmarinen 2006). Previous research has also shown that the opportunity for further training increases the desire of older employees to continue their working life, but older people learn in different ways from younger people (Kilbom Å et al 1996; Ilmarinen 2003). Satisfaction with management attitudes has a positive effect on the work ability of older employees, while lack of acknowledgement and appreciation at work have the most negative effects (Tuomi et al 2001; Lindgren 1999). Uninspiring work, poor leadership and lack of flexibility in the work situation also seem to be correlated to decreased work ability (Seitsamo et al 1997; Ilmarinen 2006). It is important, in staff retention, for an organisation to have a positive attitude to older workers, and be aware of their quality of life (Vercruyssen 2003; Landstingsförbundet 2002). Older workers are sometimes described as being slower, more quickly exhausted, less interested in new knowledge and less

flexible than younger people (Warr 1994; Nilsson et al 2004). On the other hand, older workers are sometimes also described as more loyal, trustworthy, accurate, careful and reliable than their younger colleagues (Warr 1994; Nilsson et al 2004). A previous study found that employers in general had a negative view of older workers in the workplace, but this was mostly attributed to poor knowledge of conditions for older workers in working life (RFV Analyserar 2001). This picture of older workers was found to be less negative in organisations and branches where experience from a long (working) life and knowledge was considered important, and in sectors with a lack of employable persons (RFV Analyserar 2001).

The aim of this chapter was to examine the attitude of managers to their older employees, and the attitude of these older employees to their managers, in terms of extending their working life. Specific research questions examined were: How did the older employees feel about their managers' attitude to them as older workers, and was this important for their decision to extend their working life? What were the attitudes of employers and managers to their older employees, and were they interested in these older employees extending their working life?

The research questions were examined in studies carried out in Sweden using existing methods (see Materials & Methods section). According to calculations, the proportion of working people aged 65 years or older in Sweden is going to increase from 18% in 2008 (Statistics Sweden 2010) to 22% in 2020 (Statistics Sweden 2009). Since 1976, the state retirement age in Sweden has been 65, but since 2000 the Swedish pension system has made it possible to start drawing an occupational pension from 61 years of age (RFV 2004). The economic benefits increase if the individual remains in employment up to and beyond the age of 65. After a worker's 67th birthday, it is up to the employer to decide whether that individual can continue in work or not (RFV 2004). The pension system also includes economic incentives for the employer to keep older employees until the upper age. For example, the employer does not have to pay employer's contribution for employees once they pass 65 years of age (RFV 2004).

MATERIALS AND METHOD

To examine the two research questions, the results from two cross-sectional attitude studies of employees and managers/employers were analysed. Those studies were sponsored by three organisations: The Swedish National Institute of Working Life; the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions; and Sweden's south county council Region Skåne. Some of the results presented in

this paper have been published previously in the Swedish language (Nilsson 2005a, 2005b, 2007).

Study 1

The studies on older employees were a result of a cross-sectional postal survey. The subjects were people aged 55 years and older, in employment in the healthcare and medical services sector in the south of Sweden (Nilsson 2005a, 2005b). The study was located in the southern county council, which at that time had a total of 4,982 employees of the relevant age in the occupations: doctor, nurse, nursing assistant, physiotherapist, occupational therapist, psychologist, welfare officer and medical secretary. Psychologists, welfare officers, occupational therapists and physiotherapists were grouped together (as PWOTP) in the occupation list, giving five groups of occupations. The aim was to have equal groups of 600 individuals randomly selected from each different occupation group. However in the PWOTP group there were only 542 individuals aged 55 years or older, so the target number could not be met. The final selection consisted of 2,942 individuals.

In total, 1,949 responded to the questionnaire after two reminders, giving a response frequency of 66%. The overall age range in the study population was 55-74, with a median age of 59 years. Due to the fact that the workforce in the healthcare and medical services sector is dominated by women, 83% of the respondents in this study were women. The study population consisted of 19% physicians, 20% nurses, 20% nursing assistants, 19% medicine secretaries and 19% from the PWOTP group. The remaining 3% did not state their occupation. The proportion of non-participants was highest among physicians (25%) and lowest among the PWOTP group (14%). The median age of the non-participants was 58 years. The results from the employee survey were calculated as percentage frequency, and some are presented in the Results section of this paper.

There were two questions about the time of retiring from work in the questionnaire. One was 'I think I can work until ...'. The other was 'I want to work until ...'. Based on their answers to these questions, the study population was classified into four new groups:

- Group 1 (43%): Those who think they can not, or do not want to, work until the age of 65 or beyond. Their median age was 58 years and they were mostly women.
- Group 2 (37%): Those who think they can, and want to, work until the age of 65 or beyond. Their median age was 60 years and they were mostly men.

- Group 3 (17%): Those who think they can, but do not want to, work until the age of 65 or beyond. Their median age was 59 years and they were mostly women.
- Group number 4 (3%): Those who think they can not, but want to, work until the age of 65 or beyond. Their median age was 58 years and there were no gender differences.

Group 2 consisted of mostly physicians, psychologists and welfare officers; Group 1 of nursing assistants and nurses; Group 3 of occupational therapists and physiotherapists and Group 4 of physicians and medical secretaries.

The 150 questions in the survey were sorted into the following 12 areas: health, economic, working pace, working time, physical work environment, mental work environment, work satisfaction, work motivation, attitude to work, organisation policy, competence, family and leisure. The new groups were analysed by cross tabulation with these items, a process that distinguished 124 variables where there was a distinct variance between the four groups. The next step in the process was to make a factorial analysis, to find the questions with the greatest information value. This eliminated 35 variables, leaving 89 significant variables. The subsequent step in the analysis was to examine the four groups formed based on the 'can' and 'want to' variables in terms of the final variables from the factor analysis by discriminant analysis. The discriminant analysis identified the most characteristic factors for Group 2 (those who think they can and want to continue their working life) in relation to the other three groups. .

Study 2

The manager study was also a cross-sectional study (Nilsson 2007). The questionnaire in this study was constructed using the questionnaire and the results in study 1, but unfortunately the older employees in study 1 and the managers in study 2 did not work at the same workplaces. The questionnaires were distributed to 2, 965 municipal managers included in the e-mailing list of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities. These managers work in different urban districts in Sweden within: primary school, secondary school, nursery, healthcare, disability home, retirement home, social welfare, library, public transport, grounds maintenance, road maintenance, fire station, water services and energy services. After four reminders, 905 managers answered the questionnaire, giving a response frequency of 31%. The causes of this low response rate are probably many, but there were three specific factors. i) The mailing list had not been updated recently. This increased the dropout rate because some managers had moved from their workplaces, had new e-mail addresses or had left their work; ii) the internet questionnaire was a relatively

new phenomenon at this time and in this area and many managers complained that they could not print it out; and iii) the questionnaires were distributed in December, when the managers were very busy.

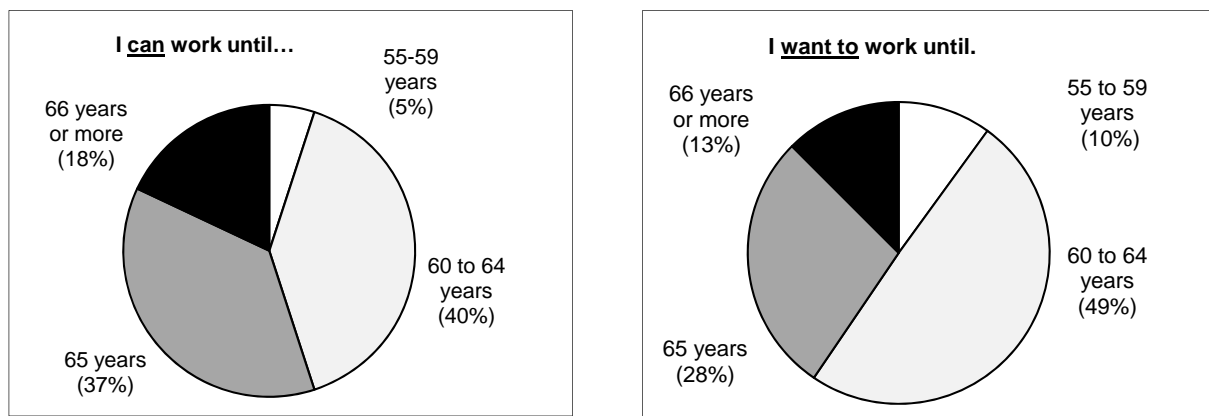
The final response group consisted of 30% women and 70% men. The age of the group was between 27-68 years, with a mean age \pm SD of 55 ± 7 years.

RESULTS

Employees' attitudes

In the questionnaire there were two questions about retiring age (Nilsson 2005a); 'I can work until ...' and 'I want to work until...'. The results showed that 55% of the study population thought they can work until the age of 65 or beyond, but only 41% wanted to do so (Figure 1).

Figure 12.1: Age to which older employees in the survey believed they can work, and age to which they wanted to work.



The discriminant analysis revealed that the most important factors for older employees attitude to whether they can, and want to continue their working life, i.e. the factors that discriminated Group 2 from the other groups,

were: i) They saw working beyond the age of 65 as a means to get a better pension; ii) they felt that they had a relatively good physical and mental work environment and good health and fitness; iii) they were able to make changes at work and in their work situation; and iv) they did not experience the pace of work as being too rapid, and they felt they got enough rest between their working days. Those in this group also felt that they could take a rest when they needed to at work; v) their work was very important in their life, and they were proud of their profession. They experienced a high degree of satisfaction, pleasure, meaningfulness and stimulation in their work. vi) they had possibilities to use their working skills, and believed that their knowledge and expertise were valued in the organisation; and vii) their managers were interested in their wellbeing and they did not think they were discriminated against by managers and colleagues because of their age. The people in Group 2 even thought that they would come back and work some hours now and then after retirement. They also stated that it was common to work beyond 65 years of age in their circle of acquaintances.

Those workers who thought they can not and do not want to continue working after 65 (Group 1) mentioned factors for their decision that were the exact opposite to those of Group 2. Group 3, those who felt they can work but do not want to, mostly cited lack of motivation, and did not mention their work as being important in their life; they did not feel appreciation from their managers and their organisation or have opportunities to further their skills. They wanted to leave the organised work environment in order to spend more time with their family and leisure pursuits. Group 4, those who want to continue work but feel that they will not be able to, appeared to have more health problems than the other groups, but felt their work to be an important part of their life.

One of the results from the discriminant analysis was that managers' attitudes and appreciation from the organisation are important if older employees are to consider working until 65 years of age and beyond. Of the older employees surveyed in this study, 75% reported that their managers had a positive attitude to older workers and 91% thought that it was desirable for older employees to stay on as long as possible in their occupation. 48% reported that their managers usually gave them positive feedback and 55% that their managers gave them support when they needed it. 94% thought that their managers did not believe that older employees hindered development in the organisation. Furthermore, 65% of the older employees thought their knowledge was suitably used in the organisation, and 93% reported that they had no problems learning new skills, despite their age.

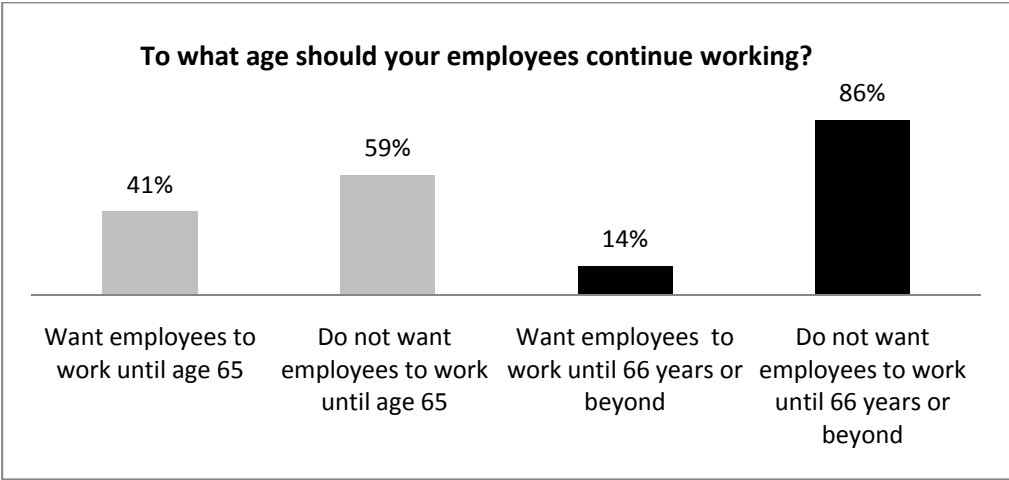
On the other hand, 7% of the older employees in this study felt that they were discriminated against at work because of their age; 15% reported that they were given fewer opportunities to develop their skills because of their age; 13%

reported fewer opportunities to participate in projects because of their age, and 15% felt that they were given fewer opportunities to supervise because of their age. In addition, 23% of the older employees stated that they planned to leave their working life before 65 years of age, due to large reorganisations in their workplace.

Managers' attitudes

In the survey examining managers' attitudes to their older employees (Nilsson 2007), one important question was whether they wanted their older employees to continue working. 41% of the managers reported that it was important to keep employees in the organisation until they were 65, but only 14% felt that it was important to keep employees until 66 years or beyond (Figure 2).

Figure 12.2. Age to which managers wanted their senior employees to work.



Among the managers responding to the survey, 99% stated that their older employees had a lot of knowledge through experience, which was very important for their work; 69% mentioned that their older employees were particularly good in dealing with new employees, students, patients and clients; and 75% stated that their senior employees were more accurate in their work than younger workers.

At the same time, 81 % of the managers in this study claimed that their senior employees had problems accepting changes, 67% that their older employees were negative towards new technology and 74% that older

employees' way of thinking was not very flexible. Among the manager respondents in this study, 67 % believed that their older employees in general were not very well educated.

As regards the reasons for older employees leaving working life early, the managers' opinions for the most common reasons were poor health, the worker's partner having left working life, wanting to spend more time with their family and leisure pursuits, and being able to afford to retire.

The reasons identified by managers, for why their older employees continued to work until 65 and beyond, were mainly having different options for flexibility in working time, e.g. shorter working week or individually adjusted working hours, and economic incentives.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to examine factors that might encourage people to extend their working life, an option that is likely to become increasingly important in Western countries due to demographic change (Statistics Sweden 2010, 2009). The results of the surveys revealed the experiences and attitudes of older workers to extending their working life and the attitude of managers to older employees. The results from the study would probably have been even more interesting if the employees and the managers in the studies had worked at the same workplace.

The responses from the older employees showed that there were more seniors who think they *can* work until 65 years and beyond, than really *want* to do so. With regard to the underlying aim of this study, important factors in the decision of older employees to work until 65 years of age and beyond were whether they felt positive appreciation and acknowledgement from their managers and the organisation. These results are consistent with previous findings (Höög 1985; Herzberg et al 1959; Herzberg 1966; Ilmarinen 2006; Kilbom et al 1996). The results of the manager survey indicated that the managers believed that their older workers had a lot of experience and knowledge, were accurate in their work and were particularly good at dealing with students, new employees, patients and clients. In general, the managers' experiences and attitudes seem to be favourable to their older employees extending their working life, confirming earlier research (Tuomi et al 2001; Lindgren 1999; Vercruyssen 2003; Landstingsförbundet 2002). However, this favourable attitude will not encourage older workers to continue their working life unless it is communicated directly to them. In the study, it was mostly older workers in high status occupations in the organisations who thought they can and want to continue their working life to 65 and beyond (Group 2). Different occupations in the organisation will hopefully not receive different treatment

from the managers. This could not be examined in the present study design, but is a question for further research.

Most of the older workers surveyed thought it was a more positive picture of older workers and their importance to the organization than the managers seem to have in their survey, even if many managers partly had a positive picture. However, the attitudes of managers towards their older employees seem partly to be based on stereotypical thinking about the low capacity, inadequate knowledge and negative disposition to change of older workers. This can be a barrier to generating a positive attitude among older workers to extending their working life, as reported in previous studies (Seitsamo et al 1997; Ilmarinen 2006; Warr 1994; Nilsson et al 2004; RFV Analyserar 2001). Most of the older employees surveyed had not experienced any problems in learning new skills, and seemed to believe that they still could make an important contribution to the organisation. However many also reported that, because of their age, they received less education, supervision or opportunities to work on new projects. They also cited reorganisation as an important factor to considering leaving working life prematurely. In this it is important to take into consideration that previous studies have reported that opportunities for skills development are important in encouraging older workers to extend their working life (Kilbom et al 1996; Ilmarinen 2003). Workers who wish to continue their personal development, and learn new skills, are probably unlikely to be resistant to change, and it is important that managers recognise this in their older employees.

The attitudes of managers seemed to be important in two respects in the decision by older workers to extend their working life. First, managers' attitudes influenced older employees' perceptions of the work situation and, as a consequence, their attitude to extending their working life. Second, managers and employers in Sweden have the power to decide whether older workers can remain in employment after 67 years of age, and thereby encourage this or not. In this study, most of the managers did not believe it was important to retain their older workers after 65 years of age. It appeared that the managers in this study did not realise their importance in motivating older workers to continue working. If society needs more people to work until an older age, it is therefore important to influence and guide managers so that they encourage and motivate older employees to extend their working life, and make the workplace suitable for older workers.

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