How do employers think about older workers?

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Abstract

Purpose – Higher pensionable age in many countries that are part of Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and a shrinking pension income force older people to postpone their retirement. Yet, age-based discrimination in employers' decisions is a significant barrier to their employment. Hence, this paper aims to explore employers' attitudes regarding the employment of workers aged 60–70, striving for a better understanding of age discrimination.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors used a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 30 managers, experts and employees in retirement age in Israel.

Findings – Findings reveal a spectrum of employers' attitudes toward the employment of older workers. The authors' analytical contribution is a conceptual typology based on employers' perceived ability to employ older workers and their stated attitudes toward the employment of older workers.

Social implications – The insights that emerge from this research are fundamental for organizational actors' ability to expand the productive, unbiased employment of older workers.

Originality/value – By understanding employers' preferences and perspectives and the implications on employers' ability and/or willingness to employ older workers, this research will help policymakers formulate and implement policy innovations that address these biases.

Keywords Discrimination of older workers, Age and ageism, Employer perspective, Thematic analysis

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Aging populations are a new reality in developed countries (OECD, 2017a). In light of the increased life expectancy and anticipated increases in pension spending, many countries have been raising the pensionable age, i.e. the age in which a person becomes eligible for pension benefits (Axelrad and Mahoney, 2017). As OECD data reveal, an increase in pensionable age leads to an increase in the share of people aged 60+ in the labor force (OECD, 2017a). Furthermore, a large share of workers continues to work after they reach their pension eligibility age (Maxin and Deller, 2010). Employers are, therefore, more likely, compared to the past, to be approached by their older workers interested in extending their employment period, or to receive job applications from workers who are passed the age of retirement. Yet, while research on the changing pattern of retirement is growing rapidly, there is a relative scarcity in research about employers' attitudes concerning the extension of their employees' working lives and its effect on their organizations. Obstacles to employing older workers might stem from

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older workers' human capital; from structural barriers such the official retirement age or employment protection rules (Neumark *et al.*, 2019) or from employers' biased perceptions and attitudes toward older workers (Axelrad, 2021). Some previous studies investigated age-based bias and examined situations in which older workers encountered discrimination, for example in hiring, promotion and layoffs (Axelrad *et al.*, 2013; Mong and Roscigno, 2010). While there is a general agreement that such discrimination poses a social problem from a normative as well as a practical perspective (Macnicol, 2005, 2006), less is known about employers' justifications for these practices (Frøyland and Terjesen, 2020), which may explain some of the barriers faced by older workers (Axelrad, 2021).

In the current study, we provide a map of employers' views concerning the employment of older employees, based on semi-structured interviews and reveal the range of attitudes toward employing/not employing older workers. Additionally, we reveal how these attitudes are perceived as justified in terms of the employers' (perceived) ability, or lack thereof, to employ workers at older ages. This innovative focus contributes to existing knowledge by showing how employers resolve discrepancies between their attitudes and behavior by shifting responsibility to external factors. The insights that emerge from this research about employers' perspectives concerning the employment of older workers are fundamental for organizational actors' and policymakers' ability to design a policy that will expand the productive, unbiased employment of older workers (McGann, 2016; Egdell *et al.*, 2020).

Extended working life

Many countries have raised the pensionable age, or are expected to raise it over the next 15 years (e.g. Australia, the Netherland and Poland; OECD, 2017a). In the USA, for example, the retirement age is being gradually increased (by two months per birth year) until reaching 67 for those born in 1960 or later (Frankel, 2016). In the UK, the age of eligibility for state pension has been gradually raised from 60 to 65 for women, and for both men and women, state pension age will keep increasing until it reaches 66 by the end of 2020 and 67 between 2026 and 2028 (Demou *et al.*, 2017). In Canada, Old Age Security (OAS) pension will be raised to 67 years old in 2023, although there is no mandatory age for retirement (Brown and Aris, 2017). In 2004, Israel also began to gradually raise the pensionable age from 65 to 67 for men and from 60 to 62 for women (Axelrad and Mahoney, 2017).

With the share of people aged 60+ in the workforce rapidly growing, scholars have turned their attention to those individuals still working passed retirement age (Fasbender *et al.*, 2014; Maxin and Deller, 2010; Pundt *et al.*, 2015). In the USA, only half of all workers retire completely upon reaching the eligibility age for social security benefits (Pleau and Shauman, 2013); in the UK, approximately half of older employees expect to work past the traditional retirement age of 65 (Calnan, 2017) and in Israel, the proportion of people who continue to work after the age of 65 (21.2%), is higher than the OECD average (Axelrad, 2018; OECD, 2017b). Studies concluded that employment in late life carries a number of non-monetary benefits, including social contact, mental stimulation and health benefits (Davey and Davies, 2006).

Employers and organizational practices affect employees' decision to continue working (Appannah and Biggs, 2015; Mansour and Tremblay, 2019). Armstrong-Stassen (2008) showed that people in post-retirement jobs are drawn to organizations that provided human resource (HR) practices tailored to their unique needs and desires as older workers (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008). On the other hand, early retirement was often found to be caused by involuntary factors, notably economic restructuring and workforce downsizing (Macnicol, 2005). While evidence suggests that there are opportunities and benefits for businesses in employing, retaining and up-skilling older workers (Davey and Davies, 2006), many employers believe that older workers are a burden to their organizations and their management (Van Dalen, Henkens and Schippers, 2010).

Employers' perceptions and age discrimination

A significant amount of evidence suggests that older people frequently encounter ageism – prejudice and discrimination – in the workplace (Ayalon and Tesch-Römer, 2017). Studies show that many employers are unwilling to employ and recruit older workers due to age-based biases (Bennington, 2004; McVittie *et al.*, 2008). A survey conducted among over 1,000 companies in the Netherlands found that employers tend to associate an increase in the average age of their workforce with higher labor costs, perceive older employees as resistant to change and believe that an older workforce would require them to re-evaluate and re-organize their operation procedures. Specifically, employers tend to believe that an older workforce would require an adjustment of their workplace conditions and would hinder or delay the adaptation of new technologies (Remery *et al.*, 2003).

From an economist's perspective, what they consider age discrimination and what we refer to as ageism is a form of statistical discrimination, in which, under certain conditions of limited information, decision-makers use observable characteristics of individuals (in our case, a worker's age) as a proxy for otherwise unobservable characteristics, such as a worker's productivity, commitment or ability to work long hours (Axelrad *et al.*, 2013; Phelps, 1972). This type of discrimination is viewed as a capitalist-based decision, motivated by the desire to reduce costs and maximize profits (Moreira *et al.*, 2010) when making decisions about recruiting new employees, wage differentials, promotions, etc. (Havet and Sofer, 2008). In our context, statistical discrimination may explain employers' hiring decisions, as employers may prefer younger candidates over older ones (Baert *et al.*, 2016).

Another conceptual framework for understanding age discrimination emerges from the literature on social closure. Social closure is the process of boundary construction between identities and communities, where resources (e.g. promotions and key positions that are vacated when older workers leave) are reserved for one's own group, while excluding outsiders. According to this perspective, the exclusion of older workers is based on decision-makers' perception of such workers as out-group members (Light *et al.*, 2011), and thus a collective threat (Simms, 2004). Processes of social closure and resource hoarding can take place through institutional exclusion and dominant group positioning, but they can also occur consciously and unconsciously through everyday interactions that replicate the existing hierarchy (Ridgeway, 1997; Roscigno, 2007).

Social closure as a theoretical framework may explain age discrimination in employment as well as the mechanisms and processes through which status inequalities are developed, unfolded and reinforced in the organizational environments (Roscigno *et al.*, 2007). Employers, who are usually younger than the official retirement age, may either exclude older workers from hiring processes or refuse to prolong employment of post-retirement of older workers, who are viewed as outsiders. Both statistical discrimination and social closure can thus lead to exclusion (Stainback, 2008), which prevents older workers, who are able and willing to work, from prolonging their working life.

Evidence suggests that employers' discriminatory behavior varies across economic sectors. The public sector, for example, was found to include higher rates of promotion discrimination against older workers, in which managers devalue seniority, due to limited accountability for promotion decisions (Byron, 2010). Firing discrimination was found to be more common in the private sector, as managers can differentially terminate workers and justify their actions as cost-effective in a competitive market (Byron, 2010). Construction employers were found to implement fewer training plans and more early retirement schemes than in the public sector, while policies such as demotion are more common in the services and trade sector, where the reduction of workload is less common compared to the public sector (Conen *et al.*, 2012). These findings are in accordance with statistical discrimination and social closure theories (Byron, 2010).

Literature reveals the difficulty of older workers to maintain their jobs or find a new job, and the need to understand the employers' perspective. Employers' attitudes are important, because they may affect their practices toward older workers (Loretto and White, 2006; Taylor and Walker, 1998), for example, in recruitment decisions (Loretto and White, 2006). Hence, employers' attitudes might either hinder or facilitate the employment of older workers. Taylor *et al.* (1998) found a statistically significant association between employers' attitudes and behavior. As one would predict from the statistical discrimination approach, Loretto and White (2006) found that experience-based attitudes tend to be associated with positive practices toward older workers, while stereotype-based attitudes are often associated with less positive treatment. These employers' attitudes were found to play a significant role, particularly in recruitment decisions, with differences between sectors stemming from labor market shortages.

Beyond attitudes, employers' perceptions about the structural conditions of employing older workers may also affect their decisions. Such perceptions may be based on accurate or inaccurate information. Such information, e.g. about costs and insurance liability , may affect employers' calculations regarding hiring or prolonging the employment of older workers (Roscigno *et al.*, 2007). Sometimes, these perceptions are not necessarily related to workers' human capital but rather to the structure of the labor market.

Literature pays little to no attention to employers' views regarding the employment of a growing number of aging employers in their business (Pitt-Catsouphes *et al.*, 2007; SHRM, 2003; Tishman *et al.*, 2012) or to employers' attitudes and the mental categories they use to process their views of older workers and the idea of employing them. The current research contributes to ageism literature by offering a detailed investigation of the various argumentations used by employers with respect to the recruitment and employment of older workers and post-retirement workers. Their argumentations reveal attitudes and the mental categories being used when making employment decisions and hiring. The justifications used by employers are compared to the corresponding views of experts (people who had practical experience with employment at older ages and in retirement age or those who were involved in the issue of older workers' employment as part of their job, either in practice or in research) and employees, in order to better understand the barriers to older workers' employment. And here lies another contribution to qualitative research methods: as we use interviews from different points of view, we show how triangulating perspectives can extend individual-level results, as such design allows for a broad perspective and a comprehensive picture of the subject.

Methodology

Research questions

In this study, we shed light on and address the research questions as follows:

RQ1. What explanations do employers give for their attitudes toward (not) employing older workers?

As evidence suggests that employers' discriminatory behavior varies across economic sectors, we also address the question as follows:

RQ2. How are employers' attitudes related to the industrial sector of the organization?

To understand employers' perceptions concerning the employment of older workers as well as the differences across industries, we conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with employers between December 2017 and May 2018, and then gathered additional data from 12 older workers and professional experts (P01 to P30). Data gathered from experts and older employees were compared to the data collected from employers, to obtain a more nuanced

understanding of their views. We drew a purposive sample and targeted employers, experts and workers who had practical experience with employment at older ages and in retirement age or those who were involved in the topic of older workers' employment as part of their job, either in practice or in research. Through our purposive sampling, we were able to construct an initial sample of employers from a variety of sectors, industries, positions and professions. We then found additional interviewees who were able to add insight from their respective fields of research, from their position in employment agencies, and from their experiences as older employees in the Israeli labor market.

We used semi-structured interviews as our primary way of collecting data. The interviewees were asked to express their views on the employment of workers around retirement age (60–70) and elaborate about aspects they thought were characteristic of good management practices regarding older employees. The interviews addressed views concerning the qualifications and costs of older workers, impressions of current and future needs of employers to attract or retain workers in retirement age, opinions about the importance of knowledge transfer and succession planning and knowledge of the legal aspects of work in later life.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 min. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was performed by the authors, according to the process described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and other researchers (e.g. Boyatzis, 1998; Charmaz, 2000). Preliminary descriptive codes were given to each sentence, which was defined as the unit of analysis. Codes representing similar topics were then grouped together and arranged into relevant categories and themes. To avoid an inconsistent application of thematic analysis, we used an ongoing reflexive dialog among the researchers who conducted the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To generate a conceptual framework, further analysis was carried out, in which we examined referential adequacy as a means of checking preliminary findings and interpretations against the raw data.

Participants

Of the 57 individuals who were initially approached, interviews were conducted with 30 (52.6%). The rest did not want to participate ($N = 7$), were unreachable or unavailable ($N = 14$), did not meet the inclusion criteria ($N = 1$) or did not participate for unknown reasons ($N = 5$).

Respondents included 18 employers (of which 13 were HR managers and 5 were other senior managers), 2 older workers, 1 older worker who was also an executive of a placement agency and 1 older worker who was also a representative of a non-profit organization in the field of employment. Six participants were researchers and policymakers – representatives of non-profit organizations in the field of employment, and two were executives of placement agencies. The employers came from diverse industries: high-tech, insurance, banking, hospitality, services, retail, public sector and governmental organizations, as well as educational and research institutes. The number of employees in the abovementioned organizations ranged between 50 and 5,000. The mean age of the interviewees was 50.7 (range: 34–80), and 30% of them were men (see Table 1).

Findings

Interview data in this study are organized into several thematic categories, which emerged from the thematic analysis of employers, older workers and other experts. Participants were asked to express their opinion about employing workers around retirement age (60–70) and to discuss what they thought were characteristic of good organizational management practice in employing older workers. They presented a variety of positions and views that were conceptualized using two dichotomies, ability/inability to employ older workers and positive/

negative attitudes concerning the employment of older persons. Ability/inability refers to objective (or perceived as objective) justifications that were mentioned by employers, like health issues, the presence or absence of structural or institutional constraints, etc., (which may be related to the social closure argument) when considering the employment of older workers.

Positive/negative attitudes refer to employer's views that may be related to the concepts of economic efficiency (or statistical discrimination). Thus, under the conditions of limited information, employers use observable characteristics (worker's age) as a proxy for unobservable characteristics (productivity, commitment etc.). By cross classifying the two dichotomies, we created a four-category typology that captures and arranges the interviewees' statements on the employment of older workers (see Figure 1). This typology offers a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the barriers to continued employment in older age.

Type	No	Sectors	Average age (SD)
Employers	18	High-ech (3), manufacturing (5), services (5), finance and insurance (2), education (1) and trade (2)	43.7 (6.5)
Older workers	7	Education (3) and services (4)	71.3 (5.9)
Executives of placement agencies	3		54.7 (11.2)
Researchers or policymakers	9		60.1 (14.6)

Note(s): *We conducted 30 interviews. Some participants, however, fit into more than one category

Table 1.
Number of interviews in case-study organizations

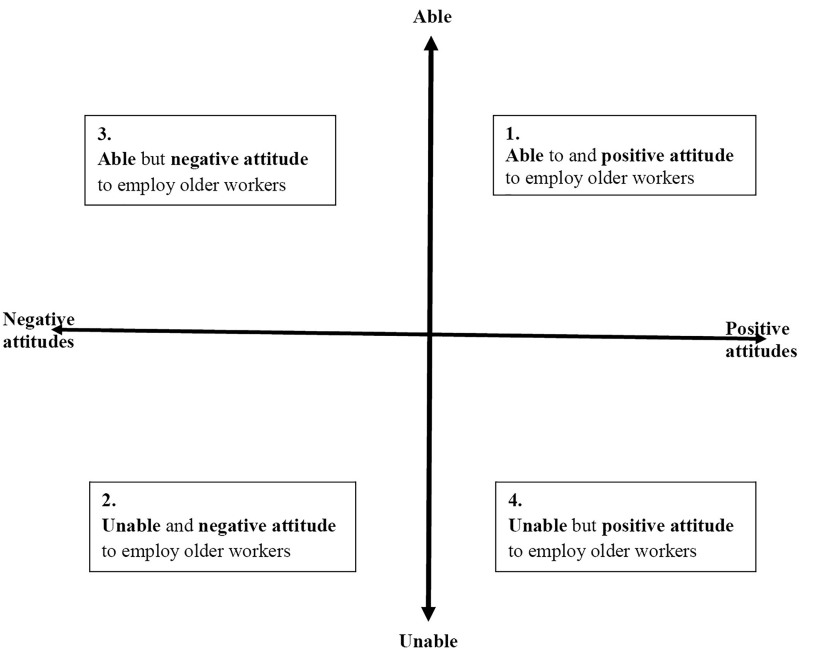

Figure 1.
Four categories according to positive/ negative attitudes and ability/inability to employ workers around retirement age

Employers' attitudes across industrial sectors

Positive and negative attitudes toward the employment of older workers were found to be associated with the type of industry. Thus, the exclusion of older workers in the high-tech sector is particularly prominent, as it was evident in the interviews of all types of participants across all sectors. According to data of the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, the high-tech sector is characterized by a younger workforce compared to other sectors. In 2014, about one-third of the employees in the high-tech sector were aged 25–34, compared to about one-quarter of workers in other sectors (CBS, 2017). Only 11.4% of the workers in start-up companies and 8.9% of workers in the traditional (bigger) high-tech companies were 50 years old or over (Hofman, 2013).

In contrast to the high-tech industry, interviews revealed that older workers are more valued in other sectors and occupations, such as traditional pre-mechanization and automation occupations in the manufacturing sector, which are about to be extinct (Sumer, 2018). In other cases, the need arises from the uniqueness of the work or service in which older employees have a relative advantage, such as providing services to older clients, fundraising work, etc. in the service sector.

Older workers in the manufacturing sector are considered "masters" (employers explicitly used this word) – the professionals with whom others consult. Seniority, and experience that comes along with it, are perceived by many as assets to the organization; therefore, organizations try to preserve older workers and their knowledge. According to the interviews, the value of older workers is particularly prominent in the manufacturing sector, due to the shortage of workers in the traditional skilled occupations, which makes it difficult to find people who are trained and willing to work in the old manufacturing sector. Participant P08, a 45-year-old vice president in an industrial textile company, said,

> Today, there is the world of high-tech, which belongs to young people. That's where the money is, and everyone goes there. Every practical engineer who earned his degree wants to be a vice president. They want to work with laptops and computers.

Therefore, justifications in favor or against employing older workers may be related to the sector and its characteristics such as the technology used (low-tech or high-tech), the way work is organized, the organizational culture, etc. seem to underline industry differences.

Negative attitudes toward the employment of older workers

A total of 19 interviewees (employers and others) expressed negative attitudes toward employing workers around retirement age and offered various justifications and reasons. One such justification referred to the organizational culture as unsupportive of employing older workers. Such a culture sometimes involves a dismissive, negative or disrespectful attitude toward older employees. For example, companies that wish to convey an image of innovation, which is often associated with "young" and "new," will often have a negative attitude toward employing older workers. Participant P21, a 40-year-old woman, a human resource manager in a retail corporation, gave an example of such an unsupportive organizational culture for older workers:

> The management is around the age of 30–40, working 12–13 hours a day and ending every day with beers, joints, pizzas, where they make important work decisions. This will not appeal to older workers.

Middle-aged executives, particularly in high-tech companies, sometimes refer to older workers with contempt and arrogance, as workers who have not been able to achieve promotion and advance to managerial ranks like the managers themselves. Participant P30, a 34-year-old woman who works as a director of corporate responsibility in a big hotel franchise, said,

> There is a tendency among middle-aged managers [. . .] of course, they know everything, and they are very smart, and they have been in the job market for 15 years, and maybe even 15 years in the same position, which is great. They have the tendency to underestimate those who have not progressed to the same rank or status.

According to four interviewees, negative attitudes seem to be more common among middle-level managers (compared to senior managers), who ultimately manage the teams and interact with employees. This leads us to a second reason for which managers prefer not to employ workers around retirement age – managerial difficulties to cope, communicate with and supervise older employees. Managers in senior positions also mentioned the difficulty of older employees to accept authority at work and their patronizing attitude. Participant P22, a 48-year-old woman, who works as an HR vice president in a non-profit organization, said,

> We had a manager who retired at 72; I felt that even the CEO, who was 15 years younger, found it difficult to manage him. The manager indeed had a very impressive resume, but he was difficult to manage because he also had trouble accepting the CEO's authority, the CEO had a hard time facing him . . .

> I was 37 years old, someone came and applied for a managerial position, and he was around the age of 60, or 62. He reminded me of my father. And we sat for negotiation [. . ..] The man was crying shamelessly, and he humiliated himself. It was very difficult for me [. . .] I remember that after the conversation with him was over, I started crying, because he . . . I imagined my father begging for a salary. This episode really rattled me.

Two participants mentioned the need for managers and HR teams to receive guidance and direction on how to handle and manage older employees in their workforce, how to deal with these situations and win the appreciation and cooperation of all employees.

Another set of justifications was related to the notions that older workers require special training and coaching, that sometimes they are unwilling to take part in training and seminars or even are not capable of coping with new realities or technologies and, therefore, are outdated, inefficient, slow and tired. Participant P24, a 53-year-old female who is the chief executive officer (CEO) of a medium-size insurance company, said,

> As the age rises, some people just get fed up. After the age of 55, they are tired, they understand that chances of promotion are slim, they do not care anymore about doing more at work, and they just wait for the time to pass, because . . . because it is too early to retire.

Hence, some of the justifications for a preference to not employ older workers (60–70 years old) relate to perceived characteristics or stereotypes including that the older worker is "tired," "expensive," "incapable of coping with changing realities," etc. There are also important organizational characteristics seen in organizational culture or in perceived managerial difficulties that play a role in negative attitudes towards older workers (see Figure 2, under "Negative attitudes").

Positive attitudes toward the employment of older workers

In total, twelve out of the eighteen interviewed employers (two-thirds) expressed positive attitudes toward older workers or of extended working lives and offered justifications in favor of employing and retaining workers around retirement age. They mentioned benefits related to the experience and knowledge of older workers and their important role of transferring knowledge to younger employees. Interviewee P27, a 45-year-old woman, who is an HR manager in an industrial, low-tech company, said,

> They [the older workers] are very much appreciated, and everyone tries to absorb as much information from them as possible, that's my feeling. Because those who stayed in the company are usually people who have special abilities or knowledge.

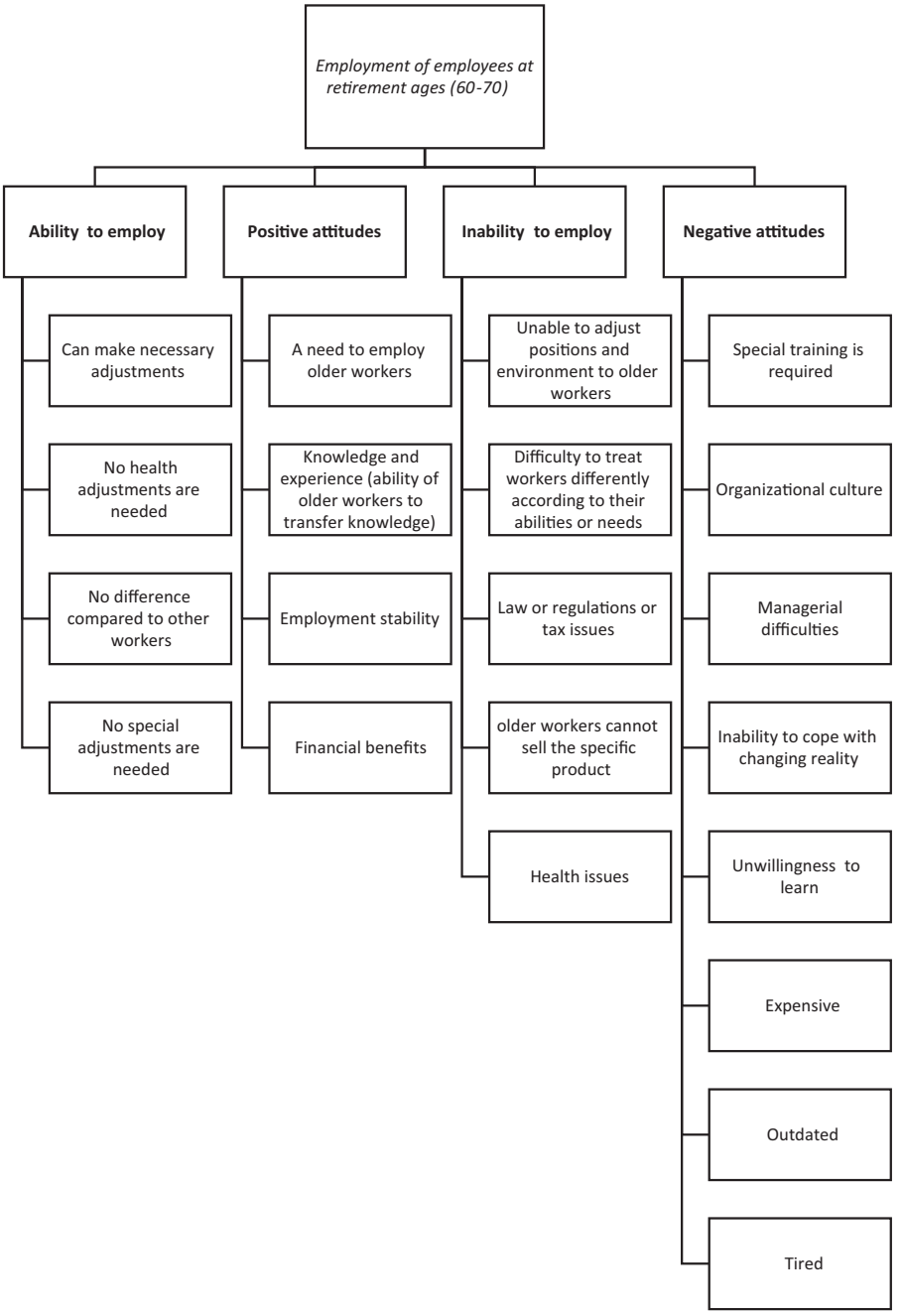

Figure 2.
Reasons given by employers for their perceived ability/inability and high preference/low preference to employ older workers

Participant P09, a 75-year-old woman, who is a gerontologist and a senior researcher, echoed this notion and described an older employee in a specific company,

> He was a senior director at XXX [a research institute], vice president, for many years. And when he left, retired, management asked him to continue working as a consultant for several days a week. So, they were aware of his potential contribution, and there were others like him, so the system can appreciate such people and it also allows them to contribute and allows others to learn from them.

Experienced retirees might also be valuable for the organization at times of extraordinary workload when they can return to the workplace and be re-employed to meet a specific project or assist in rush times.

Employment stability is another benefit that was mentioned, for which employers may prefer to employ workers around retirement age. Executives of placement agencies that specialize in placement of older workers testify that many of the job offers come from employers looking for stable employees in order to avoid high turnover. In addition, employers with whom we spoke reported that older employees are characterized by higher commitment, sense of loyalty and responsibility compared to young workers. Employers say that job stability is valuable since a high turnover is costly. Participant P17, a 38-year-old woman who works as a human resource manager in the headquarters of a large bank, said,

> Today, employers are more open to recruit older workers because employers understand commitment is a rare commodity. Younger work seekers believe they can expect a promotion after a year or two. If they cannot be promoted in their organizations, they will leave. So, you put a lot of effort into training someone, and in the end, you never get a return for your investment. [. . .] With older workers, you can assume they will not leave you after a couple of years, because it is harder for them to get a new job. You will probably benefit from them for the next 15 years; you gain a permanently committed worker.

Interviewees said that job stability is also valuable since retaining older workers is much cheaper and easier compared to younger ones. Young workers tend to seek promotion, wage increases or another job; therefore, they must be kept continuously satisfied by offering money, bonuses and benefits comparable to other firms in the industry.

Such statements reflect, to some extent, positive age stereotypes of older workers, as well as stereotypical perceptions of young workers.

Financial advantages were another justification provided by employers for the preference to employ older workers. Often, older workers are willing to settle for a lower wage (whether due to the lack of other options or having additional sources of income). Interviewee P26, a 45-year-old woman who works as a human resource manager in a wholesale and retail trade firm, said,

> I think it's kind of a jackpot, like, if you let someone retire, and then they come back, you can tell them "OK, but you're back now under different conditions", and you [the employer] can save a lot of money.

In other interviews, gerontologists and executives of placement agencies supported this view as well.

Subsequently, employers noted the available supply of older workers as an additional advantage. As mentioned earlier, employers' perception is that older people are more established, have less commitment to young children or reserve military service as compared to younger workers (i.e. most male ex-soldiers in Israel are required to serve on reserve duty up to one month every three years, until the age of 40 or 45) and, therefore, older workers are more available to work.

A total of 12 participants also mentioned knowledge and experience as economically valuable. A young employee must learn, acquire knowledge and experience – a long and

expensive process – before their work yields the output that the adult experienced employee is already generating, which is worthwhile, even if their wages are higher.

One last benefit that was mentioned by many experts but only by two employers is the benefit of age-diverse workforce. Participant P02, a 40+ year-old male, who is the vice president of a placement agency that specializes in placement of adult workers, said,

> I would also like any employer to have this conversation about the balance, the mix of workers in each team that includes both: young workers, older workers, Arabs, ultra-Orthodox . . . which means diversity. All studies show that the higher the diversity, the more efficient the team becomes, the more effective over time.

Justifications for the preference to employ older workers derive from the perceived characteristics of these types of employees – loyalty, stability, commitment or relate to objective attributes or issues – accumulated knowledge, experience, employer's need or financial advantages. The different justifications we found may also reflect inter-sectorial differences as we further detail below (see Figure 2, under "Positive attitudes").

Inability to employ older workers

Moving away from these positive and negative interviewee attitudes toward employing older workers, we found that some employers justify not employing older workers by applying structural justifications. These structural reasons, which we built into the theme of being able or unable to hire older workers, are varied and go beyond legislative reasons alone.

First, a few employers and one executive of a placement agency mentioned the difficulty of treating workers differently according to their abilities or needs. Such efforts might create frustration among other workers, as well as managerial difficulties. For example, sometimes managers are asked to split positions to create part-time jobs for older workers. While there is no impediment to the implementation of this solution because of cultural or institutional reasons, it might be expensive and create coordination and responsibility issues.

One-third of the employers interviewed said they were unable to modify jobs and the work environment to accommodate older workers. Other interviewees did not address this issue at all (maybe due to their lack of awareness or underestimation of its importance). Employers said that older workers often want to switch into a less demanding position, which requires less hours of presence in the work place, and that they were not able to address these requests in positions that require in-office meetings or direct contact with clients. Participant P30, a 34-year-old woman, a director of corporate responsibility in a big hotel franchise, shared her experience:

> [. . ..] And many times, there are more illnesses [among older workers]. Now, I never fire an employee because of illness, but if an employee has an operational role, for example, in the dining room, and he does not come to work or arrives late [. . .] someone else needs to come in his place, because there are guests who need to be serviced. So, if he is late five out of six shifts a week – I have a problem. What job can I give him? I do not want to fire him; I want to make things flexible for him. Should I make him a chambermaid? This is a physical, hard and unsuitable job.

A few employers mentioned health issues of older employees, which create difficulties in meeting their job requirements. HR managers told us about older workers with health issues who want or need to keep working, but their work performances suffer due to their poor health. In these cases, employers face an unpleasant situation, in which they are forced to fire an employee or hire another employee for the same job.

Two employers mentioned costlier health insurance resulting from age-related health problems. Participant P22, a 48-year-old female who is an HR vice president in a nonprofit organization, said,

> There are more problems that insurance companies are no longer willing to insure: Someone who has undergone a catheterization, someone who had cancer. Exceptions and exceptions . . . I encountered it in the past, and these issues really make things difficult for the system.

Other issues mentioned by five employers were the perception that older workers cannot market specific products (e.g. surfing equipment or fashion items) as they do not convey the right message for the brand, as well as physical hardships that cannot be solved or can only be solved with substantial financial investment.

Finally, some employers said they were unable to employ older workers due to legal, tax or regulation limitations. Participant P20, a 42-year-old female who is a human resource manager in a software company, said,

> I remember we had retired employees, and we really wanted to preserve their knowledge, and I remember there was a problem with the entire issue of . . . if I'm not mistaken, it was about their pension or something like that.

It is important to note that employers are not always fully familiar with the laws, and some of them admit so themselves. Sometimes, the problem is not state regulations, but rather organizational reasons, such as labor agreements or union agreements in the workplace.

Thus, the inability of employers to employ older workers is attributed to reasons related to the organization of work around older workers' needs (health issues and health insurance), the organization (special requirements and wrong message) and institutional reasons (labor laws, regulations and tax issues) see Figure 2, under "Inability to employ."

Ability to employ older workers

Despite the obstacles mentioned by participants, some interviewees did mention reasons and justifications that encourage employers to employ workers around retirement age. Employers who did mentioned these reasons to hire or maintain older workers, expressed, we believe, a non-discriminatory approach to being able to hire older workers.

One employer, some older workers and other experts noted that organizations can make the necessary adjustments to accommodate older workers. According to them, the organization can and should adapt itself and create flexibility in hours and positions, which can apply to workers of all ages. They believe that new positions need to be created due to changes in the labor market. For example, older workers can take up positions as mentors – a role that, according to some experts we interviewed, does not exist in many organizations – thus taking advantage of the knowledge and experience of older workers who can teach and train younger workers. A point of interest is the fact that this notion was more common among the non-employers, e.g. most employers are reluctant to think in terms of removing structural barriers, whereas experts view this as important for facilitating the employment of older people.

Other interviewees said that no special adjustments are needed or that older workers are not different from other workers. Participant P29, a woman working as a human resource manager in an agricultural firm, said,

> I think it is true for any age, and not only for older population. There are also specific issues for mothers, parents [. . .] not only workers around retirement age [. . .] I do not think it's a matter of age.

A common argument by employers, older workers and experts concerning the policy side was that employers are able to employ older workers because no special adjustments are needed, unless there are specific problems. This argument was equally common among employers as among non-employers. Participant P04, a 50+ year-old woman, who works as relations manager in a nonprofit organization that collaborates with the Israeli government to reduce employment gaps said, "Preventive actions, proper nutrition and exercise are true and

needed today for all employees, of all ages". Contrary to what some of the interviewees thought (and was mentioned above), others said there were no cost differences between employing older workers and others, as mentioned by participants P14, a 52-year-old woman who works as an HR manager in a governmental agency:

> You can recruit high-tech workers, and after one year, they are already looking for their next job. I think it's always better to invest in existing employees than to recruit new workers. As long as the employee is good, and willing to learn . . .

As we can see, the positions expressed by the participants are sometimes contradictory. While some said that older workers are more expensive and need special adjustments, others said that workers around retirement age have no special health or organizational requirements; therefore, they can be employed like any other employee. In their opinion, there is no reason not to employ older workers (See Figure 2, under "ability to employ").

Discussion and conclusions

The current paper explores the views of employers, employees and experts concerning the employment of older workers and the effect of their employment on employers. We used a qualitative methodology of semi-structured in-depth interviews. Interviewing employers as well as other actors in the field allowed triangulation with employers' responses. As triangulation techniques can be divided into between-methods triangulation and within-methods triangulation, our study captured within-methods triangulation by documenting different perspectives on the phenomenon under study (Jonsen and Jehn, 2009). The findings reveal the varied perceptions of employers concerning the need to adjust to the reality of the aging workforce. Via our thematic analysis approach, we were able to extract and arrange our findings with respect to older workers into a two-axes model of able/unable to hire older workers vs positive/negative attitude toward older workers. We underlined that there are differences across industrial sectors; however, we did find that there were important similarities with respect to approaches to older workers at the structural level and at the behavioural level.

The two dichotomous dimensions – positive or negative attitudes and ability or inability to employ older workers – refer to whether or not employers perceive themselves as able to employ older workers while also bringing to light their potential attitude (or their "want") to employing such workers. We used the results of our analysis of the interviews to characterize four abstract types of employers with respect to recruiting older workers. This division is important and vital since it allows policymakers to make different efforts with respect to policy creation based on characteristics of each typology (see Figure 1). These approaches and policies, organized across these four dimensions, are as follows:

Employers with positive attitudes who are able to employ older workers: Such employers will probably be the first choice of older employees when searching for a job. Older employees will be welcomed in these organizations, their advantages will be cherished and necessary adjustments, if needed, will be made for them. According to the findings, such employers are common, for example, in the manufacturing sector, a sector in which, even today, more than 11% of the Israeli labor force are employed (CBS, 2019). The manufacturing sector faces workforce shortages and has no choice but to retain older workers as long as possible and preserve (as well as transfer, if possible) their knowledge (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008). Such organizations will be willing to accept lower performances of older workers – if their performances are indeed lower – and make special adjustments to allow older workers to prolong their working life. Sometimes, the preference to employ older workers may stem from a (positive) stereotype about older workers' loyalty and easier retainment.

This is likely to be applicable to older workers: By understanding and identifying these employers, older workers and retired people can focus their job search efforts on those organizations that are more open to employ and recruit them, making the process easier for them. While it might seem like an intentional segregation of older workers in particular companies or industries, the point here is rather to make the process easier for them and allow them to integrate in supportive environments.

The second group, *employers with negative attitudes who are not able to employ older workers,* will probably be the last choice for older employees to integrate into or work for this type of employer. It is likely that such organizations will not welcome older workers, given the organizational culture that is supported by this type of employer (Weller, 2007; McVittie *et al.*, 2003).

In the third group, we can find employers *with negative attitudes who are able to employ older workers.* Those employers gave a long list of justifications for their unwillingness, some of them might stem from stereotypes and prejudice against older workers (Moss and Tilly, 2001), describing these workers as tired, expensive and unwilling to take part in training and seminars or incapable of coping with changing reality (Remery *et al.*, 2003). Older workers will find it more difficult to integrate in such organizations or under such employers. Targeted information that highlights the importance of older workers in terms of their experience and knowledge (Axelrad, 2021) might be useful in changing these employers' negative attitudes.

Employers in the fourth group, *who hold positive attitudes but are unable to employ older workers*, provided allegedly objective justifications for their perceived inability. Their justifications may be external to the organization or workplace, like health issues of older workers or regulations that pose difficulties (Moss and Tilly, 2001). Other justification may be related to structural feasibility and institutional reasons (e.g. employees cannot return to work after retiring due to reasons related to labor agreements or union agreements in the workplace). Yet, in some cases (e.g. "unable to adjust surroundings to older worker" or "difficulty to treat workers differently according to their needs"), employers might be hindered by inaccurate perceptions, as they are actually not familiar enough with relevant laws and regulations (about the employment of pension eligible workers) or since they believe necessary changes (in positions, for example) cannot be made.

Thus, employers' willingness to hire and employ older workers does not necessarily mean they are more likely to actually do so in practice (Pager and Quillian, 2005a, b). Previous studies (Pager and Quillian, 2005a, b; Devine, 1989; Carlsson and Eriksson, 2019) found discrepancies between employers' self-reported likelihood of hiring a particular applicant and their actual hiring behaviors when faced with a similar candidate. The reason may be implicit attitudes toward stigmatized groups, which unconsciously affect the employers' judgment and actions (Devine, 1989).

The discussion concerning this group begs the question: When employers argue that they are unable to employ older workers, how can we know for sure whether they are genuinely unable, or just unwilling to employ them, rationalizing their underlying preference through technicalities? The answer is not obvious and varies across organizations. If the justifications for the tendency not to employ older workers is related to the characteristics of the workers themselves (tiredness, difficult adjustment to changes or technologies, etc.) and once employers realize their perceptions rely on stereotypes, they might be more inclined to employ older workers. If employers talk about organizational or workplace difficulties (organizational culture and managerial difficulties), the organization should examine its willingness to modify and make changes to enable integration of older people.

This is likely to be applicable to policymakers that can implement measures to assist such employers in adjusting positions and environments to older worker, and the costs of accommodations might be supported by legislative frameworks. Additionally, removing social closure, which is a result of institutional exclusion – in the form of tax incentives for

early retirees or the reduction in pension payments for those who continue working – may also help in convincing employers to employ workers around retirement age. Our findings reveal a lack of knowledge regarding the current tax regulations and labor laws relevant to extending working life. Many employers even acknowledged their insufficient knowledge and their inability to provide accurate financial advice to their older employees. Providing such information to managers and human resource managers may also help in their decision-making process about older workers. Furthermore, policymakers and managers, along with employees and clients (i.e. all relevant stakeholders), should join forces and work together in defining policy and setting steps for implementation.

Our typology, which illustrates four groups, may be used by practitioners to identify an employer's position on this typology and can be used by policymakers to formulate and implement targeted policies to address employers' difficulties. The typology also allows older and retired workers to focus job search efforts on those organizations that are more likely to recruit them (Weiss and Perry, 2020). For example, organization in the manufacturing sector or organization that provides services to older populations may be more open to employ older workers. Further research that is being conducted since 2019 will improve the ability to locate employers on the offered typology.

It is important to note that only a few employers referred to the benefits of age-diverse workforce. These benefits were mentioned mainly by other experts during the interviews, among them a CEO of a placement agency, a senior director of a consulting group for business and a manager in a non-profit organization in the field of employment. This fact might be explained by the lack of awareness to these benefits as well as a lack of experience with age diverse teams. Theories about diversity management may play a more important role in the workplace, supporting organizational leaders in the management of the diverse populations in the workplace (McLeod *et al.*, 1996; Thomas, 1990). For example, resource-based theory of diversity management focuses on the effect of implementing diversity on organizational resources (physical capital, financial capital, human capital and corporate capital resources). These resources can either assist or inhibit the operations of the organization. When organizations are more diverse, they gain an advantage as they manage to use these resources in ways that assist and improve business, compared to organizations that are homogenous (Yang and Konrad, 2011).

Addressing RQ_2, that refers to the association between employers' attitudes and the economic industry of the organization, and in line with previous research, our findings reveal that differences between sectors (e.g. services, manufacturing and high-tech), job requirements and the nature of organizations may explain the different justifications and employers' classification into one of the four mentioned groups (Byron, 2010; Loretto and White, 2006; Macnicol, 2005). Thus, for instance, employers in the industrial sector, characterized by a shortage of workers, will be more willing to employ older workers, unless the work requires demanding physical effort. Employers in the high-tech sector encourage a young and competitive organizational culture and may avoid recruiting older workers.

A limitation of our study, which is inherent to qualitative research, is the use of a limited number of interviews. The interviews were an effective way to study what employers think about older workers, but our study is small in scale and comprises volunteer participants. Furthermore, the sample included only 18 employers and 12 subject-matter experts. However, we believe that our findings showcase that similar themes do exist across the categories of interviewees, i.e. employers, older employees, executives in placement agencies and policymakers. This observation strengthens our findings and points to our efforts to triangulate our data, while achieving data saturation (Francis, 2010). The diversity of the sample in terms of organization size, age, gender etc. is a good reflection of the variety of employers' explanations and attitudes since we found representations to all four categories: positive/negative attitudes and ability/inability to employ workers around retirement age.

Another limitation to this study is that we could not identify whether perceptions found among individuals reflected a bias of the HR department or of the organization itself. Further research that will collect data from other employees in the organization and outside of HR department might solve this limitation and allow a better alignment of advocacy and public relations efforts.

The focus on the Israeli context is another limitation that must be mentioned. We do not claim representativeness for our findings. Rather, we seek to present rich insights into employers' justifications about employing older workers. Nevertheless, the current study is important and innovative, since it reveals not only the justifications used by employers to explain that they do not employ older workers (Frøyland and Terjesen, 2020), but also the perceived "objective reasons" used by employers. As we demonstrated with our findings and analysis, employers' attitudes and abilities with respect to recruiting older workers are not always objective. Rather, we found narratives that showcase practices in age discrimination, relying on in some cases stereotypes and structural limitations.

Notwithstanding limitations, with our research, we are contributing to the emphasis and prominence of the diverse argumentations used with respect to the employment of older workers. Our conceptual typology refers to employers' perceived ability to employ older workers and their stated attitudes toward the employment of older workers. The methods of in-depth interviews permitted us to develop a typology that can be used to characterize organizations and develop targeted interventions. By positioning employers between the dichotomies of ability and attitudes, we can see that employers interpret discrepancies between their attitudes and their actual behavior by shifting responsibility to external factors, such as older workers' characteristics, labor market regulations, etc.

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