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# Talk about age in work organisations



# Internalised and gendered ageism and disableism and its consequences for labour market participation of older workers: a mixed method study

This ESRC-funded study is mixed methods research, which includes quantitative data (ELSA) and narrative analysis of interviews conducted in 4 organisational case studies.



Please visit our website:

<https://research.kent.ac.uk/gendered-ageism-disableism/#>

**We have no commercial relationships to disclose.**

## The importance of 'talk'

- We focus less on what managers and employees say directly about policies and more on how they 'talk' about their experiences of managing and being managed.
- Through our focus on talk we hope to both expose the ageist discourses in society and in organisations but also to explore how people actively construct their own understandings of reality.
- The bulk of research looks at ageism through the lens of discrimination **against** older workers. This study in addition assesses how age norms and narratives are internalized and deployed by older workers themselves to make decisions in this discussion about training and development.

# Qualitative data set: Case study interviewees

Through a large qualitative data set we are able to examine the discursive construction of older worker positioning (Martin et. al. 2014) by managers and the managed.

CASE STUDY	HR managers/ occupational health	Line managers	Employees ( All 50+)	Trade unions
Local Government	5	9	37	
Transport	6	6	19	2
Hospitality	3	5	22	
Engineering and Manufacturing	13	5	26	1
Totals	27	25	104	1

## Prevailing stereotypes

- The typical stereotypes are that older workers do not want training and development or are less trainable, less willing to change and find ICT particularly difficult (see e.g. Ng and Feldman, 2012; Posthuma and Campion, 2009).
- Some research seems to confirm that older workers are indeed less interested in training opportunities (McNair et.al. 2007; Loretto and White, 2006).
- There is a wealth of research which demonstrates that older workers get less training at work than other age groups (McNair, 2010; Hyde and Phillipson, 2014; Vickerstaff et al., 2015; Loretto et al., 2017).

# Formal equality of access to training and development

- The majority of managers and employees in all four organisations said that training was available regardless of age:

No, I think we all get given the same opportunities where training is concerned, yes. If there's training available, we all get offered it.  
(Female, 61)

In talking about this however it was not uncommon for managers to invoke familiar stereotypes:

Q. So older workers don't request as much training?

A. Definitely not.... [...] .There's probably two reasons. One, there's no training there that they think they need. Two, they don't think they need training (laughs) (Line manager)

- Some managers also made the conventional point that training older workers might be less cost effective:

And to a certain extent you look at it and think well, if she's only going to do another couple of years anyway, what is the point of investing thousands of pounds of training? (Line manager)

# Older worker motivation for training and development (1)

- A significant minority of employees did express views about having done enough and/or, not needing training as they knew how to do their job, making them unmotivated by career development or progression.

I don't really want a job with responsibility, I don't want too much training.... I've done it all before. (Male 69)

- In some cases this sort of response was from someone who had downshifted into their current role precisely to reduce their level of responsibility. In others it was because they did not want to move to a higher job because they liked the job they were in.

# Older worker motivation for training and development (2)

- The point of course is that older workers are a varied group and are unlikely to conform to a single motivation
- A number of other employees wanted to assert that they were motivated and resisted the stereotype that as they aged they became less interested in training and development opportunities or became less trainable:

I'd love a career change. You know, I'll go and train as a, I don't know, train driver or something. Maybe that's not a good one for someone who's elderly but you know what I'm saying. (Male 56)

- Though even in the last positive quote we can see that 'age' is creating an uncertainty about what is appropriate or possible



## Internalized “too old to train”

- Employees did express views about being too old for training and fears about their ability to do the job.
- Analysis of the talk about training found that the notion of being ‘too old’ for training was framed in two main ways:
  - the first involved unfavourable comparisons with younger colleagues and a sense that younger employees were more deserving of opportunities;
  - the second fell back on narratives about age-related physical and mental decline.

## Comparisons with younger colleagues

I don't want to improve. I don't mean I don't want to improve. I will do what I'm doing. I want to give the chance to the young people. I work with lots of young people and if tomorrow said oh there is five place in the college, I'm very, very sorry, I am not interested. Give the chance to the young people. (Male, 54)

it is a problem, is that you've got new technology evolving all the time and I will say that in all fairness to a lot of the younger lads here, they tend to grasp it very, very quickly, especially computer skills and software programming...that's something that I struggle to get my brain around....I don't know if you do get to an age where you're too old to learn (Male age undisclosed)

## Narratives of decline

Much more difficult [training]. You're not as much of a sponge I don't think (Female, 56)

Yeah, people are less malleable when they are older and things like that. (Male, 57)

I think there's a level as you get older your ability to absorb, maybe on--, maybe there's a couple of things, maybe medically because of the age, maybe there's some, you know, like slowing down of the learning process within us. Maybe that's self inflicting 'cause we put up a barrier, oh I'm 60 so I shouldn't be doing this now, so maybe I think there's a bit of psychology in there that says, that you say you can't but you actually can. (Male, age undisclosed)

## How ageism works in organisations

- Instead of focusing just on which stereotypes exist and how gate keepers restrict access to training and development, we have also investigated how older workers themselves deploy age-related narratives when talking about their training and development opportunities. This helps with understanding the 'why' behind previous findings that older workers appear less motivated for training (e.g. Ng and Feldman, 2012).
- This is important because the appearance of formal equality or age-neutral/age-blind policy may serve to obscure or even normalise more embedded forms of ageism. The fact that everyone has access to training and development is less important than the ways in which employees maybe discouraged by others or discouraged by their own sense of entitlement or competence.
- Do older workers really not want training, or have they internalized the message that they should not?

## Conclusions

- Ageism, though formally absent in the sense of compliance with age discrimination laws, was clearly part of the organizational culture and so normalized that managers talked quite freely about how they saw the disadvantages of age.
- Norms about what was age-appropriate were internalized and expressed by employees as well, as suggested by statements such as individuals being ‘too old’ for their job, changing jobs, training and/or promotion and that they would leave that ‘to the younger ones’.
- The public discourse around extending working lives explicitly frames the baby boomer generation as a potential burden and a problem and may have further entrenched negative stereotypes.
- This suggests that improving older workers access to training and development requires more than formal equality in treatment; it will be necessary to tackle deep seated and not always acknowledged ‘common sense’ views about the impact of age held both by managers and the managed.

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