

**Making a difference: line managers' activities towards older workers**

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**Paper for the 5<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Dutch HRM Network**

**In Search of Balance: Managing the Dualities of HRM**

**9-10 November 2007**

**Tilburg University, the Netherlands**

**Theme 5: HRM: integration vs. differentiation**

Word count: 5490 (excluding abstract, references, table and appendix)

## **Abstract**

Line managers make a difference when it comes to older workers' ongoing labour market participation. They do so in two meanings of the term. Firstly, line managers offer social support to older workers whom they supervise depending on their coaching skills and their willingness to use these skills. Contrary to earlier research no influence of negative stereotypical attitudes about older workers' lack of flexibility and performance was found. Secondly, line managers differentiate between older workers: depending on their assessment of older employees' motivation, employability and performance, they try to stimulate retention or exit of older employees. These findings come from a survey of 160 front line managers. They add new insights about the determinants of line managers' activities and underline the essential role front line managers play in actual HR-practices for older workers.

## **1. Introduction**

This paper builds on research (Leisink, Thijssen & Walter, 2004) the original inspiration of which is quite similar to the suggestion by Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) that the gap between what is formally required in HR policy and what is actually delivered, can be explained by the way in which line managers enact HR practices. In the case of this research of policies towards older workers, Thijssen (2001) observed a policy gap involving that top management often voiced the need to retain older workers and to undertake age-related policies that block early retirement and stimulate employability of older workers, while actual practices showed a continuing outflow of workers from 58 years onwards into early retirement. The expectation that this gap could be explained by studying the activities of line managers resulted in research which provides information about line managers' people management activities and the factors that influence these activities. Although the scope of this research is restricted to the effect of line managers activities on the HR-outcome of employee retention, the results support the general idea of the crucial role of line managers in the HR-performance equation examined by Purcell and others.

Research in the Netherlands has shown that most organizations do not have formalized policies towards older workers (Leisink, Thijssen & Walter, 2004; Remery et al., 2001), while collective labour agreements offer provisions in only a few areas. Thus, in the absence of formalized policies organizational practices consist largely of what line managers do, and therefore it is of interest to examine the factors that are related to their activities. Line managers have featured in research of older workers, but only in a limited way. Earlier interest has concentrated on the influence of age related (stereotypical) attitudes (Boerlijst, Van der Heijden & Van Assen, 1993; Thijssen & Van der Heijden, 2002; Visser, Henkens & Schippers, 2003). Other personal attributes such as their competences, and the organisational characteristics such as discretionary space and support by HR-staff, have scarcely been

examined. This paper will fill this gap and address the question what kind of social support activities line managers undertake towards their older workers, and which personal attributes and organizational characteristics are related to these activities. The interest in the social support line managers offer includes the issue whether line managers actually differentiate between their older workers.

The paper elaborates the theoretical framework and the design of the research project. The results section will begin by presenting some descriptive statistics of line manager support for older workers, and then examine the correlations with a number of managerial attributes and organizational characteristics. The relevance of these findings is discussed in the final section of the paper, which will include the question how managers deal with the issue of differential treatment of older workers.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

Focusing on line managers' support for older workers presumes that relevant HR-responsibilities have been devolved to the line. We will therefore first examine this presumption and then sketch the development of older worker policies in the Netherlands. Finally we will report the state of research of line managers' role in HR practices aimed at older workers and from this derive the hypotheses that will be tested.

### **2.1. Line management responsibility for HRM**

Early publications of some of the leading authors on HRM in Europe (Guest, 1987; Sisson, 1994; Storey, 1992) identified the management of human resources by the line as distinctive to HRM. According to Larsen and Brewster (2003, p. 228), 'the notion of line management accepting greater responsibility for human resource management within employing

organisations is now received wisdom', the most common pattern involving a sharing of responsibilities between line managers and HR specialists (see also Hall & Torrington, 1998). From their series of surveys covering a large number of European countries Larsen and Brewster (2003) draw the conclusion that the overall trend is that in each country significantly more organisations are increasing than decreasing line management responsibility in areas such as pay, training and industrial relations. There are differences in the assignment of responsibility to line managers in the various HR areas and there are also clear variations between European countries. Overall the Netherlands belongs to the top category of countries, together with Denmark and Finland, which have devolved most HR responsibilities to the line (Larsen & Brewster, 2003, p. 239-240). However, their findings do not specify in which ways the various levels of management share in these responsibilities.

It is interesting to note that in the top category of 'most devolved' countries more than two thirds of the organisations indicate that the primary responsibility for major policy decisions on training and development rests with line management (alone or together with the HR department) (Larsen & Brewster, 2003, p. 237). Obviously training and development is of major importance to our interest in the employability and retention of older workers (Thijssen & Van der Heijden 2002; Van der Heijden, 2005).

Larsen and Brewster raise another point, which is relevant for our discussion of line managers' support for older workers. They note that there are several practical problems associated with the devolvement of HR responsibilities to the line. These include: line managers' resistance to accepting this responsibility, lack of time, lack of ability, ignorance about recent developments in HRM, lack of a comprehensive organisational or longer term view of HRM topics, and poor policy making in HRM areas (Larsen & Brewster, 2003, p. 229). In addition, numerous studies report evidence of these problems and of the consequences of the ongoing trend of devolving HR responsibilities to line managers (cf.

Budhwar, 2000; Cunningham & Hyman, 1999; McConville & Holden, 1999; Thornhill & Saunders, 1998; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). We may expect that these problems which hinder line managers taking up HR responsibilities in general, will also impact on the extent to which they undertake activities on behalf of the retention of older workers.

## **2.2. HR policies towards older workers**

The late 1970s saw the beginning of a policy to facilitate early retirement of older workers in the Netherlands (Trommel, 1995). At the time youth unemployment was fairly high and industrial restructuring was making large numbers of workers redundant. These circumstances induced the state to introduce a plan for fiscal subsidies for older workers who would retire and who would be replaced by young unemployed jobseekers. Employers accepted the plan because this offered them a way to restructure in a socially responsible way and to replace older workers by young workers who were considered cheaper and more productive. The early retirement arrangement based on fiscal subsidy and financial contributions by employers became very popular with older workers, and trade unions succeeded in gradually expanding the scheme to include workers from 57½ years onwards. Early retirement was formally a voluntary arrangement but grew into a routine practice which was administratively handled by the personnel department. Managers had no role in the process leading up to early retirement and most refrained from discussing the idea of postponing retirement even if they were about to lose workers whose outstanding performance they valued (Henkens & van Solinge, 2003).

Early retirement as one type of older worker policies was complemented by adaptation policies (Remery et al., 2001). The aim of these was to adapt the job and the working conditions to older workers whose workability and employability were limited. Adaptation policies included for instance reduction of working hours, extra holidays and a ban on compulsory overtime and nights shifts from a certain age (50 or 55) onwards, as well as

ergonomic measures or transfer to less burdensome jobs (De Lange & Van de Bogaard, 2007). The measures could involve line manager activity for instance in the sense of signalling the need to bring in health and safety specialists or HR advisors.

Thijssen (1997) labels the early retirement and the adaptation policy as 'old' type of older worker policies that restrict themselves to a specific age category (usually 50 years and older) and to financial and curative measures that accept the limited employability of older workers. In his view 'new' policies consist mainly of preventive measures that consist of human resource development and job mobility activities and that target all employees – not just older workers – on the assumption that such measures are more successful and that sustainable employability is effected if workers participate in such HR-activities from the start of their career. Since the government decided in 2004 to stop the fiscal subsidy of early retirement schemes and thereby enforced the transition to working longer – in principle until retirement, which is now at the age of 65 - the recognition of the need for new age-related policies has grown (Leisink, Thijssen & Walter, 2004; Thunissen, 2005). Recognizing that there are large differences between older workers, in the sense that whereas one 'older' worker is fit and can go on working until 65 years or longer, another cannot and needs his job adapted, Thijssen (2006) argues for tailor-made arrangements. These evidently require line manager involvement because the line manager is in a position to observe individual employees functioning and to discuss their job performance in the annual cycle of planning, coaching and performance evaluation interviews (Leisink, Thijssen & Walter, 2006).

Assuming that line managers have discretionary space, do they use that space to differentiate between workers and to arrange tailor-made arrangements? The call not to treat older workers as a category but to adopt an individual approach has been met in a negative way. That is to say that collective agreement regulations that offered protective measures for older workers as a category, for instance in the form of reduction of working hours and bans

on overtime work, have become the object of scrutiny because these may represent an instance of unequal treatment that is not founded on objective grounds. This is the effect of the new 2004 law in the Netherlands that demands equal treatment as regards age (Van der Burg, 2007). The implication of this law forbidding unequal treatment is not that protective measures make no sense at all but that because of the individual differences between older workers these measures can be relevant to older workers individually but not to the category of older workers as such unless there is objective proof. This actually means that line managers can no longer apply the collective agreement regulations offering special treatment for older workers. They can either do nothing or engage in individual arrangements. There is little information on what line managers actually do, but the fact that only just over one third of older workers indicate that they positively think that their manager would adapt their job if they would ask for it (Henkens & Van Solinge, 2007: 68) suggests that it is not self-evident that line managers are willing to engage in tailor-made arrangements.

We think that line managers are hesitant to differentiate between workers not only because this may require expert knowledge to assess whether some type of arrangement is justified in an individual instance, but also because individual arrangements will raise issues of fairness and managers will have to be able to account for their decisions. Accounting for the justice of managerial decisions based on collective agreement regulations that are applied consistently is easier than accounting for managerial decisions that involve an arrangement for one older worker (for instance no compulsion to do overtime work) based on the assessment of the individual situation (Greenberg & Cropanzano, 2001). Other older workers may compare their own situation with this individual arrangement, question its justification and confront their line manager with questions that are difficult to answer. In addition, in a situation where collective regulations are replaced by individual arrangements risks of perceived injustice and breaches of the psychological contract increase, and so will the

negative consequences of perceived breaches (Schalk, De Jong & Freese, 2007; Torka & Looise, 2007). We assume that managers will engage in differentiation hesitantly because of the delicate issues and the risks of negative consequences involved.

### **2.3. Research of line managers and older workers**

The importance of line managers' support for older workers was the object of a number of studies. Boerlijst, Van der Heijden and Van Assen (1993) examined line managers' activities aimed at supporting the learning value of the job, the quality of functioning of (older) employees, their participation in various sorts of social networks and job mobility. Thijssen (1996) studied the influence of line managers on their older employees' participation in training. The effect of the absence of line manager's involvement in their older employees' decision process to opt for early retirement was established by Henkens and Van Solinge (2003). Leisink, Thijssen and Walter (2004) found no work organizations with formalized comprehensive age-related policies. Age-related measures that were available, such as the reduction of the number of working hours for older workers from a certain age onwards and the right to early retirement, were mostly the result of compliance with collective labour agreements for the sector. Neither retention-oriented nor retirement-oriented policy-measures had a notable significance in actual practices, according to line managers. Retention-oriented measures dealing with development and job mobility, and measures facilitating early retirement were relatively less insignificant than other types of measures. This implies that hr-practices supporting older workers basically consist of line managers' own initiatives.

These studies show that the type of activities that line managers can undertake towards their older workers involve various functional career-oriented activities. These coincide partly with the five types of social support described by House (1981) involving praise, job related

information, job-related help, help dealing with disappointment, and help with personal problems. In addition to career-oriented support, House's types of social support also include stimulation of commitment and personal well-being. The above studies concentrate on line manager support for older workers, but fit in with other studies of social support. For instance, a recent study by Wadsworth and Owens (2007) examined the effect of social support on the work and family domains, and showed that social support from supervisors and co-workers helped to reduce work-family conflict.

The determinants of line manager's activities examined by earlier studies consist mainly of managerial attitudes and age related stereotypes, thereby following insights from British and American research (e.g. Hassel & Perrewé, 1995; Taylor & Walker, 1994; 1998). In a recent study of employers' opinion about policies aimed at retention of older workers, Visser, Henkens and Schippers (2003) found that employers who subscribe to negative stereotypes associating older employees with a lack of flexibility/ innovativeness and with less productivity, give less support to retention policies. This suggests that the earlier findings of Boerlijst, Van der Heijden and Van Assen (1993), who found that most managers prefer a majority of younger employees working in their department and legitimize this by negative stereotypes about older workers' lack of flexibility, creativity, ambitions and performance, basically still hold. The fact that workers over 50 years of age benefit less than younger workers from a range of managerial activities that support employees' participation in training, job mobility and job performance is partly accounted for by the prevalence of such stereotypes (Boerlijst, Van der Heijden & Van Assen, 1993).

Until recently other managerial characteristics have not been studied as determinants of line managers' support for older workers. This is curious because the studies about the devolvement of HRM responsibilities to the line come up with various other factors that

appear to influence line managers' take up of their responsibilities. Following these studies (notably Larsen & Brewster, 2003; McConville & Holden, 1999; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003), supervisors' people management abilities and their opportunities in terms of discretionary space and HR-tools for engaging in career-related support activities should be considered as relevant antecedents in addition to their attitudes about older employees. One would assume that line managers who are more competent and have more room and facilities for support activities will give more support to their older workers and will also be more likely to differentiate between older workers.

Drawing on the studies mentioned above and on our own research (Leisink, Thijssen & Walter, 2006) we suggest a number of hypotheses regarding the relationship between managers' attributes, organizational characteristics and line managers' support for older employees. These are:

H1: There is a negative relationship between line managers' subscription to negative stereotypes about older employees and their support for older workers.

H2: There is a negative relationship between line managers' preference for their personnel consisting of a majority of younger workers and their support for older workers.

H3: There is a positive relationship between line managers' skills to coach older workers and their support for older workers.

H4: There is a positive relationship between line managers' willingness to coach older workers and their support for older workers.

H5: There is a positive relationship between the degree of managerial discretion which line managers perceive they have and their support for older workers.

H6: There is a positive relationship between the degree of support which line managers experience themselves and their support for older workers.

Regarding the influence of these same determinants on the differential treatment of older workers we suppose that managers' coaching skills, their willingness to use these on behalf of older workers, and the degree of managerial discretion and support will be related positively to actual attempts to influence retention or early exit of older workers. No hypothesis about the influence of stereotypical attitudes is included, because the very notion of differentiation is at odds with generalized stereotypical attitudes about older workers that treat them as a category and not as individuals. In summary:

H7: There is a positive relationship between line managers' skills to coach older workers and their differential attempts to influence retention or early exit.

H8: There is a positive relationship between line managers' willingness to use skills to coach older workers and their differential attempts to influence retention or early exit.

H9: There is a positive relationship between the degree of managerial discretion and their differential attempts to influence retention or early exit of older workers.

H10: There is a positive relationship between the degree of support which line managers experience themselves and their differential attempts to influence retention or early exit of older workers.

### **3. Research design**

This paper aims at testing hypotheses concerning managerial attributes and organizational characteristics that are presumably related to line managers' support for older workers.

The data come from research of HR-practices towards older workers in organizations in the printing industry, the wholesale business in food, the financial services and healthcare. The selection of organizations was based on the aim to spread cases over manufacturing and

service sectors of industry. The sampling was selective in the sense that the organization's HR-director's willingness to participate in the research was obtained through personal networks of the researchers. For the purpose of this paper the questionnaires of 160 front line managers can be used, meaning that we concentrate on lowest level line managers with direct supervisory responsibility for workers of fifty years and older.

The dependent variable 'supervisors' support for older workers' consists of two subvariables: 'support of older workers' commitment' and 'support of career development'. In addition the dependent variable 'differential treatment of older workers' is included. The independent variables consist of managerial attributes and organizational characteristics: skills to coach older workers; willingness to coach older workers; stereotypical attitudes about older workers' presumed lack of performance; stereotypical attitudes about older workers' presumed lack of flexibility; preference for a majority of younger workers in the unit; discretionary room; support from HR-specialists and other managers. All variables were measured using 5-point Likert scales (with a 5-score indicating very strong support for the statement in the item). Appendix I gives the full details of the operationalization.

#### **4. Results**

Line managers are strongly focused on stimulating older workers' commitment and slightly less strongly on supporting older workers' career development. Mean scores were 3,93 (Std. 0,55) and 3,44 (Std. 0,70) respectively.

It appears also that line managers do differentiate between their older workers, at least in the sense of attempting to stimulate retention of highly motivated, well performing and broadly employable employees and attempting to stimulate early exit of poorly motivated,

poorly performing and narrowly employable employees. Coding the items on the attempts to stimulate retention, the mean score is 3,80 (Std. 0,58).

Line managers rated their skills to coach older workers as fairly good (Mean 3,68; Std. 0,52) as well as their willingness to coach (Mean 3,64; Std. 0,59). Line managers have a weak tendency to reject the stereotypical presumption of older workers' lack of performance (Mean 2, 62; Std. 0,59) and report neutral on the stereotypical presumption of older workers' lack of flexibility (Mean 3.18; Std. 0,62). They also tend to be neutral on the ideal of a majority of younger workers in their unit (Mean 2,73; Std. 1,00). Finally they are not very positive about their discretionary room (Mean 3,08; Std. 0,63) but fairly positive about the support they get themselves from HR-specialists and other line managers (Mean 3.66; Std. 0,81).

Table 1 presents the results of the correlation analyses. We will summarize the results.

< Insert Table 1 about here >

H1 cannot be confirmed. The correlations between line managers' subscription to negative stereotypes and their support for older workers are very weak and not significant.

H2 is confirmed. As hypothesized there is a negative relationship between line managers' preference for a majority of younger workers in their unit and their support for older workers.

The correlation is weak but significant.

H3 and H4 are confirmed. There is a strong positive relationship between line managers' skills to coach older workers and their support for older workers, and this holds also for their willingness to coach older workers. Provisional regression analyses (not included in this paper) show that managers' competences explain about 34 per cent of the variance in commitment support and 29 per cent of the variance in career support, and that other variables add but one to three per cent in explaining variance.

H5 and H6 are confirmed. There is a moderately strong positive relationship between the degree of discretionary room which line managers perceive and their support for older workers, and this also holds for the degree of support which line managers get themselves and their support for older workers.

Of the hypotheses H7 - H10 concerning the determinants of line managers' differential attempts to influence retention or early exit, only H8 can be confirmed. That is, there is a weak positive correlation between line managers' willingness to use their coaching skills and their attempts to differentiate between older workers whom they want to retain and whose early exit they try to influence.

## **5. Conclusion and discussion**

Returning to the question which this paper set out to answer we can conclude that line managers offer social support to the older workers they supervise in various ways, notably by stimulating older workers' commitment and by supporting their career development, and that these support activities are dependent on line managers' people management competences, the willingness to use these competences and on the discretionary space and support that the organization provides to line managers. This is an interesting conclusion in various respects.

First, it illustrates the important role which line managers' people management activities have in HR practices towards older workers. Following the distinction which Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) make between leadership behaviour and the enactment of HR practices which need to be taken into account in the explanation of the causal chain linking policy inputs to performance outcomes, we see in the case of older worker policies that line managers do engage in (supportive) leadership behaviour while the priority of various types of older worker policies is quite low (Leisink, Thijssen & Walter 2004). So actual practices

aimed at sustaining older workers' employability depend in an important way on the support that line managers offer, both in the sense of stimulating older workers' commitment and to a slightly lesser extent in the field of career support.

Second, an important finding is the significance of line managers' people management competences, that is their skills to coach older workers and their willingness to do so. This finding resonates with the studies of the devolvement of HR-responsibilities to line managers, which concluded that lack of ability and ignorance about recent developments in HRM are among the problems that hinder line managers taking up HR responsibilities. This study shows that line managers who are more competent also engage more in support of their older workers, and people management competences appear to be the most important factor influencing the activities undertaken.

A limitation of this study that qualifies this conclusion is that the results are based on self-report by line managers. Common-rater bias is known to inflate reported effect sizes, particularly for attitude-attitude relationships (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Indeed, in the research of older worker policies, on which this paper builds, we found that line manager scores of the social support they offer are about 0.5 point higher than their older workers' scores of the career support they perceive to get. However, while the actual scores vary the important finding of our earlier research was that there is a positive correlation between actual support offered by line managers as perceived by older workers and the intent of older workers to work longer instead of opting for early retirement (Leisink, Thijssen & Walter, 2004: 145-146). So line managers make a difference.

In addition to manager's competences the opportunities which organizations offer to their managers to perform well are important. These opportunities include the discretionary space that managers have, the support they get from HR-specialists and the support they get from

other line managers. The importance of discretionary space is interesting because it is related to the issue of managers' ability to differentiate. The more HR-policies regarding older workers, regarding their employability and working until the age of 65, take the form of collective standardized rules, the less discretionary space line managers will have and the less they will be able to come up with tailor-made arrangements.

Third, related to the previous point is the interesting finding that stereotypical attitudes about older workers do not seem to influence line managers' support activities whereas earlier studies demonstrated the importance of negative stereotypes. This difference could be related to three factors. First, Visser, Henkens and Schippers (2003) studied the effect of stereotypes about older workers and assumed that HR-advisors would have a more positive opinion about older workers than the employer because they have more professional knowledge, and were able to confirm this hypothesis regarding the positive stereotypes of loyalty and motivation but not regarding the negative stereotypes of productivity and innovativeness. Our research deals with line managers who supervise and interact with older workers on a daily basis, so the finding that these line managers hold less negative stereotypes about older workers is consistent with the general theoretical assumption about more interaction and information about 'other groups' leading to less stereotyping. Second, the tendency of line managers to score neutral on negative stereotypes or even to reject them, could be the result of awareness campaigns that have been staged in the Netherlands in recent years to make the public aware of the 'myths' about older workers (Nauta, de Bruin & Cremer, 2004). An alternative interpretation that these neutral scores reflect a political correctness tendency seems less probable, because line managers do apparently not have a problem with indicating that they attempt to influence retention or early exit of older workers who are more or less motivated, more or less performing well. Third, the different findings could be related to differences in measurement. Our operationalization of the negative stereotypes of older workers' presumed

lack of productivity and flexibility include only some items of the more extensive scales used by Visser, Henkens and Schippers (2003).

However, while managers appear on average not to hold negative stereotypes about older workers' lack of performance and lack of flexibility, some still favour the idea of their personnel consisting of a majority of young workers. Earlier studies associated this preference for a pyramidal age composition of the workforce with the negative stereotypes about older workers. It is not evident that this assumption is tenable. As in the case of the negative stereotypes (with mean scores of 2,62 for lack of performance and 3,18 for lack of flexibility) the mean score on the preference for a majority of young workers (mean= 2.73) is fairly neutral. However, the standard deviation on the preference for a majority of young workers is almost twice as high (1,00) as for the two negative stereotypes (0,59 and 0,62 respectively). The differences regarding the preference for a majority of young workers could have to do with sectoral differences rather than with stereotypical attitudes. We do not have sufficient numbers of respondents in various sectors to test this assumption, but it would seem that managers in sectors with low-skilled/manual work and/or a high proportion of older workers have a stronger preference for a majority of younger workers than managers in sectors with high-skilled/clerical work and/or a low proportion of older workers. Just to illustrate this assumption: the managers' mean scores on the preference for a majority of young workers vary from 3,70 in the printing industry, 3,00 in the wholesale sector, 2,68 in healthcare to 2,54 in financial services.

It appears that line managers differentiate between older workers, at least in the sense of attempts to influence retention of well-motivated, well-performing and broadly employable older workers. Caution in interpreting these findings is called for. Henkens and Van Solinge (2007) report that line managers as a rule tend not to engage in talks with their older workers

over the moment of early retirement. They also report that in their survey of retired employees only 15 per cent of their respondents had been approached by their manager with a request to consider postponing the moment of early retirement. Our findings are not explicitly concerned with managerial intervention in the employee's decision over the moment of early retirement but with managerial attempts in a more general sense to influence retention or (early) exit of workers aged fifty or older. Our findings suggest that line managers differentiate in relation to motivation, performance and employability. It is difficult to explain that line managers' willingness to use their coaching skills is positively related to their differential approach while the coaching skills themselves are not, unless it is assumed that this is the case because the skills cannot be used because of a lack of discretionary space.

The correlation analyses reported in this paper show the direction of more robust analyses to be performed. These should examine the assumption that line managers' competences (coaching skills and willingness to use these) have a direct influence on actual managerial support activities, while the opportunities they have for action (discretionary space and received support) moderate the impact of competences on actual support activities. The differential approach to older workers is another area that requires further research. Such research should not only examine managerial action opportunities but also the issues dealing with managers' perceptions of accounting for the distributive and procedural justice of decisions that involve individual arrangements, and managers' perceptions' of the risks of perceived injustice and breaches of the psychological contract.

We have indicated the limitations of this study having to do with the use of self-report measures, the operationalization of some variables and the small numbers of line managers per sector to test the influence of certain determinants. These limitations should be addressed

in future studies. Having said this, we believe that this study demonstrates the important role of line managers in HR-practices. Another way of framing this conclusion is that policies that wish to give priority to retention of older workers by preventive measures that invest in workers' sustainable employability and curative measures that adapt the job and working conditions for those employees whose workability requires so, should pay attention to training line managers, and to providing them with the discretionary space and support to enact their frontline role with older workers. We believe that top management underestimates the importance of the front line manager's role in the HRM-performance chain. The line managers in our study indicated that their people management activities were not part of the appraisal interviews they had themselves with their supervisors. Some line managers do not invest in people management as a consequence of the top management focus on achieving the hard performance targets. Other line managers' personal motivation for people management activities is so strong that they invest considerable time and energy although this is not part of their performance appraisal. It would be an important signal of the value placed on people management activities in general and with regard to older workers' sustained employability in particular when top management make the people management competences and activities of line managers a priority in HR-policies and managers' performance interviews.

Note: the authors want to thank Prof. Dr. Jo Thijssen for his suggestions regarding an earlier version of this paper.

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## **Appendix I Operationalization of the variables**

The variables were measured using 5-point Likert scales, with a 1-score indicating very weak support for the statement in the item and a 5-score very strong support. Because most of these scales were newly developed the test scores for reliability will be provided.

The dependent variable ‘supervisors’ support for older workers’ consists of two subvariables which have been established on the basis of factor analysis. The subvariables are:

### *a. support of older workers’ commitment*

This variable is based on four items asking managers to indicate their support for statements about their interest in their older workers’ job performance and in their personal functioning. Cronbach’s Alpha for reliability of the scale is good: .86.

### *b. support of career development*

This variable is based on four items asking managers to indicate their support for statements about facilitating their older workers’ participation in training and use of career opportunities in the organisation. Cronbach’s Alpha for reliability of the scale is good: .85.

Differential treatment of older workers is a dependent variable that refers to:

### *c. managers’ attempts to stimulate early exit or retention dependent on differences between older workers.*

This variable is measured through six items asking managers to indicate their support for statements about their attempts to influence exit or retention of older workers who perform better or worse at work, who are more or less employable, and who are more or less motivated. So differentiation is understood in terms of attempts to influence exit or retention, and certain characteristics of older workers are assumed to be the basis for differentiation.

This variable was included in the questionnaires sent to some but not all organizations; the N for this variable is therefore 69. Cronbach's Alpha for reliability of the scale is good: .78.

The independent variables consist of seven managerial attributes and organizational characteristics. The managerial attributes include coaching competences, involving both coaching skills and the willingness to use these skills (d-e), and stereotypical attitudes about older workers (f-h). The organizational characteristics include discretionary opportunities and support for line managers (i-j):

*d. skills to coach older workers*

This variable is based on six items asking managers about their skills to coach older workers in various respects such as discussing their job performance and assessing training and career possibilities. Cronbach's Alpha is good: .77.

*e. willingness to coach older workers*

This variable is based on six items asking managers to indicate their willingness to coach their older workers in various respects. Cronbach's Alpha is good: .83.

*f. stereotypical attitudes about older workers' presumed lack of performance*

This variable is based on five items asking managers to indicate their support for statements about older workers' performance at work in comparison with younger workers; a 5 score meaning very strong support for the presumption of older workers' lack of performance.

Cronbach's Alpha is acceptable: .71.

*g. stereotypical attitudes about older workers' presumed lack of flexibility*

This variable is based on seven items asking managers to indicate their support for statements about older workers' adaptation to new technology and new work routines in comparison with younger workers; a 5 score meaning very strong support for the presumption of older workers' lack of flexibility. Cronbach's Alpha is good: .81.

*h. preference for a majority of younger workers in the unit*

This variable is based on one item asking the managers to indicate on a 5-point scale their support for the statement “There should be a majority of younger workers in my unit”.

*i. discretionary room*

This variable is based on six items asking managers about the autonomy they perceive in deciding about arrangements for their older workers. Cronbach’s Alpha is good: .80.

*j. support from HR-specialists and other managers*

This variable is based on two items asking managers to indicate the support they perceive they get from HR-specialists and other line managers. Cronbach’s Alpha is acceptable: .64.

**Table 1** Correlations between some line managers' attributes and organizational characteristics and line managers' support for older workers

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Support of older workers' commitment										
2. Support of career development	,419(**)									
3. Attempts to differentiate	0,149	0,036								
4. Competences to coach older workers	,391(**)	,442(**)	0,160							
5. Willingness to coach older workers	,555(**)	,487(**)	,223(*)	,457(**)						
6. Stereotypical attitudes about older workers presumed lack of performance	0,001	-0,124	-0,034	-,218(**)	-,159(*)					
7. Stereotypical attitudes about older workers presumed lack of flexibility	-0,060	-0,055	-0,086	-,180(*)	-0,118	,526(**)				
8. Preference for a majority of younger workers in the unit	-,134(*)	-,209(**)	0,073	-,169(*)	-,145(*)	,259(**)	,169(*)			
9. Discretionary room	,195(**)	,332(**)	-0,019	,316(**)	,263(**)	-,142(*)	-,190(**)	-,145(*)		
10. Support from HR-specialists and other managers	,222(**)	,307(**)	-0,179	,142(*)	,321(**)	0,041	0,046	-0,110	,347(**)	

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed)