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Making the case for older workers**

Against a background of population ageing, and with it, concomitant effects on social welfare systems and labour markets, public policy makers in affected nations are seeking ways of pushing out the final age of withdrawal from their labour markets. Central to such efforts is promoting the contribution of older workers to organizations and overcoming labour market age barriers. Within this advocacy approach there has been recent interest in identifying and promulgating examples of employer best practice in order to emphasize new dimensions of the business case for employing older workers. Drawing on literature concerned with advocating an ethical concern in human resource management as it pertains to older workers, this article examines an exemplar set of employer case studies aimed at promulgating best practice. It considers the concept of age management and its manifestations to argue that many standard HRM practices are firmly, although probably unwittingly, grounded in ageist assumptions concerning the capacities, potentiality and contributions of both younger and older workers. This, we argue, is a consequence of an unnecessarily narrow conception of good employment practice based in an economic rationality that is not conducive to the effective management of age in organizations.

Key words: **discrimination, labour markets, age barriers, age management, HRM best practice, ageing societies** (JEL: J23, J24, J26, J71, J78)

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Introduction

Labour market age barriers are in sharp focus across most industrialized nations and in Europe and East Asia in particular as public policymakers, concerned with the economic effects of population ageing, have moved to encourage longer working lives. Many affected nations will experience a substantial ageing and, simultaneously, shrinking of their workforces, bringing to the fore the issue of managing older workers. In combination with declining birth rates, the retirement of a large cohort of ‘baby boomers’ is expected to reduce the supply of skilled workers, contribute to a lowering of workforce participation rates, and raise dependency ratios. Addressing workforce ageing issues has thus become critical to many of these nations’ economic performance. Governments needing to improve labour force participation rates of older workers have utilized various means, such as changing employer attitudes (Sonnet, Olsen, & Manfredi, 2014).

Accordingly, among most industrialized and some middle-income nations, there is public policy interest in the prolongation of working lives (OECD, 2006). Germany and Japan are noteworthy contexts where efforts are underway to foster a new working life course focused on workforce participation at older ages. In both nations, the extension of working lives to capitalize on productivity into advanced age has become central in public policy discourses and labour market measures. While the industrial structures of Germany and Japan share many similarities, the policy approaches to late- and post-career work differ, particularly in formal phased retirement, or bridge retirement, programs. Largely gone from the policy makers toolkit in Germany, as in other industrialized ageing contexts, is early retirement, which in the 1980s was a much used tool for the management of labour supply, but has now been superseded by increasing efforts to push out the final date of labour market withdrawal (Vargas, Fric, Curtarelli, Feifs, & Weber, 2013; Walker & Naegele, 2009). In Japan also efforts have been underway for some time to promote the concept of longer working lives to business (Yamada & Higo, 2015). Underpinning these shifts has been an increasing emphasis on the promotion of ‘age management’ (Walker, 2005).

Alongside the efforts of these governments some employers, particularly large ones, are pursuing a business agenda of recruiting, retaining and rehiring older workers. This is occurring in Germany and Japan, as well as other contexts, in response to a range of factors, including but not limited to the following four, that stem from workforce ageing. Firstly, there appears to be a greater demand from older workers themselves for more opportunities to continue working for longer in quality jobs (Dittrich, Busch, & Micheel, 2011; Oka, 2013). Partly, as exemplified by the case of Germany, the desire to work on is generated by insufficient retirement incomes (Fasang, 2012), an issue that is particularly acute for older single women and one that is complicated by failing health, poor work conditions and a lack of quality jobs (Pleau, 2010; Zimmer, Leve, & Naegele, 2010). Secondly, generally improved health among older people means that they are assumed to be more readily able to continue working longer (Buckley, O’Dwyer, Tucker, Adams, Wittert, & Hugo, 2013; Zhan, Wang, Liu, & Shultz, 2009). Thirdly, advances in technology and

workplace design may enable older workers, including those with a disability, to continue working to later ages (Brooke, Taylor, McLoughlin, & Di Biase, 2013). Fourthly, there is a concern among employees and their employers for greater work life balance in order to, for example, fit in caring and other responsibilities with paid employment (Loretto & Vickerstaff, 2013; Nikolova & Graham, 2014; Sweet, Pitt-Catsouphes, Besen, & Golden, 2014).

Large organizations in Germany and Japan offer best practice examples of employer behaviour in recruiting, retaining and rehiring older workers. Some employers, notably in Japan, have also identified a business case for investing in their ageing workforces. Nonetheless, it is commonly held that labour market age barriers are still prevalent and thus raising awareness among business of the activities of leading employers in the area of the effective management of ageing workforces would seem to be necessary.

Context

Over the last decade there has been growing interest in seeking to better understand the determinants of older workers' employment and retirement behaviour. There is a rich international literature concerning organizational barriers to older workers' employment and the determinants of employer behaviour (Conen, Henkens, & Schippers, 2012; Rix, 2012; Taylor, McLoughlin, Di Biase, Brooke, & Steinberg, 2013; van Dalen, Henkens, & Wang, 2015).

Across ageing nations, major knowledge transfer projects have been undertaken in order to collate and disseminate to employers examples of corporate best practice in the employment of older workers in an effort to encourage behavioural change. These include: Corporate Champions, Experience Pays, Australia; Age Platform Europe, Combating Age Barriers, Employment Initiatives for an Ageing Workforce, European Union; Finnish National Programme on Ageing Workers, Finland; Age Positive/Business Link, UK; and Sloan Center on Ageing and Work, USA.

Alongside these public initiatives the private and not-for-profit sectors have played an important role in offering practical, business orientated solutions, for example, Sageco, Australia; Arbeit und Alter, Austria; Fraunhofer IAO, Germany; Employers' Forum on Age, Third Age Employment Network, UK; and AARP Best Employers International Program, USA. Internationally an extensive range of compendia of best practice, guides to best practice and tools to support industry have been developed and promulgated (Department for Work and Pensions, 2013, 2015; Finkelstein, Roher, & Owusu, 2013; Naegele & Walker, 2006; Walker, 1998; Walker & Taylor, 1998).

However, while much is considered known about the 'how to' of effective 'age management', to date there have been few attempts to draw knowledge together in a way that can constructively inform policy efforts. Importantly, attempts at synthesizing what can be learned from so-called examples of employer best practice have been rare (Taylor, 2006).

The purpose of the study described here was to identify lessons from a particular set of employer case studies collected as part of the USA's older people's advocacy organization AARP Best Employer International Award which was established

to draw attention to international best practice in the employment of older workers. This current discussion focuses on the characteristics of these initiatives and how and why they evolved, with a particular emphasis on understanding the underpinning business rationales for their implementation. This is important because arguments for the employment of older workers, in an effort to encourage corporate engagement, are often grounded in such rationales.

A number of such business cases to encourage the implementation of workplace practices aimed at supporting the employment of older workers have been proposed. For instance, an early attempt at defining such a case was set out by Taylor and Walker (1995). This had five elements: Return on investment; preventing skill shortages; maximizing recruitment potential; responding to demographic change; and promoting diversity. Similarly, AARP has recently put forward a business case for the employment of older workers based on: The business impact of changing labour force demographics, the value of older workers to an organization, the economics of retaining and recruiting older workers, and what older workers seek in an employer (Aon Hewitt, 2015).

However, the utility of such approaches has been criticized for decades. Dickens (1999, pp. 9-10) has described 'a shift from equality arguments based primarily on appeals to social justice or morality, backed by the need for compliance with anti-discrimination legislation, to arguments based on pragmatic business self-interest as a rationale for equality action', arguing that 'limitations arise from the fact that business case arguments are inevitably contingent, variable, selective and partial, and often underplay the wider context within which business case rationales are having to be pursued'. Developing this argument, Riach (2009) argues that the framing of age diversity as an economically rational process such as a business case does not inherently lead to organizations responding to age diversity in a fair and equitable way. Attempting to ground a case for age diversity in terms of the 'benefits' that older workers may offer 'may limit the impact of the diversity message by legitimizing the use of stereotypes, be it positive or negative' and reduce the justification for equitable HRM policies to an economic logic (Riach, 2009, p. 322). As a consequence practices that may purport to be beneficial to older workers may actually be harmful.

Using the AARP Best Employers International Award applicants as a data source this study sought to understand how practices manifest among employers claiming to be age management innovators. In particular, the aim was to understand the nature of the underpinning business rationales for such measures in order to ascertain whether these were considered within, were linked to or co-existed with anti-ageism frameworks.

Methodology

This article is based on analysis of applications for the 2014 AARP Best Employer International Award. Organizations, most of which were large, voluntarily submitted applications to the award in response to a generic international call or invitation. Some potential applicants for the awards were identified by AARP appointed regional experts who assisted with applications, while others became aware of the initiative via

other networks. This inevitably introduced an element of bias into the AARP recruitment process. It meant, for instance, that higher profile organizations with long-standing initiatives that might already have been known to the regional expert were more likely to be approached. Applicants might also be expected to more often be larger organizations with significant human resource functions and therefore have the capacity and desire to prepare an application. It also meant that the influence of national institutional contexts needed to be considered since, as noted below, there was a significant geographical bias in the recruitment of applicants.

The application template invited organizations to submit a brief description of the organization, a description of its employment practices and policies for older workers, and the business case for these. Applications were required to be relatively brief but applicants could attach supporting documents if they chose to. Nonetheless, this meant that descriptions were somewhat perfunctory and occasionally provided too little detail to make interpretation straightforward. Most applications were written in English, although the quality of this was variable, again occasionally making interpretation problematical. Organizational statistics were also requested: The total number of employees in 2010-2014 and the percentage of employees aged 50 plus over the same time period.

Applications were evaluated and allocated points against pre-determined criteria and rubrics. The statistical data provided by each organization were collated and analysed. Additionally, the cases were coded according to the characteristics of interventions and these data were also collated and analysed. Each case study was dealt with individually and judged against the following key learning points: Problem analysis, strategy, implementation, novelty of approach, aspects of the business case, and evaluation.

Findings

Characteristics of case organizations

In this section the characteristics of the case organizations are described, from descriptors of the organizations themselves to the types of workforce policies they employed. In terms of the location of the case organizations the greatest concentration was in Europe, and Germany in particular (Table 1). This is likely to reflect greater action on the part of European employers but is also likely due to the greater experience those gathering the European cases had in working on this AARP program.

Private-for-profit organizations made up the bulk of the case studies. Altogether, 28 were classified as such. Far fewer – 9 – were classified as public sector organizations, 3 were classified as private-non-profit and 4 were classified as other.

More detailed sectoral analysis indicates that the case studies were most commonly located in Manufacturing followed by Health Care and Social Assistance and then Retail Trade. Overall, most industry sectors were represented with the exceptions of Electricity Supply, Mobility, Wholesale Trade, and Arts and Recreation Services (Table 2).

Table 1: Location of case studies

Pacific Asia	Australia	2
	China	1
	Japan	6
	Singapore	1
	South Korea	6
Germany	Germany	18
Other EU countries	Austria	1
	Finland	1
	Ireland	1
	Italy	2
	Netherlands	1
	Poland	1
	United Kingdom	3

Table 2: Industry sectors of case employers

Manufacturing	10
Electricity Supply, Mobility	-
Wholesale Trade	-
Retail Trade	5
Accommodation, Food Services	1
Transport and Storage	1
Information Media and Telecommunications	2
Finance and Insurance	2
Rental, Hiring and Real Estate Services	2
Professional, Scientific and Technical Services	3
Administrative and Support Services	4
Public Administration and Safety	4
Training, Education and Development	2
Health Care and Social Assistance	6
Arts and Recreation Services	-

The case studies represent a diverse range of workforce sizes. A fraction of employers were small with six having fewer than 60 employees. A further eight had between 60 and 200 employees. By far the largest group were larger employers, with 27 employing more than 200 employees. This may reflect the capacity of large or-

ganizations to undertake older worker initiatives, for example, having a significant human resource function and, as noted above, their willingness and interest in participating in such an initiative. It also inevitably introduces an element of bias. It is important to stress that much of this article is based on evidence provided by larger employers that may have less relevance for smaller enterprises.

Turning to the types of workforce measures employed, of note is that a significant proportion of the case organizations took a multi-faceted approach to age management, employing a range of initiatives. Thus, five organizations had in place 1-2 initiatives, 14 had 3-4 initiatives and the rest more than 4. This is suggestive of these latter organizations recognizing the need for sophisticated, multi-layered approaches to workforce management.

The most common types of measure – employed by 34 of the case organizations – were health promotion and protection. This was followed by flexible working arrangements (such as teleworking and formal phased retirement programs) nominated in 28 organizations. Similar in terms of the level of usage, lifelong learning and training along with age diversity promotion were utilized by 26 and 25 employers respectively. Recruitment – 19 employers – and employee knowledge capture and transfer – 18 employers – followed this. Rather less used were measures focusing on employee retirement – 11 employers – and caregiving – 10 employers. An emphasis on health and wellbeing programs indicates its significance for employers. Given that there are significant numbers of older carers, among women in particular, and this number is set to rise substantially in coming years, a lack of emphasis on policy for caregiving was surprising.

Identifying the organization's business case for age management

Employers frequently invoked a business case for employing older workers, centred on maintaining competitiveness, meeting organizational needs, and managing perceived organizational risks such as, for example, increasing health costs associated with an ageing workforce, the physicality of certain roles, and countering knowledge and experience loss due to retirements. Alongside these challenges, benefits of considering issues of workforce ageing were also identified, including: Retaining valued expertise and knowledge, being an employer of choice for older employees, greater staff engagement and productivity, a more sustainable workforce, reducing replacement costs through offering flexible working arrangements, reduced health costs as a consequence of reduced illness/injury and reduced absenteeism and turnover. Thus, while business cases for employing older workers were often firmly embedded in an economic rationale, this did not necessarily negate there being concomitant benefits for older workers.

Competitive advantage and mixed-age teams

A key aspect of the business case was maintaining a competitive advantage. Notably, employers acknowledged that the ageing of the customer base was a factor in focusing on maximizing the contribution of older workers, the argument being that organizations' workforces needed to better reflect their customer profile. Added to this, organizations recognized the potential for labour shortfalls due to a decline in

young people entering the workforce and general sectoral labour shortages, with a corollary of older people wishing or needing to remain economically active. It was, therefore, logical to develop policies aimed at the older workforce.

For instance, a Japanese manufacturing company found that, as a small enterprise, it faced difficulties attracting younger graduates. The company learned that many older workers retiring from large companies were becoming inactive. Hence, the company targeted such workers to strengthen its weaker areas, including technical and managerial jobs. Some companies took this further, commenting on the supposed positive attributes of older workers, apparently drawing upon common stereotypes concerning the benefits of employing older workers. These included applying the skills they had accumulated in previous jobs, the ability to be effective immediately, and being a mentor and leader. An example was a large German steelmaker whose older employees were utilized in troubleshooting roles in what was a complex manufacturing environment. Mixed-age teams allowed for the transfer of this expertise to younger workers.

Similarly, a German geriatric care organization was facing increasing competition in the nursing market created by policy decisions that were affecting the framework of geriatric nursing. According to the organization, given the nature of its business, it was more reliant on the experience and knowledge of its staff than many other industries. Thus, maximizing the utility of staff over their full working lives was advantageous. A novel approach was that of a Korean company that was a market leader in the manufacture and supply of hearing aids. This company supported its retirees who chose to open a hearing aid retail store.

A further factor supporting the business case for older workers was the maintenance of company values. Enhanced customer service through continuity of roles also underpinned the business case for employing older workers. A German transport and logistics company pointed to the skills and wealth of experience of older employees being valuable for a company in which safety takes priority. It was essential that this was passed on to younger workers, for instance via mixed-age teams. Another example was a Japanese manufacturing company that referred to valuing 'family like' teamwork and older workers taking on quasi-parenting roles. A further example was an Irish hotel where, because most older employees had long service with the company, this provided continuity to guests. According to the company and apparently once again drawing age stereotypical attitudes, older staff were considered as acting as role models to younger staff and interns.

Inter-generational knowledge transfer and mixed-age teams

Noteworthy was an emphasis among the case organizations on knowledge retention, capture and transfer. A number recognized the need for inter-generational knowledge transfer. Many described variations of mentoring schemes that, while serving to transfer knowledge, may also have fostered inter-generational solidarity. A Japanese staffing agency described the situation of older people on its books being placed in an engineering firm to team up with younger inexperienced workers in areas such as industrial machinery maintenance and plant management. As well as pointing to benefits for the older workers such as rediscovering pride in work and

regaining confidence the company pointed to benefits such as better service quality, enabling the placement company to reduce its employee headcount, and reduced training costs and turnover among younger workers.

A South Korean manufacturing organization rewarded employees who had worked for 20 years in the industry and shown outstanding manufacturing and repairing skills with the title ‘Master’. Masters manufactured the highest quality products and these were sold as the most high-end products. Masters also mentored younger workers. According to the company, such a role changed the perception of older workers as being seniors who incur cost to seniors who create special value.

A German retail and retail-related services group’s Senior Experts Consultancy was a particularly noteworthy example of knowledge utilization as it challenged conceptions of what it means to be retired. The consultancy provided retired former employees with the opportunity to undertake consultancy assignments within the company that arose at short notice. It drew upon the technical and social skills of former employees. The company identified the following benefits of such an arrangement:

- Experts were on call and could be deployed at short notice
- Consultants required no familiarization, no training and no permanent support
- Experts provided relevant expertise gained over a long period
- Sensitive know-how remained within the organization and was not sold on to rivals
- External consultancy services were more expensive
- Consultants were efficient from day one due to their expertise

Related to knowledge management and transfer was a recognition that organizations benefited from establishing and maintaining mixed-age teams. This goes beyond the notion of simply focusing more on the ageing workforce to recognize that successful organizations will usually employ people at different age-career stages and that there are gains to be made by capitalizing on this. Thus a South Korean bank re-hired retired branch managers who benefited from the continued opportunity to utilize their networks, expertise and consultancy skills, while the company benefited from increased sales opportunities and better customer service.

A further view of the case organizations was that greater diversity (including age) led to greater innovative capacity, workforce productivity and the more effective transfer of knowledge among the generations. For example, in the case of a Polish manufacturing organization it was argued that young people commencing their professional careers benefited from the opportunity to gain knowledge from their senior colleagues who inspired them with their attitude and knowledge. On the other hand, interaction with the younger workers helped the mentor to become disciplined and develop their mentoring skills.

Direct personal benefits to the worker from interventions could also be inferred from the case studies. For instance, a South Korean government organization referred to its strategy of recruiting older people as helping to decrease the sense of isolation and loss that older people may experience after retirement. Other cases

pointed to providing older people with the opportunity to continue to apply their knowledge and experience, to nurture young people and to maintain a sense of self worth.

Bridge employment in Germany

Managing the transition to retirement was a focus of a number of organizational measures. One such measure offered by a German health care organization concerned employees in the process of transitioning to retirement who were given the opportunity to meet with the CEO to discuss this coming phase of life and if they would be interested in retaining some kind of 'mini-job'. This job might or might not be in their present area. According to the organization, most employees took advantage of the offer and appreciated the organization's on-going interest in them.

Another example was a German logistics organization's Generations Pact, which involved working time accounts, partial retirement and a demographic fund and which particularly benefited the company's lower income earners. This was a scheme notable in its efforts to mitigate potential performance declines in terms of physical work. The vast majority of participants worked in the mail and parcel delivery operations. In the scheme, while employed full time, an employee paid into an account that was converted to credits. Staff accumulating enough credits could convert to part time (half their previous hours) employment from the age of 59. Wages were topped up by the company and by means of a Demographic Fund that came from a 0.5 per cent levy on the company's wage increase. Employees received between 79 per cent and 80 per cent of their previous net salary. The company pointed to the inevitability of physical decline amongst its employees given the nature of their work and that the scheme was the only means by which a prolongation of working lives was achievable.

A further example was a German cleaning and care services organization that recognized that those who had undertaken commercial and domestic cleaning work could often no longer continue at older ages. The company offered such workers the opportunity to retrain in dementia care at its expense. The company argued that only by ensuring its employees were assigned age appropriate work and had a satisfying work life could it be considered a good provider of services to the elderly.

Bridge employment in Japan

By contrast, a common approach to managing ageing workforces was to invest in supporting their health and wellbeing. For instance, a Japanese retail organization undertook research which found evidence of a decline in employee mobility due to weaker muscles and joints associated with ageing and which resulted in pain and fatigue in the legs and back. This reduced work efficiency and productivity and in the worst cases led to the departure of the employee. In response the organization implemented Pilates training for staff and disseminated advice on health and available support to staff via its internal newsletter.

It was apparent that roles for older workers were more often a continuation of previous ones. For instance a Japanese retailer had introduced a continued employment system whereby those aged over 65 (the retirement age) might continue to

work for the organization (or a subsidiary) until the age of 75 if they wished. Staff wishes were determined via a meeting between employee and supervisor that took place six months prior to retirement. Staff might remain beyond the age of 75 if they were considered valuable. A further example was a Japanese real estate management organization with a notable characteristic – those aged over 60 accounted for more than three-fifths of the workforce. This was explained by the company's recruitment strategy. It managed condominium apartments and the superintendents – known as Front Managers – of each building were recruited from among people who had retired from other companies. The company provided an intensive two-year training program for those starting their second career. While the retirement age of Front Managers was 65, they might be rehired as temporary workers with contracts renewed annually up to the age of 70. Beyond this staff might be rehired as substitute superintendents – known as Senior Front Managers – as long as they were motivated and met company health requirements. Approximately 300 such staff were employed, the oldest of whom was aged 79.

The case studies also challenged stereotypes concerning the ability of older people as learners. Some of this involved the provision of new skills, while some was concerned with attitude change. For instance, a Japanese staffing agency focused on resetting the so-called 'vocational mind' of older workers so they could adjust better to a new role that offered quite a different job experience and status level. This was particularly the case with white-collar workers who had transitioned out of large companies. Workers received training on role expectations and how to do the job so that they could more effectively transition into the new role and so that it was sustainable. The intent was to reduce the likelihood of an employer stating that, according to the organization, 'older people are hard to deal with'. In addition the organization subsidized the cost of vocational training in a range of areas undertaken by its employees, the bulk of whom were older workers.

Lifelong learning and the retraining of older workers were also features of case organizations from other national contexts. One example was an Italian organization that operates in the area of reintegrating disadvantaged people into the labour market and which had in place a program supporting lifelong learning among its workforce since 2010. The organization had established a small library, provided expert tuition, granted part time or flexible working hours to those undertaking studies or attending evening classes, offered loans to those undertaking study, refunded fees to those successfully completing study and entered into agreements with educational establishments.

Discussion: HRM best practice versus persistent ageism

A notable facet of business cases for employing older workers was that some policy was implicitly grounded in ageist assumptions. Thus, younger people were viewed as bringing new ideas and fresh approaches, whereas older workers were viewed as reservoirs of knowledge and wisdom. A related point concerns the way older people were sometimes represented in the case studies: As being in the final phase of a career, as being on the cusp of retirement, as being in physical decline, as keepers of knowledge that needed to be captured or passed on, or as only suitable for lower

status jobs. This is suggestive of a common employer perspective of older workers as inevitably being in decline and gradually disengaging, rather than as being able and willing to build careers.

Thus, while it was apparent from the organizations that the potentiality of older workers was recognized, for instance one referred to them as the ‘treasure of society’, there were boundaries to this. This particularly manifested in the contractual relationships some older workers had with their employers. Apparent in some cases was that older workers were being treated as non-core employees, recruited after so-called ‘career jobs’ had ended, with attributes that were valued, but not to the extent of being offered permanent contracts of employment. Such workers were finding employment opportunities where they might hitherto not have existed. However, the nature of their employment contracts meant, presumably, that such workers could be relatively easily dismissed if considered surplus to requirements. This was particularly noticeable in the Japanese cases where older workers were being recruited after completing career jobs and were working, sometimes while claiming a pension. Accorded such status, these older employees were able, with the support of the employer, to balance work with family life.

Yet, such working arrangements were clearly a double-edged sword, on the one hand benefiting workers, but on the other, with them being employed in, sometimes, low wage and insecure work. For employers, such flexibility had clear benefits in that they had considerable control over who they employed and how; they also gained ready access to a relatively untapped, highly motivated and relatively low cost source of labour. Thus, one employer described them as a ‘workforce with rich experiences and high quality at low cost’ and that they provided an opportunity to secure a high quality workforce without ‘additional charge for weekends and holidays’ and allowed younger, regular workers, to take a break at such periods. Older workers’ low place in the organizational hierarchy was apparent from such statements.

Conclusions

Altogether, these examples of employer action provide a useful lens through which to observe the emergence of workplace practices regarding older workers internationally. The cases demonstrate that action is underway across the employment continuum from recruitment to retirement. The case examples, including ones from Germany and Japan, illustrate the emergence of some sophisticated approaches to the management of age in organizations. Such approaches may acknowledge, for instance, that the workforce of the future will be increasingly diverse, consisting of mixed-age teams. As noted by Brooke and Taylor (2005) it is potentially helpful to view the management of older workers alongside that of other age groups rather than to consider issues of older worker employment in isolation. Thus, while a specific focus on older workers may once have made some policy and advocacy sense, from a practical implementation perspective it does not acknowledge that workforces are increasingly diverse and, as a consequence, employers may require assistance in tackling issues of intersectionality, as has been acknowledged, for instance, in some recent British guidance for employers (Department for Work and Pensions, 2013).

It was posited that some, although by no means all, organizational policymaking in these case studies appeared to be grounded in what we presumed to be unwittingly ageist assumptions concerning older and younger workers. The implication of this observation is that there is a need to be sensitive to and challenge workplace age stereotypes of both younger and older workers. In this regard a business case approach alone is deficient. Shacklock and Shacklock (2005, p. 9) argued that as the workforce ages there is a need for ‘a reappraisal of HRM functions such as recruitment, selection, training and performance management to embrace older workers’. Yet, although it is a practice adopted by some in this study, as noted by Brooke et al. (2013), older workers may not benefit from being consigned to the less productive edges of organizations. Compounding this, some of the existing management literature, while purporting to challenge workplace age barriers, arguably, seems likely to only encourage and provide a rationale for ageist attitudes and behaviours. For instance, an example of deploying age stereotypes in order to make the case for employing older workers comes from Peterson and Spiker (2005, p. 157) who state that ‘It is hard to imagine an instance when a confident, hopeful, optimistic, and resilient employee would not make a positive value contribution to an organization. We suggest that older workers, when compared with their younger counterparts, often possess more of these capacities’. The potential tension between age management and ageism suggested by Riach (2009) and observed in the practices of some employers in this study points to a need for considerable caution when looking to contemporary organizational practices in identifying a business case for employing older workers. Otherwise, there is the potential for a perpetuation of age stereotypical attitudes and ageist behaviours masked as best practice.

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