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# Does workplace flexibility help to retain older workers in their career jobs up to and beyond retirement age? A qualitative study in the knowledge-intensive sector in Switzerland



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Little is known about how relevant workplace flexibility is on continued work in one's career job – a type of bridge employment that should best help to reduce the negative aspects of skilled worker shortage. We therefore examined the role of temporal, locational and functional flexibility on career consistent bridge employment in the knowledge-intensive sector. The qualitative study included interviews with employees before retirement age in Switzerland, individuals with a career consistent bridge job and retirees, who were no longer employed in any form. Our results show that some factors are prerequisites for any type of bridge employment. However, career consistent bridge employment seems dependent on both significance and value of one's work combined with workplace flexibility.



*Bislang ist noch wenig darüber bekannt, welche Bedeutung die Flexibilisierung der Arbeit auf die Entscheidung hat, über das Pensionierungsalter hinaus im eigenen Beruf weiterzuarbeiten – eine Form der Weiterbeschäftigung, die besonders die negativen Aspekte des Fachkräftemangels abzuschwächen vermag. Wir haben daher untersucht, welche Rolle zeitliche, örtliche und aufgabenbezogene Flexibilisierung auf die Entscheidung, im Beruf zu verbleiben, spielen. Die qualitative Studie umfasste Interviews mit Beschäftigten vor dem Pensionierungsalter, mit berufsbezogener Weiterbeschäftigung und mit Pensionierten. Unsere Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Weiterbeschäftigung im eigenen Beruf insbesondere vom Stellenwert der Arbeit kombiniert mit Arbeitsplatzflexibilität abhängig zu sein scheint.*



retirement, workplace flexibility, flexible work arrangements, ageing workforce, retention management, bridge employment



*Pensionierung, Arbeitsplatzflexibilität, flexible Arbeitsbedingungen, alternde Belegschaft, Bindung von Mitarbeitenden, Weiterbeschäftigung*

## 1 Introduction

Demographic change along with low birth rates and increased longevity is leading to an increase in the average age of workforce and a skilled labour shortage in various branches (Bieling et al., 2015; Bundesamt für Statistik (BFS), 2015). To face the challenge of finding personnel and release pressure from pension funds, an often-discussed suggestion is prolonging older workers participation in the workforce (Bundesamt für Statistik (BFS), 2015; Truxillo et al., 2015). However, several ways of spending retirement (e.g., leisure activities, volunteer work) exist and bridge employment is only one of them (Jex and Grosch, 2013). As reasons for leaving the labour force (early) are health problems (Gobeski and Beehr, 2009), lacking employability and the desire to retire early (Wang and Shultz, 2010), it is inevitable to ensure employees health, ability and motivation to work. Studies suggest that the flexibility when to work and where to work has a positive impact on performance and wellbeing of older workers (Bal and Lange, 2015; Höpflinger, 2015; Maxin and Deller, 2011; Trageser et al., 2012). Moreover, further studies also suggest that those flexibility arrangements affect employees retirement expectations (Bal et al., 2012; Cahill et al., 2015; Dropkin et al., 2016). Apart from the benefits of offering locational and temporal flexibility (Breaugh and Farabee, 2012; Dropkin et al., 2016) companies also benefit from functional flexibility, i.e. re-assigning workers to different tasks according to their demand (Kelliher and Riley, 2003). From the employee-perspective, older workers also benefit from a flexibility regarding tasks and applied skills as they get the chance to do what they like and know best. Thus, functional flexibility might also help to retain older workers in the workforce. Our study therefore aims to explore the importance of workplace flexibility regarding the decision on how to continue working in later work life – expanding workplace flexibility on temporal, locational and functional flexibility.

Since there are certain factors that determine different types of flexibility such as technological requirements as a precondition for locational and temporal flexibility (Weichbrodt et al., 2014) or level of education for functional flexibility (Desombre et al., 2006), our study focuses on the knowledge-intensive sector. On the one hand, jobs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) suffer from a high shortage of skilled workers (SECO, 2016) making it important to retain older workers in these jobs. On the other hand, compared to other sectors such as the healthcare sector, many of these jobs meet the requirements for flexibility when and where to work but also provide the opportunity to change tasks and to postpone retirement.

## 2 Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Working in retirement

The decision to retire is highly influenced by the official retirement age defined by the government (Alcover et al., 2014). The official age when workers exit the labour force and receive money from pension funds is usually around 65 years with some variation regarding countries, sector or gender (cf. Alcover et al., 2014). However, retirement is more and more a less defined event, as there are many different ways of how and when employees approach it. There are options such as early retirement, phased or partial retirement and deferred retirement, i.e. continue working and choosing the option to defer retirement benefits (Lawton and Wheatley, 2018). Retirees might also choose to re-enter the labour force. The period before fully leaving the paid labour market is often referred to as bridge

employment (Beehr and Bennett, 2015; Wang and Shultz, 2010) contrasting it from full retirement, i.e. not working for pay anymore (Gobeski and Beehr, 2009). Bridge employment is commonly defined as “labour force participation by older workers after they leave a career job and before they completely and permanently withdraw from the labour force” (Beehr and Bennett, 2015: 112–133; Cahill et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2008). Different types of bridge employment exist regarding occupation, employer or type of contract. Some workers decide to choose a career consistent bridge employment; others might choose a non-career bridge employment. Both types can be realised at their former organisation or in another organisation. In addition, there are self-employed bridge workers compared to other-employed bridge workers (cf. Beehr and Bennett, 2015) as well as a broad range of hours worked in bridge employment (Alcover et al., 2014).

Undoubtedly, there are several advantages for the individual, the employer and the society associated with bridge employment. Society benefits from less pressure on pension funds and the social security system. Employers take advantage of retained knowledge, expert knowledge, the experience of older workers and the possibility to fill vacancies, depending on the type of bridge employment. Finally, research found several positive effects of bridge employment on older workers such as improvements in their financial situation, social contacts, sense of identity or collective purpose (Jahoda, 1997) – often referred to as the meaning of work (cf. Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). A study by Mor-Barak (1995) differentiated between four factors to the meaning of work: financial, personal, social, and the generativity factor that play a role in employment decisions of older employees. Financial meaning refers to the need to earn money, personal meaning refers to having meaningful tasks and finding personal satisfaction in work, social meaning captures the contact with others and the feeling of being appreciated and accepted and generativity refers to viewing work as a way to teach, train and share skills with younger generations (Mor-Barak, 1995). Deller and colleagues (2009) found evidence for the generativity factor in bridge employment while Fasbender, Wang, Voltmer and Deller (2016) failed to do so, but found a positive relationship between social and personal meanings of work with post-retirement decision-making. In both studies the type of bridge employment held has not been taken into account, however, this might be an explanation for the different findings. The following example illustrates that the type of bridge employment chosen depends on the meaning of work for the employee. A technician who really enjoys her career job and the relationship with her colleagues might choose a career consistent bridge employment in her former organisation: She will benefit from having social contacts and recognition for her experience while a bridge-job in a non-career environment such as delivering newspapers might rather serve financial purposes for the job owner.

In light of skilled worker shortage and increased longevity, employers benefit the most when older workers either stay in their career job (i.e. deferred retirement) or choose career consistent bridge employment. In either instance, companies can make use of the older workers knowledge and experience with technologies and clients. We therefore aim to explore the factors that influence the decision to work up to or beyond retirement age in career consistent jobs. Particularly as governments of various countries are discussing (i.e. Switzerland, Bundesamt für Sozialversicherungen, 2017) or have already decided to raise the official retirement age (i.e. Germany; Wöhrmann et al., 2014) it is of vital importance to know relevant personal and organisational factors that will help organisations to retain their ageing workforce.

## 2.2 Workplace flexibility

Similar to retirement, workplace flexibility is also hard to define. Flexibility is often used as an umbrella term and might mean different things depending on the perspective (Reilly, 1998; Zeytinoglu et al., 2009). In an attempt to provide some clarity, Hill and colleagues (Hill et al., 2008: 152) defined workplace flexibility as “the ability of workers to make choices influencing when, where, and for how long they engage in work-related tasks”. Rapid technological changes with new developments in ICT software, hardware and infrastructure serve as enablers for companies to offer flexibility regarding when and where to work. Therefore, research has focused mainly on temporal and locational flexibility (Chung and Tijdens, 2013; Possenriede et al., 2016; Reilly, 1998; Weichbrodt et al., 2014). The terms “blended working” and “mobil-flextibles Arbeiten” (German for “mobile and flexible working”) are used for the combination of time-independent and location-independent working (Van Yperen et al., 2014; Weichbrodt et al., 2014).

In line with Reilly (1998) we argue that workplace flexibility should also encompass arrangements regarding the tasks which employees execute. From the employer perspective, functional flexibility signifies “employees can fulfil different tasks and activities to meet changes in work requirements, production methods, or in technology” (van den Berg and van der Velde, 2005: 111–112). From an employee perspective, functional flexibility manifests in a change of tasks or skills used, resulting in a reduction in job demands and reduced levels of responsibility (Earl and Taylor, 2015). Thus, workplace flexibility would also encompass arrangements offered by the employer to re-design the job (e.g. to take over counselling tasks instead of physical demanding tasks; to cede managerial responsibility). In this regard, functional flexibility arrangements are more than just waiting whether employees actively shape the design of their jobs by negotiating different job content and choosing tasks, a process that is referred to as job crafting (cf. Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001).

Research shows that workplace flexibility provides many benefits. Those studies often deal with the employee perspective on workplace flexibility and mostly examine benefits or drawbacks of locational and temporal flexibility for employees (Breaugh and Farabee, 2012; Dropkin et al., 2016; Kröll and Nüesch, 2017; McNamara et al., 2012, but see Kelliher and Riley, 2003; van den Berg and van der Velde, 2005 for functional flexibility). However, literature distinguishes between flexibility arrangements that serve the needs of employers compared to the needs of employees (cf. worker-centred flexibility versus company-centred flexibility, (Gareis et al., 2002); employer-oriented versus employee-oriented arrangements, (Reilly, 2001). In line with the Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College (n.d.) in our study we focus on flexibility arrangements that “enable both individual and business needs to be met” and “should be mutually beneficial to both the employer and employee”.

## 2.3 Workplace flexibility and continued work in later life

Workplace flexibility is frequently mentioned as key for prolonged employment (Cahill et al., 2015; Damman, 2016; Dropkin et al., 2016; Earl and Taylor, 2015; Van Yperen and Wörtler, 2017). Locational and temporal flexibility may bring benefits to older workers in terms of comfort and autonomy, decreased psychosocial stress and less travelling time (Dropkin et al., 2016). Hence, workplace flexibility sets incentives for continued work.

Thus, the concepts of phased or partial retirement make direct use of reduced working hours and part-time work patterns to reduce demands on older workers. There is also some empirical evidence of a positive relation between workplace flexibility and prolonged employment. In their experimental study, Cahill et al. (2015) could show that offering options to older workers in terms of work scheduling, the number of hours designated for work and the place(s) where the work is done has an impact on their retirement expectations. More precisely, workers who could make use of this workplace flexibility were more likely to stay in their company compared to those who did not have that option. Similarly, as shown by Bal and colleagues (2012), older workers who made individual agreements with regard to flexibility in work schedules were motivated to continue working after retirement. Functional flexibility in terms of different tasks or reduced responsibility might also lead to reduced job demands allowing older workers to continue working beyond retirement age. There is evidence that workers in jobs with greater physical or psychological demands are more likely to choose (early) retirement (Elovainio et al., 2005; Gobeski and Beehr, 2009). Furthermore, the study by Bal et al. (2012) also found increased motivation to continue working when individual arrangements regarding the work tasks were made. However, Damman (2016) reported some studies that could not find any positive relationships between workplace flexibility and continued work. She argued that it highly depends on how workplace flexibility manifests such as the availability of options compared to the actual use or the support of the management. Corresponding to this, Earl and Taylor (2015) found that line managers' attitudes might inhibit positive effects of workplace flexibility, as flexible working arrangements can be difficult to manage.

Based on the mixed results regarding the positive impact of flexible working arrangements on continued work in later life, we aim to explore the role of workplace flexibility in the decision to continue working up to and beyond retirement age. Furthermore, little is known about how workplace flexibility, among other factors such as meaning of work (Rosso et al., 2010), influences the type of chosen bridge employment (cf. Beehr and Bennett, 2015). Considering the importance of retaining older workers in order to prevent skill shortage and loss of expert knowledge, we therefore focus on continued work in one's career job. As the line between staying in one's career job and career consistent bridge-employment is somewhat blurry, we likewise consider deferred retirement and career consistent bridge-jobs. Apart from that, we not only examine workplace flexibility in terms of when and where to work (temporal and locational flexibility) but also cover flexibility in terms of tasks and applied skills (functional flexibility). Therefore, we propose the following research questions:

*How relevant is workplace flexibility on continued work in one's career job up to and beyond retirement age?*

- a) *What are the factors that affect the decision to continue working in one's career job?*
- b) *What are the respective flexibility needs of older workers?*
- c) *What are the flexibility barriers older workers perceive?*

Given that bridge employment as well as retirement is difficult to measure (Beehr and Bennett, 2015; Wang et al., 2014) we chose a qualitative design. Interviews help to get a deeper understanding on how individuals define their work situation and allow the individual

to elaborate on his or her choices, thoughts and needs. In doing so, we were able to gain other information than through a quantitative approach as interviews also allow to better understand the richness of an experience and to facilitate the investigation of that experience (Polkinghorne, 2005).

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Sample

Our sample consisted of 20 male individuals before and past retirement age. We chose a complete male sample as previous research found gender differences in post-retirement employment (Pleau, 2010) as well as in flexible working in later life (Loretto and Vickerstaff, 2015). Furthermore, the sector we decided to focus on – science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) is traditionally male dominated and only few women are found in those jobs in the generation 55plus that we focus on.

We clustered our sample into three groups. The first group (pre-retirement employees) consisted of nine individuals, who were still within the age frame of working age in Switzerland, so before retirement age (average age: 61 years). The second group (bridge employees) included seven individuals who had already reached retirement age or already received money from the pension funds but continued working (average age: 67 years). Lastly, the third group (retirees) consisted of four individuals who had reached retirement age and who were no longer employed in any form nor earning money in any other form (average age: 66 years). The individuals worked in for-profit organisations in the knowledge-intensive sector in varied industries (engineering industry, energy industry, pharmaceutical industry). Job titles were mostly senior managers, senior consultants or software architects.

Interviews were obtained through a snowballing process by contacting the HR department of companies that were either members in industry and professional associations in the knowledge intensive sector (more precisely "engineering occupations", "technicians" and "IT occupations") or that were derived from our professional network. We asked the HR department to establish contact to qualified employees who were above the age of 55 as well as employees who were above the age of 65 and in any form still working for the organisation or retired from their jobs.

#### 3.2 Research approach and analysis

We conducted 20 face-to-face interviews with the above-mentioned individuals during the period of May to October 2016. The duration of the interviews was between 20 minutes and 1.5 hours. For the most part, the interviews were conducted at the work place of the participants.

We used a semi-structured interview guideline that we adapted according to the group the individual belonged to (pre-retirement employees, bridge employees, retirees). The interview encompassed four main topics, namely working beyond retirement age, flexibility at work, the meaning and importance of work as well as perceived offers and possibilities by the employees' organisation in terms of flexibility. Concerning flexibility, we were interested in learning if and why the older worker worked flexibly and which needs working flexibly could cover. By asking about the meaning of work, our goal was to increase our knowledge about what people at that stage of their life particularly enjoy about their

work (and what they do not) corresponding to the four factors social, personal, financial and generative meaning of work (Mor-Barak, 1995; Fasbender et al, 2016). We were interested to learn what they would miss if they stopped working and also, compared with other life domains, which was the most important life domain to them in the current stage of their life. We were also interested about their plans and thoughts considering retirement (for example if they had any desire to continue working and if so, under what circumstances). In reference to bridge employment, we had a special interest in conditions and needs of people considering working beyond retirement age or also considering early retirement. Lastly, we asked the individuals about their perception of offers from their employers in terms of flexibility, if, and how they were guided or supported in this phase of approaching retirement as well as the possibility of continuing employment within the organisation.

At the beginning of the interview we started by asking a number of questions regarding their current or past routines and to which extent they use or have used the flexibility their employer offers or has offered. These questions also involved their work experience in years, the location of their main work place (and if they have the possibility of working remotely, e.g. from home) as well as inquiries to changes in their work tasks and work contract in the previous years. This data was gathered in a data sheet.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and then coded using the software MaxQDA. The used approach was a content analysis following Kuckartz (2016). We started by coding the interviews theoretically, top-down according to the main interview topics and our main research questions. We also left open categories for topics that presented themselves but were not part of our previous theoretical research and analysis (bottom-up approach).

## 4 Results

To answer our research question on the relevance of workplace flexibility on continued work in one's career job up to and beyond retirement age we provide an overview about the factors that affect the decision to continue working in one's career job. Then, we present the flexibility needs of older workers and the flexibility barriers that have an impact on the decision whether to stay or not to stay in one's career job. Before doing so, we illustrate, if and how the individuals in our sample worked flexibly.

### 4.1 Status quo of workplace flexibility

First, we analysed the extent to which the individuals in our sample experienced workplace flexibility. Participants in the *pre-retirement group* all worked full time and did not work flexibly temporally. Considering the locational flexibility, the vast majority worked at their workplace. Five individuals worked remotely from time to time, for example while travelling, mostly to see clients. Three older workers indicated that they sometimes worked from home. One employee never worked from home and another one person was not permitted to work from home. All but one individual had a permanent employment contract. Regarding functional flexibility, 6 out of 9 reported that they experienced some kind of changes in their tasks and responsibilities in the past few years.

In the group of *bridge employees*, the individuals who continued working in career consistent jobs, all worked part-time, between 20% and 50%. Temporally, they were flexible and free to choose the days they wanted to work. Locational, four individuals of this

group worked mostly at their company, and if not, sometimes worked from home or remotely, on their way to clients. Only two individuals of the group worked exclusively at their company and one person rented a private office to work in. In terms of functional flexibility, all bridge employees experienced a change in their tasks as they switched to being employed beyond retirement age. However, these tasks still were in the realm of their career pre-retirement. In this group, all but one had a kind of non-permanent employment contract.

The *retirees* did not differ from the group of pre-retirement employees in terms of the temporal and locational work place flexibility they experienced before the retirement. All four have had a permanent employment contract and flexible working hours but worked mostly at their company. Two out of four described that they had changes in their responsibilities and tasks before retirement.

### 4.2 Working past retirement age

In the group of the *pre-retirement employees*, 5 out of 9 individuals could see themselves continuing to work past retirement age in career consistent jobs, if the circumstances suited them. Important circumstances mentioned here were mostly flexibility (especially temporal) and having job tasks that fit their professional interests and experience. One quote illustrates this:

*“The content would have to fit, it would have to do with something I've been doing there in the last 35 years. I could see myself doing that, yes.”* (Pre-retirement employee, 62 years old, to retire in two years and could picture himself continuing to work on a project-based level)

Only three pre-retirement employees already had decided that they would no longer want to work once they reached retirement age. Reasons given for this were mostly in the realm of not wanting to have the hassle of work anymore and enjoy retirement and the leisurely life. One person also mentioned that a new management had taken over his company and that company culture had changed so much, he no longer felt comfortable working there.

All seven individuals in the group of *bridge employees* were in career consistent jobs. More results in detail as to the reasons why they chose to continue working and what role flexibility played will follow below.

The reasons that the group of *retirees* gave for not continuing to work were on an organisational and structural level. One of the reasons for example was, that their former employers were not open to hiring them past retirement age or did not give them a possibility to continue working. Another reason was that the role and tasks they performed in their job function previous retirement did not allow them to work less than full time. There was also a number of personal reasons mentioned: The retirees had wanted to start a new chapter in their life, enjoy the flexibility that life as a retiree provided them. They enjoyed being able to spend time with their families, friends and free time although they did not name family or friends as a specific reason for not continuing to work.

*“I have very strong commitments to taking care of my grandchildren, therefore continuing to work was not an option for me.”* (Retiree, 66 years old, retired since 3 years)

They also had the sense that they had worked long enough, wanted to close that chapter of their life and were not afraid of retirement. Further analysing the interviews, in compar-

ison to the bridge employees, the aspect of the importance of work in their life, the sense it gave them and the passion they felt when working, was mentioned less in the group of retirees, when asked to reflect back on their work. Financial reasons were mentioned in the sense that these interviewees did not have the financial need to continue working past retirement. However, retirees did mention that they missed their social contacts from work, but all of them were engaged socially (for example in a club or association).

We will now take a closer look on factors that influenced the interviewees' decision to stay (not) in their career jobs. Focusing on our research questions, we asked: What are the factors that affect the decision to continue working in one's career job? The results show that the decision to continue working in one's career job depends not only on personal but also on organisational factors.

### 4.3 Personal factors

Focusing first on the personal factors that affect the decision positively to stay in one's career job, the main aspect here was being in good health. Being healthy seems to be a basic criterion before even considering how and in what form to continue working.

*“One aspect is of course health. If worst comes to worst and something happens to you health wise, that makes it impossible for you to work anymore, then you just have to say to yourself: Now I just can't go on.” (Bridge employee, 70 years old, continued working as a senior consultant after his regular employment)*

On a motivational level, the significance and value of one's work was also deemed very important. This means that the employees continued working because the work tasks were either very interesting or challenging for the individual or because the employees felt that they were in some way contributing either to society or to their company in a meaningful way. One quote concerning the positive aspect of being challenged at work makes this clear. The employee was asked what he would miss if he stopped working or retired.

*“Yes, I think it would be the daily challenge. Of course, I can go for a bike ride, but I would have to look for a new challenge in retirement. I wouldn't know what that could be right now.” (Pre-retirement employee, 60 years old, plans to retire early in 2 years, but sees himself continuing to work, either freelance, project-based or in a company)*

We further analysed that the meaningful aspect of work comes especially from applying knowledge stemming from experience (c.f. personal meaning of work, Mor-Barak, 1995). It is a type of knowledge that arises directly from the work task itself and is bound to the individual and the situation and often only becomes apparent in the direct moment of action (Schnell et al., 2013). It seems that the possibility of further developing this kind of knowledge is what makes sense to the employees and gives them a sense of validation. Applying this kind of knowledge allows experiencing oneself as competent, which is also an important factor when it comes to passing on knowledge to a next generation. Many employees, especially bridge employees, mentioned that staying up to date with technological advances, being able to keep up with the newest trends in their field was an important factor in why they wanted to continue working.

Lastly, through feedback from clients or customers, employees that stay in their career job feel appreciated and receive recognition. This serves both as motivation for continuing in one's career job but at the same time is also an effect that stems from it. An effect that

especially in retirement, if one would dedicate one's time mostly to leisure activities would be harder to achieve. A quote from an employee illustrates experiencing success and competence:

*“Of course, it's obvious; now and again you experience success. I mean, if you're at home and go on an excursion, that's also nice, but when something really works [at work], these experiences of success are certainly not bad.” (Bridge employee, 65 years old, works 50% as a financial consultant in the same company he was employed before)*

The employees further stated that the feeling of being needed and receiving appreciation are important factors when deciding to stay in a career job. Other reasons often named were continuing social interactions with colleagues as well as the emotional tie to them. Identifying and feeling a sense of commitment to the company was also important. One quote is as follows:

*“The relationship to the company and to the clients. I'm still interested in knowing what's going on and I like doing it. And I think they also appreciate my support and my experience from all these years and of course, the clients also know me. And as long as both sides are happy, it's good for both of us.” (Bridge employee, 69 years old, works at on an hourly basis for the same company as before retirement, around 20 hours a week)*

Financial reasons were mentioned but had a subordinate role. It seems that in this sample with highly qualified people it is not a matter of money whether they decide for bridge work as they all have good pension funds. It was also mentioned that by continuing in one's career job, the transition to retirement, especially when working flexibly, could be somewhat slower and the work could be done with less pressure and stress. Support from family and social environments were also deemed necessary when individuals made the decision to continue working in their career jobs.

*“So of course my wife had to be on the same page, and she took it very positively, that, of course, can also be a criterion.” (Bridge employee, 67 years old, works 20%, project-based)*

As to the reasons that negatively affect an older worker's decision to continue working in either career jobs or non-career jobs, the main reason, corresponding to the positive factors, is poor health. Other main reasons were wanting to spend more time with family and friends, or on hobbies. Similarly, no longer enduring the pressure and stress that comes with working and the feeling to have completed the working phase of their life is a personal factor for not continuing paid work at all as expressed here:

*“I mean, if I'm really honest with myself, eventually everyone just dreams of staying in bed a bit longer in the morning, reading a good book, not having to go to work. So yes, I'm happy and I'm looking forward to retirement.” (Pre-retirement employee, 63 years old, plans to retire early with 64 years)*

The social environment that on the one hand is a factor supporting the decision to continue working was also analysed to hinder continued employment. If colleagues or life partner are already retired, career consistent bridge employment in the former company or at

all seems not to be an option for many of our participants. Interestingly, we also found that some of the participants held age-stereotypes themselves that prevent from continuous employment:

*“I think when you show up to work with a walker, you know, it's time to stop. Then it's not fun anymore.” (Bridge employee, 70 years old, worked full time, then 80% and now 60% for the same employer since before retirement)*

On the contrary, low identification with the employer and little relation to the company, as illustrated in the following quotation, also due to new management and cultural changes in the organisation, are reasons not to work in one's career job – at least at the former company. One person describes the changes that have occurred with the new management and that have led to the decision to retire early.

*“3 years ago I never would have thought I would retire early. (...) But I have worked here for 40 years, and now someone new comes along. And you have to 'cast' yourself again, in a way. That person doesn't know what you've done for the company in the last 40 years, and this cosying up to someone, that's not something I want to have to do to myself anymore. People who worked with me know what I'm capable of. I don't want to prove myself anymore.” (Pre-retirement employee, 63 years old, plans to retire early with 64 years)*

Retirees also mentioned that close to their retirement, they were often tasked with incorporating their successors into the job and company and transferring knowledge so that the thought of continuing with their employment seemed futile. Furthermore, the need to do something new with one's life seems to stand against a career consistent bridge job. This is the answer one individual gave, when asked if he ever considered working past retirement.

*“No, there are things I want to do. I want to play golf. I haven't even started yet, because I haven't had the time. (...) I ran a marathon. I want to ski more, do more cross-country skiing, go cycling. I do all of that now. I used to not have so much time before to do that as much as I wanted to.” (Retiree, 65 years old, retired with 64 years, not working in any capacity nor does he plan to)*

Similarly and in line with what was said about fostering career consistent bridge employment, retirees and employees with no aspiration to continue working, who neither perceive their work as being meaningful nor value the significance of applying and continuing to develop their knowledge would not stay on their career job. Therefore, the personal meaning of work seems to be the prominent personal factor in career consistent bridge employment. However, we also explored several organisational factors that also affect the type of bridge job chosen.

#### 4.4 Organisational factors

Whether a career consistent bridge employment is realised, often highly depends on the supervisor or line manager as illustrated in this quotation:

*“In my case, it was really the group CEO, who likes to experiment and likes to gain new experience. He knew I wanted to continue working, but it was really both of us and we talked about it and he said he wanted to see if it would even work. (...). So it*

*“was really dealt with between me and the CEO.” (Bridge employee, 67 years old, works 20%, project-based)*

Employees want to be asked to continue working in their company. Employees seem to have reservations regarding offering their work in their company if the need of their employment was not stated by the company. Retirees stated that they might have continued working had they been asked personally. In line with this, we found that staying in one's career job is enabled by I-Deals (Bal et al., 2012). All bridge employees reported that they made individual agreements regarding their employment with their supervisor. So negotiating workplace flexibility options for their continued employment seems to be key. Corresponding, not being informed about flexibility options seems to reduce the likelihood to choose for bridge employment in their company. Accordingly, retirees mentioned that there were not enough flexibility options available to them. Continuing to work full time was not desirable, so they chose to not continue working at all.

Support of their team and their supervisors as well as familiarity with the work environment and company culture are also supporting factors for career consistent bridge employment at the former company. Whereas being confronted with age-specific stereotypes and attributes from colleagues and supervisors have a negative impact on deferred retirement.

### 4.5 Flexibility needs of older workers

The following results will reveal in more detail the flexibility needs and barriers which older workers perceive that have an impact on their decision to prolong employment. Our analyses of the interviews showed that most importantly employees appreciated temporal flexibility, in terms of flexible working hours and reduced workload. The possibility to work less to better coordinate their different life domains was mentioned in all three groups. Furthermore, *bridge employees* described and *pre-retirement employees* anticipated that by reducing their workload, yet still continuing to work in their jobs, they feel less stress at work.

The majority of people that we interviewed who either were past retirement age and continued working in their career consistent jobs as well as those who could picture themselves working past retirement age, mentioned that by continuing in one's career job, the transition to retirement could be somewhat slower. This was especially the case when working flexible. Besides, it makes it possible to do their work with less pressure and stress. Temporal flexibility especially seemed to be crucial when choosing to continue in career consistent jobs. None of the bridge employees worked full time. On the contrary, they often noted that working part time better fitted their needs, still allowing them enough time for other activities or family or friends. A quote illustrates this:

*“It suits me quite well that I have something of a fifty / fifty day. One half of the day is structured and other half I go somewhere or go swimming or something like that. I find this mix at my age actually ideal.” (Bridge employee, 65 years old, works 50% as a financial consultant in the same company he was employed before)*

Locational flexibility, for those who had the opportunity to use it, helped older workers in this aspect as well, since they were able to work where it best suited them. This contributed to less stress and at the same time was more compatible for their work domains. By benefitting from functional flexibility, employees felt less pressure and at the same time

were able to put their strengths, knowledge, competencies and experience to use. Through functional flexibility, employees were able to use their specific knowledge and their experience. This in turn supported them in experiencing their own strengths and competencies and allowed them to experience meaning in their work. This was especially true for the individuals in the group of *bridge employees*, as they often mentioned that they could do the tasks that they enjoyed the most.

#### 4.6 Flexibility barriers perceived by older workers

However, various flexibility barriers also surfaced in our analysis. Older workers in all three groups perceived temporal and locational flexibility barriers based on the organisation, mainly due to size, workflows, organisational culture and industry. In particular, retirees described that a reduced workload was not possible due to their job.

*“And this job that I did, you can't do it with 80 or 70 or 60 percent or 50 percent. That's not really possible. So either you do it or you don't.” (Retiree, 65 years old)*

Furthermore, the management, in particular the line manager was perceived as either enabling or restricting workplace flexibility of all types and therefore indirectly getting high impact on the decision to prolong employment. Especially, *pre-retirement employees* who would not picture themselves in working beyond retirement age and *retirees* mentioned this.

Interestingly, the employee's own attitude and beliefs were also mentioned as flexibility barriers. These were specifically linked to supervisor positions, e.g. that those positions could only be filled by working 100–150% or demanded constant physical presence.

### 5 Discussion

The continued employment of older employees is regarded as an essential starting point to tackle the shortage of skilled workers in various industries. Companies in particular benefit from employees who postpone their retirement or remain in their career job after retirement, as they can make use of their specific experience and skills. The aim of this study was therefore to examine which factors influence whether someone is in a career consistent employment after retirement and what role workplace flexibility plays in this.

First of all, our study confirms previous research and on a basis of 20 individuals from the knowledge-intensive sector, we could also show that health as well as the expectations of spouse and family are regarded as preconditions to prolong employment beyond retirement age (Kim and Feldman, 2000; Shacklock and Brunetto, 2011). In line with Mor-Barak (1995) as well as Fasbender and colleagues (2016), our results acknowledge the relevance of the social, personal, financial and generative meaning of work for bridge employment decisions. However, our study went beyond that and shed light on the factors influencing the decision for or against career consistent bridge employment differentiating from bridge employment per se. Our results revealed that only those people decide to stay in their career job that highly value their work and report that they experience their work tasks to be meaningful. Shacklock and Brunetto (2011) found a positive relationship between importance of work to the individual and older workers' intentions to continue working. Fasbender et al. (2016) could show that the social and personal meanings of work were positively related to post-retirement employment. We could even specify that

the four factors of work meaning as developed by Mor-Barak (1995) seem to determine the type of bridge employment chosen. The social meaning of work in terms of social contact and expected recognition of colleagues seems to influence the fact that someone does not fully retire, but instead does a bridge job in some way – be it career specific or non-career specific. Whereas people who highly value their work and find their job very satisfying (i.e. personal meaning of work), rather postpone their retirement or aspire to a career consistent bridge job.

The financial meaning of work played no particular role in the decision for career-consistent bridge employment in the investigated sample of individuals with a rather high economic status. This is in line with the results of Fasbender et al. (2016), who found that subjective economic status moderated the relationship between financial meaning of work and post-retirement employment in a way that retirees with low subjective economic status were more likely to work beyond retirement age than those with high subjective economic status.

Our results might even explain the mixed findings in previous research that the generative meaning of work either contributes (Deller et al., 2009; Dendinger Adams, & Jacobson, 2005) or does not contribute (Fasbender et al., 2016) to older workers choosing bridge employment. In our study, personal meaning combined with generativity was an important factor for career-consistent bridge employment. Future research needs to examine whether personal meaning of work combined with generative meaning of work influences the type of bridge employment chosen.

In addition, our results showed that commitment towards the employer affect the decision to deferred retirement – a finding in line with research on commitment and retention (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002).

Besides these personal factors, we also found relevant organisational factors. *Retirees*, who highly valued their work, did not continue working, as the organisational framework conditions were not given. Our results show that the management has an important role to set according conditions in place. First, we found that employees want to be asked whether they would like to carry on. Older workers seem to regard it as not appropriate to ask for prolonged-employment themselves. While other researchers could show that workplace flexibility is a prerequisite to postpone retirement (Cahill et al., 2015; Earl and Taylor, 2015; Matz-Costa and Pitt-Catsouphes, 2010; Shacklock and Brunetto, 2011), our results show that this is especially the case for staying in one's career job. Here, a reduced workload (part-time) combined with a shift in tasks and responsibilities seems to retain employees beyond retirement age. Locational flexibility such as the possibility to work remotely does not seem to be of much importance at least within the generation that did not have much experience with it. Moreover, it is noteworthy that employees perceive several barriers to workplace flexibility and thus to continued employment in their career job on a structural and organisational level. However, it seems as if these barriers depend on the attitudes of the line manager or even the employee him- or herself. Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between the factors examined based on our findings.

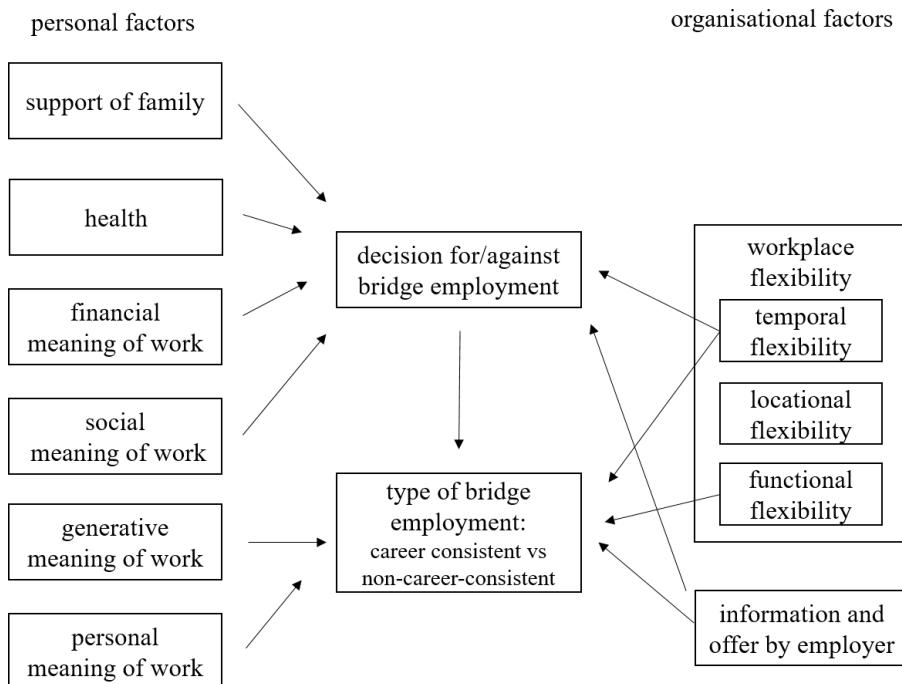


Figure 1. Model of personal and organisational factors and their relationship with career-consistent bridge employment.

## 5.1 Practical Implications

Our study bears several practical implications. To retain older workers, employers should begin to manage the organisational factors mentioned above. For employer, it is advisable to inform employees 55plus regularly about possibilities and framework conditions for making work more flexible. Our results showed that employees often have little knowledge about the possibilities of continued employment. It might also be useful to draw up guidelines about workplace flexibility and career consistent employment as was already proposed by Earl and Taylor (2015). So far, it seems that most arrangements on career consistent bridge employment seem to be individual deals between line manager and employee (Bal et al., 2012). However, some kind of guidelines would help line managers and employees likewise to get an idea about how to organize this so that it could be beneficial for both sides. In addition, it would help to prevent that it depends solely on the line manager whether an employee continues employment in the company and the way he or she does it. In line with this, it seems useful to integrate a regular dialogue about thoughts and expectations regarding transition into retirement in the annual performance review. As employees often perceive flexibility barriers that could be removed, this should also include information on temporal, locational and functional flexibility options.

In addition to this adaptation of the performance review process, our results also bear some implications for personal development and qualification. Line managers need to be qualified to lead conversations with older employees about the option of bridge employment and the possibilities of changing job profiles, reducing workload and responsibilities

without giving their subordinates a feeling of not wanting them anymore. Veth et al. (2018) could show that a unique relationship between supervisor and employee is important for work engagement of bridge workers. In particular, our results imply that line managers need to invest in this relationship early, as it might be too late to start to talk about transition into retirement just one year before the official retirement age as employees differ a lot when they start dealing with this life event. Likewise, older employees need to be qualified in terms of options about how their job profile could be modified and what additional qualification they might need for that. In general, seeing the older workers as valuable part of the workforce should prepare the ground that they take part in training programmes even at an older age.

Finally, many companies offer their employees preparatory courses for retirement a few years before retirement age. Those courses should be adapted and receive a new focus. Having in mind that continuous employment fails because employees are not informed about the possibilities to prolong employment, the courses should also encompass examples of other employees who have chosen to continue employment.

### 5.2 Limitations and Further Research

This study has some noteworthy limitations. As we had a complete male sample from the engineering industry, energy industry and pharmaceutical industry, we do not know whether the same factors that affect the decision to continue working in one's career job apply for women and for employees from other industries likewise. There are reasons to believe that other factors than those pointed out here play an important role for (not) choosing bridge employment in other branches for example the health care sector as these jobs are often physically more demanding and employees might need to work for financial reasons (cf. Dingemans et al., 2017). We also assume that financial reasons might also play a more important role for women to continue employment beyond retirement age as they often face times of unemployment or reduced workload during their career due to childcare obligations. For the same reasons women in the generation examined might have more experience with working flexibly and therefore might even regard the possibility in doing so as more important. Future research should therefore examine the role of experience in working flexibly and whether our results could be generalized on both gender and other generations.

Besides, we only compared bridge employees with retirees who totally left paid employment and were not planning to work for money anymore. However, retirees often engage in voluntary work (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2018). For companies that are reliant on bridge employees to fill vacancies and to keep knowledge within the company, it might be important to understand when employees choose voluntary work instead of career consistent bridge employment. To this regard, future research need to examine whether the personal meaning of work differentiates between these two groups (i.e. career consistent bridge employment vs. voluntary work) and shed more light on the impact of the generative meaning of work. It should be fruitful to find out what does set the course to decide for the different options and whether some characteristics of voluntary work that make retirees choose for it, could be applied on bridge employment. In line with this, the group of retirees who completely stopped working and then decided to re-enter the workforce later should also be examined. Although this was beyond the scope of this study, knowing

why retirees want to work again and whether they seek career consistent or non-career consistent employment might provide useful insights for employers.

Finally, in our study we only covered the perceptions of employees as we did not talk to the HR department or management about what they offer in order to retain their employees in their company up to retirement age and beyond. Future research should also examine the perspective of the employer in order to find out which HR practices to retain older employees are fruitful to encourage employees to prolong employment or to choose career consistent bridge employment.

Taken together, our study shows that employees in the knowledge-intensive sector with a high personal meaning of work are interested in career consistent bridge employment provided the right framework conditions are in place and the possibility to reduce workload and responsibilities is given. Employers who want to retain their workforce up to and beyond retirement age should therefore implement appropriate measure to foster workplace flexibility.

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### Acknowledgements

We thank Jasmin Diezi, Melanie Reber, Sarah Schindler and Michelle Zumsteg for their help with literature search, data collection and data analysis.

### Funding Statement

The research on which this article is based was funded by the Strategic Initiative “Aging Society” of the FHNW University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland.