

Master Thesis in Strategic HRM and Labour relations

Is age really nothing but a number?

*Norms and practices related to age and employment in the
Municipality of Gothenburg*



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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this thesis was **a)** to describe how institutional pressures on organizations maintains, as well as challenges, current norms and practices regarding age and employment, and **b)** how organizations can respond strategically to these pressures. The background to the study is that the population is getting older, thus there is an increasing need for better age management in the workplace.

Design – We used a case study design, and the study was conducted in a large Swedish municipality. The empirical data was collected in semi-structured interviews with HR practitioners and operational managers, and was analyzed using Oliver's (1991) model of strategic responses to institutional processes, as the authors hypothesize that institutional pressure causes as well as challenges norms and practices.

Findings – Results indicated that norms and practices that inhibit better age management include e.g. negative attitudes related to age and a lack of strategies on how to retain older employees. We found support for the hypothesis that institutional pressure causes as well as challenges these norms and practices. There was a relative lack of strategic replies.

Originality/value – The study offers explanations for factors that inhibit good age management, and offers suggestions for organizations that want to create age-friendly workplaces.

Keywords - age management, institutional theory, resource dependence theory, strategic responses, public sector, ageing employees, age discrimination.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

A global challenge currently affecting both developing and industrialized countries is the increasingly older population. The amount of people above the age of 60 is expected to have increased from 841 million in 2013, to 2 billion in 2050 (United Nations [UN], 2013:12). Furthermore, on a European level it has been estimated that by the year of 2025, the amount of people between the ages of 50-64 will be twice the amount of those younger than the age of 25 (Ilmarinen, 2006a). The ageing population is in particular explained by lower birthrates and higher life expectancy, while on the labor market large post-war cohorts also have a significant impact (Ilmarinen, 2006a). Presumably, there will be consequences on all societal levels, e.g. increased pressure on pension systems, organizational loss of competitive advantage and involuntary retirements (Stone & Deadrick, 2015). Further, according to Bengtsson (2010) and Ilmarinen (2006a) the high immigration level in large parts of Europe cannot stop the population ageing, rather the opposite as demands increase on all levels. Several European countries have therefore revised possibilities of retaining older employees in the labor market to a greater extent (Walker, 2005).

Similarly, the Swedish government has commissioned investigations in order to map out barriers to and possibilities of a longer work life (Statens offentliga utredningar [SOU], 2013:25; SOU 2012:28). Specific obstacles were identified, e.g. poor working conditions for elderly, non-beneficial pension rules as well as negative attitudes towards older people. Furthermore, it was clarified that people will need to work longer in order to maintain the welfare system. The governmental investigators therefore proposed to raise all retirement-related ages before the elections in 2018 (SOU 2013:25). However, they also emphasized that conditions for elderly need to improve, e.g. in recruitment processes, in order to avoid ageism (i.e. age discrimination).

Authorities, employers, social partners and others should strive to be age-blind. It can counteract the negative attitudes towards older workers and tendencies towards ageism. (SOU 2012:28: 506).

Research (e.g. Lucas 2013) report that some groups, e.g. women and low-income earners, tend to retire earlier than other groups, e.g. due to not coping with heavy physical tasks. Thus, certain actors, e.g. trade unions, argue that conditions for these groups need to improve first (Andersson, 2015). Furthermore, research has indicated that other factors e.g. managerial attitudes, declining health or a lack of strategies of how to retain older employees, also have been proven to negatively influence retirement decisions (Jensen, 2014).

In Sweden, there is in particular a lack of strategies on how to retain older employees (SVD, 2012), i.e. on age management. Walker (1999) defines age management as "measures that combat age barriers and/or promote age diversity". According to a recent survey, only 8 % of Swedish organisations have age management strategies, compared to 83 % of their Japanese counterparts (SVD, 2012). An explanation put forward is that Japan is facing a more urgent situation regarding their older population, while cultural differences is another: "In Sweden, we are very focused on the young. But the older are needed in order to introduce the younger to work in a good way." (SVD, 2012, p.1).

Kadefors (2012) argues that a common idea in the Swedish society is that old people stand in the way of young people on the labour market. He problematizes this and refers to research indicating that large amounts retirements did not decreased youth unemployment (AGE 2009 as cited in Kadefors 2012). Further, a study by OECD (2006 as cited in Kadefors 2012) indicated that economies with high labor force participation of older groups also had relatively low youth unemployment. SKL (2013) further argues that there might be a need to approach the current and future lack of labor supply from both directions, i.e. earlier establishment in the labour market and later exits from it - as a strategy with the potential of decreasing recruitment challenges. They described that this could be accomplished by signalling that employees who have reached retirement age are an important resource; give work opportunities for seniors as e.g. mentors and stand-in's; offer young people traineeships in order to give them an introduction to work life; and finally prioritise a good working environment, as this is necessary in order to enable people to fulfil their work life (SKL, 2013). Drawing from this, as well as research indicating that the ageing of the population is a continuing trend (UN, 2013), we find many incentives for working actively with age management.

Bengtsson (2010) argues that investigating age management within the Swedish public sector is of certain interest, since large generational shifts takes place there. Echoing this, Bisnode's (n.d.) study indicated that the average age of managers is significantly higher within the public sector than in the private sector. Further, the Swedish Municipalities and

Counties ([SKL], 2013) stated that 3 out of 10 employees are older than 55 years of age in municipalities and counties. Further, also on a European level, older workers tend to be overrepresented in the public administration, health and education sectors (Eurofound, 2012). In Gothenburg municipality - one of Sweden's largest municipalities – a lack of labor supply stemming partly from retirements is expected in the future. In some parts of the organization, every fourth employee will reach retirement age within 10 years (Goteborgs stad, 2015b). There will be a huge need of new managers during the next decade as many are retiring. There are also issues within the education sector and health care sector (Gothenburg municipality, 2015b).

Despite the current and future lack of labor supply within the municipality, and that they could benefit from later retirements (SKL, 2013), the organization does not have a consistent age management strategy (Interview HR practitioner, April 22 2016). We found this an interesting paradox, and decided to make Gothenburg municipality the object of this qualitative case study. Further, drawing from previous research on age management, we have found certain dominant norms and practices related to age and employment, e.g. negative attitudes towards older people; that some groups, e.g. women and low-income earners tend to retire earlier than other groups; and that there is a lack of strategies on how to retain older employees.

In this study we will therefore seek to investigate how these norms and practices are maintained or challenged. Further we will investigate the causes behind in order to get a fuller picture. As stated by Rye (2001:8), it is necessary to identify current institutionalised norms and traditions in order to initiate change and as we hypothesise that the case organization has needs (e.g. the insufficient labor supply), this motivates our purpose.

Further, we hypothesise that other factors than the need for resources, influence current norms and practices relating to age and employment, namely institutional pressures. We will therefore use Oliver's (1991) model on strategic responses to institutional processes when analysing our empirical material. We suggest that institutional pressure (e.g. from the government and public opinion) impacts and constrains organizations' will and ability to maintain or challenge norms and practices relating to age and employment, but that there are multiple possible responses to these pressures and that organizations have a level of agency. We therefore assume that the strategic responses can offer alternative explanations to what causes norms and practices relating to age and employment, as well as how they are maintained or challenged.

Furthermore, as researchers (e.g. Jensen & Juul Møberg, 2012; Ilmarinen, 2006b)

suggest that HR practitioners and operational managers are organizational actors that have an important influence on organizations' age management – or lack thereof – we suggest that it is important to study these groups in order to understand how norms and practices regarding age and employment are maintained or challenged.

Previous research on age management (see chapter 2) has also this far been largely normative, with a focus on describing good age management. This thesis therefore fills a research gap regarding structural obstacles – such as institutional pressure – to implementing age management, as well as analyzes the multiplicity of pressures and potential responses.

Although age management can be defined as improving conditions for all age-groups (e.g. Walker, 1999), we will focus on older employees, which we define as employees who are above the age of 55 (e.g. Ilmarinen, 2001). This focus, we argue, is motivated by the on-going debate (e.g. SOU 2013:25) regarding whether people will have to work longer.

1.2 Research objectives and purpose

The aim of this thesis is to describe: **a)** how institutional pressures on organisations maintains as well as challenges current norms and practices regarding age and employment, and **b)** how organisations can respond strategically to these pressures.

We will also answer our research question; “who and what influences how HR practitioners and operational managers relate to age and employment in the case setting?”

The thesis will begin with previous research on age management, followed by a presentation of our theoretical framework and a description and discussion of our method. Our results will then be presented, followed by an analysis and a concluding discussion.

2. Previous research

2.1. Age management

As our thesis relates to the dilemma of taking a proactive approach to the demographical challenge of the ageing population or not, we first see a need to explain the concept of age management. A common definition of age management is "measures that combat age barriers

and/or promote age diversity" (Walker, 1999:3). However, it is often interpreted as the management of older employees (Vallerius & Uggelberg, 2007). Jensen and Juul Møberg (2012) criticise this conception and argue that it should not be seen as a way of targeting seniors, due to the risk of younger employers finding it unjust, while older employees may feel stigmatised and labelled (Friis et al., 2008).

Instead it is preferable to talk about age management as "efforts to maintain employability and work ability over the entire course of life" (Jensen & Juul Møberg, 2012:50). While age management has received increased attention of the European policy agenda during the last few decades (Walker, 2005) the concept is still rather new within management literature (Vallerius & Uggelberg, 2007). The Age and Employment Network (TAEN, 2007) address the lack of recognizability of the term, stating that it is often used interchangeably with concepts such as 'diversity' or 'age discrimination', but argue that the term 'age management' should be used as it encompasses more.

Further, organisations work with age management for several reasons. Naegele and Walker (2006, p. 5-7) mention e.g. wanting to maintain the skills base, reducing age-related labour costs and reacting to changes in external labour market conditions. They also state that good practice in age management consist and be part of: "recruitment, training and lifelong learning, career development, flexible working time practices, health protection and promotion, redeployment of older workers as well as employment exit and transition to retirement" (p.5). They offer several examples, which of one is that older workers should be able to decrease work time in order to become used and increase work ability before retirement. Further, Walker (1997, p.5) state that an example of good practice in age management is if retired employees become re-employed, although on a temporary basis.

The Work Ability Index (e.g. Ilmarinen, 2006b) measures work ability by comparing job requirements and ability to work, and was developed by practitioners at the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health. The creators found that the fundamental element of work ability is the individual's mental and physical status. However, in order to maintain work ability skills should be updated, motivation should be maintained and attitudes would need to be positive towards ageing (Ilmarinen, 2006b). Furthermore, management should create good working conditions, e.g. regarding the work environment and teams (Ilmarinen, Tuomi and Seitsamo, 2005). In a follow-up study using the WAI, the most important factors in order to increase work ability (for those between 51 and 62 years of age) turned out to be leadership and managerial attitudes, as well as individuals' own perception of their and other peoples' ageing (Ilmarinen, 2006b). To conclude, work ability depends on both the individual and the

management.

Although there is no agreement in research on why some workers retire early and others later (Jensen, 2014), employers can effect retirement decisions through push and pull factors (e.g. Preter, Looy & Mortelmans, 2013). Examples of push factors are negative managerial attitudes, declining health or a lack of strategies on how to retain older employees, while pull factors may include early retirement schemes or wanting to spend time with family (Midtsundstad, 2005). Jensen (2014) finds that certain factors can be more important for one group of workers (e.g. women, manual workers or academics), whilst other factors can have a stronger influence on other groups. Nilsson, Hydbom & Rylander (2011) and Kadefors, Thorin and Öhman (2014) have found that groups that already enjoy relatively high incomes (e.g. men and academics) are more prone to work after the retirement age.

The literature above shows that employers have a big impact on the individual employee's ability to work as they become older, e.g. through their ability to offer life-long learning, flexible work arrangement, a good work environment and positive attitudes towards older employees from managers. In addition, employers have an effect on retirement decisions, and specific employee groups are influenced by different factors.

2.2. Potential differences between age groups

As we investigate norms and practices related to age and employment, we find it crucial to discuss what researchers argue may or may not be typical for older and younger individuals, and whether age is really nothing but a number. According to Ilmarinen (2001, p. 546) declining physics related to age begins on an average after the age of 30, but he emphasises that the aging process is highly individual. Further, Ilmarinen explains that cognitive systems may decline with age, but that job performance of older workers has been proven at least as productive as that of younger workers. In addition, he argues that while physics may decline, mental functions might even improve as people age. Malmqvist (2007) further argues that older and experienced employees are not a uniform group and implies that e.g. educational level, health and experience are of more importance.

Others (e.g. Campbell et al., 2010) emphasise generational differences. It is nonetheless common that certain characteristics are ascribed young and old people. Further, one study showed that older employees were often described as change resistant as well as having difficulties in taking orders from e.g. younger managers (Taylor & Walker, 1998, p. 650). However, older generations were also often described as loyal and that they do not

change job as often as younger people (Becton, Walker & Jones-Farmer, 2014), while simultaneously research indicates that it is more difficult to find a new job after the age of 55 (“Dubbelt så svårt att få jobb efter 55”, 2014).

Concluding, there are conflicting accounts of how, or indeed if, age groups differ. However, most research agrees that as people age they may have different needs than their younger colleagues (e.g. Ilmarinen, 2001).

2.3. Ageing in a Swedish context

Sweden has amongst the highest participation of older employees and retirement ages are high in comparison to in e.g. Germany (Ebener & Hasselhorn, 2015). The pension system is further quite flexible and to a large extent it is possible to decide when you want to retire. Public pension is available at the age of 61 (Pensionsmyndigheten, n.d.) and you have employment protection until the age of 67 (LAS, 1982:80). While the average retirement age has increased during the last few year (e.g. Eurostat, 2010), Sweden has at the same time amongst the highest proportion of elderly in the world and a very high life expectancy (Bengtsson, 2010). Thus, from a governmental perspective the progress is too slow in order to maintain the welfare system, as the dependency ratio, defined as the amount of retired people compared to those within the active workforce, will be too high (SOU, 2012:28).

Further, after the age of 67 it is possible to work longer if both employee and employer wishes, but then a temporary work contract must be signed according to LAS 5§ 4p. The Swedish Discrimination act (2008:567) has the purpose of protecting the rights of people not to be discriminated on the grounds of age as well as 6 other categories (e.g. ethnicity and gender). However, it is stated in § 2 point 4 that special treatment on the basis of age is exempt from the prohibition of discrimination as long as it “has a legitimate purpose and the means used are appropriate and necessary to achieve the purpose”. This exception is not more closely formulated in the law, but the EU has decided that e.g. national employment and social policies are acceptable grounds for exceptions to the prohibition on age discrimination in a directive (2000/78/EG) (European Commission, 2016).

A consequence of this is that the exception can potentially be used both to support affirmative action in order to promote equality, or to rectify discrimination with a negative effect on the disadvantaged group in a given situation. Furthermore, Sweden was comparatively late with out ruling discrimination on the grounds of age (Dimming, 2007) and is quite rare for organizations in Sweden to be convicted of age discrimination (Ellung, 2015)

Further, national values also have possible implications on age management.

According to Hofstede (The Hofstede Center, n.d.) Sweden is an individualist society, and he further remarks that in individualist societies, “management is the management of individuals” (The Hofstede Center, n.d.). A dominant perspective in Sweden is thus that people should be treated as individuals rather than members of a certain societal group, and that the equal rights should be promoted and protected. A possible implication of the strong wish to be treated as an individual rather than as a member of a group is that affirmative action towards certain groups can be viewed as stigmatising.

Also, there are discussions about age-obsession in Swedish society, and a concern that has been raised is that it is deemed more acceptable to be prejudiced against older people, as everyone eventually will become old (Johansson, 2014). Figures also show that 1 out of 3 Swedes have experienced that their age has been an issue when applying for jobs, and 51 % think that the obsession with age on the labor market has increased (Sjöberg & Mild Nygren, 2012). To conclude, individual identity is generally emphasised over group identity, and in addition it might be stigmatising to claim membership to a group that is deemed as undesirable.

2.3.1 Age management research interventions

Governmental investigations (SOU 2012:28; SOU 2013:25) indicate that negative attitudes related to age do exist in Swedish organisations. Previously, the government financed two age management interventions for the public sector. This was done in order to change managers' understanding and attitudes, as well as to decrease sick absence and early retirements amongst older employees (Skoglund, C. & Skoglund, B., 2005). The focus of the interventions was educating managers through training and mentorship programmes. Results turned out positive, but in order to “break down barriers and find new ways to develop a more age-friendly work organisation” the authors concluded that there was a need for a continuous approach of age management (Skoglund & Skoglund 2005, p. 396).

Furthermore, Vattenfall AB has previously has an active approach to age management. The reason behind was large amounts of retirements and competence transfer issues. Age management practices included mentorship programmes, dialogue seminars with universities and training sessions of managers. Further they implemented the 80/90/100 program, which meant that employees could, from 58 years of age, work 80 %, keep 90 % of his wages and 100 % of his pension (Vallerius & Uggelberg, 2007). An employee who participated in the implementation of the programme described that important elements were

that leaders communicated the value of older employees and that they wanted them to stay. During his time in the organisation, the average retirement age increased from 60 to 63,5 years and according to estimations, Vattenfall saved millions of SEK by avoiding early retirements (Wallin, 2012).

To conclude, it seems that age management research interventions have previously been successful. However, drawing from the first example it seems that a broad and continuous approach is preferable, which may call for the incorporation of age management into the overall HR strategy.

2.4. Is the public sector different from the private sector regarding age management?

As our case organisation is part of the public sector, we found that it is important to discuss what may differ from e.g. companies in the private sector. An obvious and major difference is that there is a political impact on the public sector and that resources depend on governmental budgets. Postle (2002) argues that this might limit the possibilities for e.g. managers to initiate change, as they may perceive that resources are insufficient. Further he suggests that the role of middle managers has become more complex, with a larger focus on administrative tasks than before (p. 343). Furunes, Mykletun and Solem (2011, p. 1237) further argue that middle managers in the public sector may "have their mind on daily operations and that they are less concerned with age management issues." Furthermore, Postle (2002) points out that managers are fighting a constant battle between being loyal to the employees or the bureaucratic organisation and that this ultimately might influence what is prioritised.

There are further indications of differences between the public and private sector in the ability to attract staff, especially young people. Dyhre and Parment (2014) expresses that the municipalities need to make bigger efforts to brand themselves as attractive employers. In line with this, SKL (2015) has started an employer branding project, in order to increase their attraction as an employer. In the 2015 project report, they stated that they have considerable recruitment challenges due to the on-going extensive generational shift. Further, they suggest that young people are an important target group as potential employees (SKL, 2015). One sign that their efforts are paying off is that the municipalities were the employers that increased their popularity in the 2014-2015 annual survey of students' attitudes to employers (Johansson, 2015). The company who conducts the survey explained this by the municipalities' efforts to "wash away their reputation of being a grey and boring employer" (Johansson, 2015).

3. Theoretical framework

As demonstrated by our introduction and literature review, there is arguably a need for age management both on the societal and organizational level. At the same time, institutionalized attitudes, practices and rules are in the way of creating better conditions on the labor market for older employees. Further, as shown in the literature review there are conflicting pressures regarding age management, with some indications that organizations are experiencing pressure to develop better age management. We have therefore chosen to analyze our empirical data using Oliver's model (1991) on strategic responses to institutional processes, in which she combines institutional theory with resource dependence theory. We argue that this model will help us understand and map out institutional pressures exerted on the organization. Further, as there are conflicting pressures, we find the notion that organizations have an active choice in how to respond to these relevant to our study. We will begin by explaining how the model was developed, drawing from institutional theory and resource dependence theory, as well as presenting the important concepts used in our analysis.

3.1. Strategic responses to institutionalism (Oliver 1991)

3.1.1. Institutional theory and Resource dependence theory

In order to show that organizations can react in a variation of ways – from passive conformity to active resistance – to institutional pressures, Oliver (1991) combines insights from resource dependence theory with institutional theory. The author argues that while institutional theory emphasizes external pressures from the institutional environment, resource dependence theory focuses particularly on demands from the task environment (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978 as cited in Oliver, 1991) and is thus more focused on the market and on resources.

Further, as opposed to traditional institutionalism, resource dependence theory emphasizes agency and non-compliance as ways for organizations to survive, and thus a central assumption to this theory is that organizations can negotiate with their environment (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), as well as that they can exercise some degree of control or influence over the resource environment or the organization's exchange partners for purposes of achieving stability.

Oliver further argues that choice is a present element in both resource dependence and

institutional theory and that it is limited by external pressure. What differs between the theories is that resource dependence theorists also include resistance and manipulation as responses to external demands. Furthermore, according to Oliver, a common assumption of both theories is that organizations may be interest-driven, but that interests from an institutional theory perspective tend to be socially or institutionally defined (Scott, 1987 as cited in Oliver, 1991). We assume that the municipality is highly pressured by external constituents and therefore we also assume that Oliver's (1991) model will help us understand why certain norms and practices related to age in employment exist within the organization and how the organization responds to these.

3.1.2. A model of Strategic responses to institutional pressures

Oliver (1991) suggests that organizations often comply with institutional pressure, but that strategic responses to external pressures may vary from passive to active. In the model (figure 2) Oliver proposes five different types of responses: *acquiesce*, *compromise*, *avoidance*, *defiance* and *manipulation*. We will however focus on the first three strategic responses, as we found that they are the most relevant for our study.

The first strategy, **acquiesce**, is divided into *habit*, *imitation* and *compliance*. *Habit* is blind compliance of taken-for-granted rules or values. Oliver argues that this tactic often is applied when e.g. norms are institutionalized to the degree of being social facts. Further, the author suggests that organizations are often unaware of institutional influences and thus are not able to respond to them in a strategic way. An organization may therefore reproduce practices and behaviors, due to them being historically repeated or taken-for-granted. Another type of **acquiesce** is *imitation*, meaning that organizations consciously or unconsciously imitate other institutional models, e.g. those of successful organizations or those which have gained social approval (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The third type of **acquiesce** is *compliance*, which is defined as the aware compliance to values, norms or institutional demands.

The second strategic response is **compromise**, which implicate that organizations facing different external demands may have to compromise in various ways. This strategy is also one which implies conforming to institutional pressures, but what differentiates it from **acquiesce** is that the organization uses a higher degree of agency and self-interest. An example of conflicting demands is e.g. pressure from shareholders to increase efficiency, which may conflict with those of public pressure. In such a situation, the organization might have to apply *balancing tactics*, which means that the pressures exerted by stakeholders are

balanced, so that none become dominant. The second type of **compromise** is *pacifying tactics*, which includes partial conformity to one or more stakeholders who pressurize the organization. The organization might continue its behavior but devote considerable effort to easing the effect of the partial resistance.

The third type of **compromise** is that of *bargaining*, which implies a more active approach to reach a compromise. For example, an organization might accept the content of a new regulation, but seek to negotiate the scope or timing of it with the constituent. This approach assumes that organizations can negotiate with their environment. The third suggested strategy is **avoidance**. As implied by the name, the organization tries to avoid institutional pressures, but does not want to go into a conflict with the constituent/-s. The first type of **avoidance** is *concealment*, which means that the organization will put on an act for constituents where they perform activities and showcase behaviors that are in line with the institutional pressures in order to conceal that these are not otherwise performed. This strategy does not imply real conformity, compliance is only apparent. The second strategy is *buffering*, where the organization decouples activities and behaviors that are not in line with institutional pressure from e.g. its formal structure. This is done in order to reduce external scrutiny and evaluation.

Further, this strategy might work well for organizations that do not need to be open for public scrutiny. If the organization is dependent on public approval to gain e.g. legitimacy and funding, this tactic might lead constituents to become suspicious, and legitimacy and survival capabilities might be reduced. The last avoidance strategy is *escape*, which means that the organizations flees the environment in which institutional pressure is exerted, or adjusts its goals or activities to the degree that compliance with institutional pressure is no longer necessary. **Defiance** is the second most active resistance strategy. Within this strategy, the organization can *dismiss*, *challenge* or *attack* institutional pressures. Further, the most resistant strategy is **manipulation**, where the organization seeks to shape the institutional pressure itself and/or the constituents that are exerting the pressure. The **manipulation** tactics identified by Oliver are *co-opting*, *influencing* and *controlling*.

Strategies	Tactics	Examples
Acquiesce	Habit, Imitate, Comply	Following invisible, taken-for-granted norms, Mimicking institutional models, Obeying rules and accepting norms
Compromise	Balance, Pacify, Bargain	Balancing the expectations of multiple constituents, Placating and accommodating institutional elements, Negotiating with institutional stakeholders
Avoid	Conceal, Buffer, Escape	Disguising nonconformity, Loosening institutional attachments, Changing goals, activities, or domains.
Defy	Dismiss, Challenge, Attack	Ignoring explicit norms and values, contesting rules and requirements, Assaulting the sources of institutional pressure
Manipulate	Co-opt, Influence, Control	Importing influential constituents, Shaping values and criteria, Dominating institutional constituents and processes.

Figure 1. Strategic responses to Institutional Processes (Oliver, 1991:152)

3.1.3. Predictive factors to strategic responses

Oliver also finds five institutional factors that predict responses to institutional change; *cause: constituents, content, control and context* (see figure 2). The *cause* of institutional pressure is often social legitimacy and/or economic fitness. To understand the cause, the following question can be asked: “*why is the pressure being exercised?*”. Oliver hypothesizes that resistance to organizational pressure will be higher if perceived economic gains and/or social legitimacy is expected to be low. The response will also vary dependent on whether the constituent/-s and the pressurized organization have a shared understanding of the cause, and the validity of the cause (see figure 3).

The *constituents* are the institutions that exert pressure, e.g. the state, public opinion or professional groups. Oliver hypothesizes that organizational resistance to institutional pressure will be higher if the organization has a low degree of dependence on constituents and/or if there is a higher degree of multiplicity of constituents. Further, if multiplicity is high, the response will depend on whether conflicts are resolved, whether uncertainty can be reduced, and whether awareness of the institutional pressures is raised (see figure 3).

The *content* of the institutional pressure can be described as the norms and rules the

organization is pressured to follow. Oliver hypothesizes that organizational resistance will be higher if the content is not compatible with the goals of the organization and/or the content severely limits the organization's own freedom of choice (*see figure 3*). *Control* refers to how the pressure is being exerted. Oliver hypothesizes that the lower the degree of legal coercion and/or voluntary diffusion, the higher level of resistance. This can be directly paralleled to the concept of coercive and mimetic isomorphism respectively. Oliver argues that organizations are likely to use acquiescent responses when there are severe consequences of not following the established rules and laws (*see figure 3*).

The *context* describes the environment in which the pressure is being exerted. Oliver hypothesizes that organizations will showcase lower levels of resistance when they are in an unstable environment (*see figure 3*). In uncertain conditions, organizations are instead prone to conform to pressure and mimic other organizations to prevent further instability. They might use **compromise** tactics such as *bargaining*, or they might use **avoidance** tactics such as *buffering* and *concealment* in order to hide the activities that are surrounded by uncertainty. Resistance will also be higher when there is a low level of interconnectedness in the institutional environment, i.e. when there are no interconnected networks in the institutional environment, as networks help spread values, myths and practices (e.g. DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). This means that when the level of isomorphism is high, organizations are less likely to resist institutional pressure.

Institutional Factor	Research Question	Predictive Dimensions
Cause	Why is the organization pressured to conform to institutional rules or expectations?	Legitimacy or social fitness, Efficiency and economic fitness
Constituents	Who is exerting institutional pressures on the organization?	Multiplicity of constituent demands, Dependence on institutional constituents
Content	To what norms or requirements is the organization being pressured to conform?	Consistency with organizational goals, Discretionary constraints imposed on the organization

Control	How or by what means are the institutional pressures being exerted?	Legal coercion or enforcement, Voluntary diffusion of norms
Context	What is the environmental context within which institutional pressures are being exerted?	Environmental uncertainty, Environmental interconnectedness

Figure 2. Antecedents of Strategic Responses (Oliver, 1991, p. 160)

Predictive factor	Acquiesce	Compromise	Avoid	Defy	Manipulate
Cause					
Legitimacy	High	Low	Low	Low	Low
Efficiency	High	Low	Low	Low	Low
Constituents					
Multiplicity	Low	High	High	High	High
Dependence	High	High	Moderate	Low	Low
Content					
Consistency	High	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Low
Constraint	Low	Moderate	High	High	High
Control					
Coercion	High	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Low
Diffusion	High	High	Moderate	Low	Low
Context					
Uncertainty	High	High	High	Low	Low
Interconnectedness	High	High	Moderate	Low	Low

Figure 3. Institutional Antecedents and Predicted Strategic Responses (Oliver, 1991, p. 160)

4. Methodology

In this section, we will present and justify how we chose to conduct the study. It will cover the research approach, data collection and analysis as well as a discussion on ethical considerations as well as on research quality.

4.1 Research design

As mentioned in chapter 1.2, our research aim is to **a)** describe how institutional pressures on organisations maintains as well as challenges current norms and practices regarding age and employment, and **b)** how organisations can respond strategically to these pressures. We chose to interview both operational managers and HR practitioners in order to get perspectives from organizational actors who might be affected by, and respond, to these institutional pressures in different ways. Another aim was to get an idea of how they potentially cooperate around age management issues. Researchers (e.g. Jensen & Juul Møberg, 2012) also stress the importance of these categories of organizational actors for successful implementation of age management.

Further, we chose a qualitative approach since we figured that this would help us understand the underlying mechanisms that shape attitudes and behavior, e.g. values, myths and previous experiences. Qualitative research has previously been defined as “a research strategy that usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.386), which is in line with our aim. Further, we chose a qualitative research design since it is appropriate when the study concerns individual experiences and views (Ahrne, 2011).

We decided to study a single case. The reasoning behind this is that case studies can give an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon set in its natural environment (Bromley, 1986, p.1) and that it is possible to obtain deeper knowledge of certain aspects, e.g. attitudes and perceptions, by limiting the scope of the study (e.g. Kvale & Brinkman, 2014, p. 310; Halvorsen 1992, p.67). Studying a single case also meant that we were able to understand complex contextual conditions and take these into account. A common criticism of case studies is that they are only appropriate to use in the early state of research on a particular subject, i.e. to find out whether it is worth proceeding with other qualitative or quantitative methods (Yin 2012, p. 6). However, a case study approach is appropriate when one seeks to answer descriptive and explanative research questions, which might be useful

when studying under-researched or rare phenomena (e.g. Yin 2012, p.5; Malterud, 2009). We argue that this is true for the topic of age management.

4.1.1 Case presentation

The municipality of Gothenburg has 10 different city districts and approximately 50,000 employees (Goteborgs stad, 2015a). Around 70 % of the employees work within the city district councils, which provide services e.g. elderly care, pre-schools, compulsory schools and libraries. Furthermore, in the administrative units, approximately 15 % of the employees work while the other 15 % work within municipality-owned companies. Being part of the public sector, the municipality is governed by the political system. The budget is the superior policy document and operations are in particular financed through municipal taxes, and also by the government (Goteborgs stad, 2015a). Furthermore, the municipality is female-dominated and there are 84 % women in the city district councils, as well as 57 % women in the municipality-owned companies (Goteborgs stad, 2015a). On their website, they stress the importance of working pro-equality (e.g. Goteborgs stad, 2005).

The average age amongst employees is 46.6 years (Goteborgs stad, 2015a). However, as discussed previously, there will be a lack of labor supply in some parts of the organization during the next 10 years, much due to retirements. This is in particular true for educational and health care personnel (Goteborgs stad, 2015b). Furthermore, between the years of 2015-2024, the organization will need to recruit 2 500 new managers in the administrations, half being due to retirements. Further, on the company side, an estimation has shown that 7 000 engineers will have to be recruited before the year of 2020 (Goteborgs stad, 2015b). The organization has previously shown interest in age management. In 2007, they participated in the partly EU-financed project “Livskompetens 50 +” (Dimming, 2007). An emphasis was then to focus on developing pedagogy for adult learning, in order to maintain a continuous learning approach (Adolfsson, 2007). Further, a need to attract young people in order to get a balance of inflows and outflows has been identified (Goteborgs stad, 2015b). For instance, the municipality has implemented a program called “The manager of tomorrow”, in order to tackle the recruitment challenge of managers (Fleur, 2014). Further, within the health care sector, they have developed a competence transfer model in order to be able to transfer knowledge from retiring nurses to new employees (Senior Goteborg, n.d.). However, we find no accounts that there are any specific age management related practices targeting educational

staff and engineers. Further, there is no comprehensive strategy on age management for the whole organization (Interview HR practitioner, April 22 2016).

4.2. Data collection

4.2.1 Sampling

As our tutor was involved in an ongoing age management research project at the University of Gothenburg, our target population was organizations that were connected to the project. Gothenburg municipality had previously decided to partake in the research project, and we also had previous knowledge of e.g. big generational shifts in the municipality. Further, we had previously decided to study age management in a setting where it is of particular relevance and Gothenburg municipality fit our criteria. In addition, we held a meeting with two HR practitioners at the executive office of the municipality, and discussed their understanding of age management, what they view as their age management related challenges etcetera.

Then we started researching the organization more thoroughly and defined the limits of our population. As we found that challenges of managers and health care personnel are already being targeted, we wanted to investigate other parts of the organization, which also may need to retain older employees to a larger extent than today. Also due to a need of narrowing the scope, we chose to focus on the educational sector, as well as one of the municipality-owned companies, which mainly employs engineers. We further wanted to see whether the sub-cases differ regarding norms and practices related to age and employment.

We then proceeded to find respondents within the chosen population. We were appointed a contact person (one of the HR practitioners we first met) in the case organization, which helped us get access to respondents. The HR practitioner further put us in touch with HR personnel in the two sub-organizations, and we asked them for a list of potential respondents. The fact that a contact person within the case organization helped us get access to informants via other HR professionals was convenient, but also involved certain methodological risks as we had less control over what operational managers we could talk to. Although we did not have an overview of how these HR practitioners potentially made any sampling decisions, we mitigated this risk by getting to know the organizational structure and asking specifically to interview the positions/roles we were interested in.

The HR practitioner further contacted the people we asked for, and on the occasions

that we were not able to get an interview it was for practical reasons. We then suggested alternatives. We did not perceive that anyone tried to keep us from contacting certain people in the organization. However, we do believe that there is a risk that the sample was influenced by the HR practitioners' personal relations, i.e. that the operational managers most likely to reply were those with whom the HR practitioners had some kind of work relationship. A majority of our participants were of the same gender (female), which was perhaps an effect of convenience sampling. We will therefore not focus on gender aspects, since there is a strong dominance of female respondents.

4.2.2 Primary source of data

McCracken (1988) expresses how qualitative studies often include a small number of people, while attempting to explore these more deeply. This supports our choice of semi-structured interviews with few informants. The semi-structured interview is an appropriate tool when the researcher wants to let the respondent co-shape the interview, as themes and questions that the informant consider important can be explored in the manner that they come up naturally before moving on to the next theme (Gummesson, 2000; Bryman, 2012).

When we had a rough idea of whom we would interview and we made an interview guide (see Appendix 1), in which we made themes for what we assumed to be the most central sides to age management. These themes are also prevalent in previous literature. In order to be able to understand how the organization works with age management, we first had to understand how the operational managers cooperate around HR issues with fellow managers and HR practitioners in general. We also wanted to uncover attitudes and previous experiences. However, the most central part to us was understanding how the organization works in practice. We therefore incorporated many questions regarding everyday actions relating to senior employees. In addition, we made a pilot interview with an acquaintance that is an operational manager, and used this person's feedback to improve the interview guide. We also did role play by pretending to interview each other. This helped us uncover worst case scenarios, so that we could prepare alternative questions, and it also helped us estimate the time that the interview would take.

In total we held 11 interviews: 4 HR practitioners, 6 operational managers and one external consultant (see Figure 1). Out of the HR practitioners, 2 were from the city executive office, 1 was from the company, and 1 was from the city district council. Out of the operational managers, 4 were from the company and 2 were from the city district council. Since we only got to interview 2 operational managers from the city district council while we

interviewed 4 operational managers from the company, the data is skewed, and less appropriate for making generalizations about the differences between the two subcases. Further, as mentioned, the data is skewed due to mainly having interviewed women, we will not include the gender aspect in the analysis.

All interviews were conducted at the location of choice by the participant and lasted between 30 minutes and 1,5 hour. All participants agreed to have the conversation recorded. We divided the interviews so that only one of us was present at every interview. This was not our initial intention, but was a matter of logistics. A downside of only one person interviewing is that one person is less able to focus on all important aspect such as listening actively, managing time, asking important follow-up questions and observing body language. However, the respondent might feel that it is less intimidating than being interviewed by two people. The person who was not present during the interview would listen to the interview afterwards and offer a different perspective. We could have chosen to have e.g. Skype interviews with the participants so that we could both partake at all times. However, we thought that it was preferable to do the interviews in person.

Role	Gender	Number
Operational manager	female	1
HR practitioner	female	2
HR practitioner	female	3
HR practitioner	female	4
HR practitioner	female	5
Operational	female	6

manager		
Operational manager	female	7
Operational manager	female	8
Operational manager	male	9
Operational manager	male	10
External Consultant	female	11

Figure 4. Informants

4.2.3 Secondary source of data

In order to increase the quality of qualitative research it is beneficial with pre-understanding, which is emphasized and viewed as a condition for creating new theory in the interpretational approach of hermeneutics (Gummesson, 2000). Gummesson argues that “A lack of pre-understanding will cause the researcher/consultant to spend considerable time gathering basic information (...)” (2000:58). Therefore, we spent considerable time getting a good pre-understanding of the case organization, which arguably improved the quality of the data. In order to accomplish this, we chose to review several documents. Some were exclusive for employees in the city, but most were accessible through the municipality's intranet. Examples of documents which we took part of are personnel policies, news, and strategic HR documents on current and future challenges as well as employee surveys.

4.3 Data Analysis

In order to analyze our data, we used a thematic analysis technique (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We first started by transcribing our recorded interviews followed by searching for codes and themes. As previously mentioned, we chose to investigate the educational sector within one city district council to a company which mainly employs engineers, as we wanted to compare two rather different parts of the organization and see whether there were any major differences between them. However, as we did not find signs of the differences we anticipated, we chose to analyze the data from the subcases together, stating whether the informants belong to either the district council or company when perceived as necessary.

Further, we have separated the data regarding occupation, i.e. the HR practitioners and operational managers data will be analyzed separately as larger differences were perceived between these occupational groups. In order to structure our data we used a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a flexible methodological tool which allows researchers to structure the data around. e.g. interpretations of the research topic covered (Bran & Clarke, 2006). We did our first round of coding based on the themes around which we had structured our interviews. We then familiarized ourselves with the data by listening to the interviews, and made notes. We found that new themes emerged, which were used to create codes within the themes. In this part of the process, we also allowed our theoretical framework influence our codes in order to make the analysis more stringent.

The prevalence of a theme in interviews does not decide whether it is important, instead it is the ability to capture important aspects of the research problem that is important (Bran & Clarke, 2006). We therefore chose themes that were mentioned both frequently and rarely. One decision that researchers must make when thematising is whether to thematise all data, or choose a number of themes and pick out relevant data. Picking only certain themes means that the researchers use their own judgment and an inherent risk is that researchers contort the data in the process (Bran & Clarke, 2006). We have chosen the latter approach as parts of our interview material regards topics that only border the research problem. The guiding principle for coding has thus been finding themes that capture important aspects of the case and of the research problem. Some of our codes were "negative attitudes, institutional pressure, and age management".

4.4. Ethical considerations

We have developed this study around the ethical principles suggested by Bryman and Bell (2011). Prior to the interviews we asked for the informants' full consent and sent an informational letter stating that it was possible to withdraw at any point, that their anonymity would be protected and that recorded interviews would be deleted after they had been transcribed. The respondents were also given our contact information and the possibility of taking part of the result which most of them showed an interest in.

Further, we tried to keep an objective view throughout the whole process and also to use a proper language. Although we apprehended that the topic might be of a sensitive nature, as it also concerns age discrimination, we made an effort to mitigate this, e.g. by not asking directly about age discrimination. Further, we argue that none of the informants were harmed participating in this study. In addition, we were transparent throughout the whole process, about our purpose and how the interviews would be used in the study, as well as that it would be possible to take part of results afterwards.

4.5 Research quality

According to Bryman and Bell, credibility and confirmability concerns the trustworthiness of the findings, that is how honest the researcher seeks to be despite of the fact that subjective interpretations are involved (2011, p. 43). A common criticism of qualitative research in general is that it is biased (Gioia & Watkins, 2015, p. 10) and data collected through qualitative methods is sometimes described as being less scientifically acceptable than quantitative method data since the former bases itself on subjective interpretations (Gummesson, 2011, p.126). However, a positive side to qualitative research is that it makes bias explicit (Gioia, & Watkins, 2015, p. 10) and according to Bryman and Bell (2011) there is no such thing as value free research, and therefore it is of essence that the researcher is reflexive about values and potential bias.

We will therefore discuss potential bias throughout the thesis, and will describe our motivation for choosing to study age management. First, we were interested in the paradox of the demographical changes: that people will have to work longer but are simultaneously pushed away from work life, or at least rarely actively encouraged to stay. Second, we had the impression that age discrimination is the issue relating to senior employees that is most talked about. We found that diversity issues such as gender and ethnicity are at least rather well known by organizations, but that age diversity is something that is not at all common to

discuss or actively work with. Further, we do not advocate any specific form of age management, however we encourage organizations to work actively with it. Further, the aim of this qualitative study is to explore a problem from multiple angles, rather than to find proof for a specific hypothesis.

Regarding the individual views expressed, we interpret these through a constructivist perspective, where reality is seen as subjective and constantly recreated in the shifting meaning frameworks of social actors (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 23), i.e. that reality is subjective and colored by individual's perceptions of it. Having this in mind, we do not profess to present one objective account of age management in the organization, but interpret the individual views as unique accounts that can lead to a multiplicity of new understandings.

We argue that the research process might have been colored by factors such as personal values, previous experiences, gender, socio-economic status and age. However, with a subjectivist interpretational approach, these factors will always impact individual understandings of any given situation, and we have not been able to find any risk factors that were a clear threat of distorting the material. We also ended each interview by making sure that the respondents had been able to express what they wanted and did not feel misinterpreted.

Management and organizational research is often conducted within what Gummesson calls the consultant paradigm (2000, p. 19), which can be contrasted to the scientific paradigm. The first generates applied whilst the second generates basic research. Management and organizational research relies on organizations sharing time, information and respondent access with the researcher, which puts the latter in a position where one might feel pressured to produce research that is practically applicable to the organization, which makes this type of research receive criticism for lacking scientific integrity and irrelevant to general interest (2000, p. 28).

We carried the ambition to make research that could be interesting to both practitioners and researchers, and argue that we maintained a balance between these two throughout the process.

Further, we did not at any point feel that we were pressured by the organization to change our research plans, but we did include the organization in our process in order to make the research relevant to practitioners. We did not feel that the contact persons or the respondents tried to change the results or the angle of the study in any way.

To conclude, we maintained our scientific integrity throughout the project.

5. Results

As previously mentioned, we chose to investigate the educational sector within one city district council to a company, which mainly employs engineers, as we wanted to compare two rather different parts of the organization where recruitment challenges exist, and whether there were any major differences between them.

However, we did not find signs that they differed significantly. Therefore we chose to analyze the data together, stating whether the informants belong to either the city district council or the company when perceived as necessary. However, we found significant differences between HR practitioners and operational managers. Thus, data from these occupational groups will be analyzed separately. We will also weave in responses from the external consultant who we interviewed, where we found it relevant.

5.1. Understanding of the demographic challenge and the concept of age management

In order to answer how HR practitioners and operational managers relate to age and employment, we found a need to investigate what the level of understanding of the challenge of the ageing population was. Judging from primary and secondary data, we found that HR practitioners on central HR level are discussing the issue (Gothenburg municipality, 2015), often in relation to the current and future lack of skills supply. One of the HR practitioners describes the situation in the following manner:

We do work with this type of questions... and we will have to have strategies in order to deal with our mission with an older population and to meet the lack of skills supply. We have not formed any strategies yet... but I feel that on the basis of the skills situation we have today, we will want our employees to stay until they are 70. (IP5)

One of the HR practitioners refers to the demographical challenge of segregation between different ethnical groups rather than the demographical challenge relating to age.

Most of the HR practitioners were further familiar with the term “age management”, and most of them interpreted it as targeted towards older employees. This shows that there is a level of knowledge about the concept within the organization. However, it is not spread to operational managers as none of them had heard of the concept prior to the study. One of the operational managers mentions that she has never heard anybody in Gothenburg municipality

talk about anything that could be labeled age management.

Further, it was echoed in the interviews that there is no comprehensive age management strategy for the whole organization. Additionally, the content of the policies that touch upon age management issues do not seem to be so well known and clear that managers can act according to them and be certain about how to deal with age management issues. For example, the majority of the operational managers at the company believed that 67 was an age absolute limit in the company, but they were not certain of it, and did not know exactly in which policy to attain a certain answer.

5.2. Attitudes related to age

Further, in order to answer our question regarding how institutional pressures on the organization maintains as well as challenges current norms and practice, we found a need to clarify what the current norms in the organization are. One recurring theme we found was negative attitudes related to age. However, we also found that there was a difference in the way that operational managers and HR practitioners talk about older employees. While HR practitioners are pointing towards individuality and that people do not differ because of their age, a majority of the operational managers ascribe older and younger employees in their organization certain attributes. One HR practitioner e.g. expresses that "I think it is more connected to the person, personality, personality traits, than it was the age. " (IP5)

However, HR practitioners as well as operational managers state that younger people often fall victim to age related prejudice in the organization. An HR practitioner describes how managers often complain about younger employees, arguing that they are all "strategists" and know nothing about how things work in practice. She offers as an explanation that there is a large gap between education and real work life that employers must respond to better.

One HR practitioner further describes that there is a strong organizational culture that involves negative attitudes towards young people:

One can be discriminated here because of age. I believe that young employees can become quite 'belittled'. According to existing 'rules' you are considered a new employee for the first 10 years. When you are young, you do not have the right to say anything. We do not like that...we do want to take advantage of new competence, energy etc. (IP2)

An operational manager further describes her own experience of discrimination:

There is prejudice against young people... and I have experienced them as well. Perhaps I am more aware of them due to that... I actually think it was age discrimination at times...then if you are new in a role, it is another thing, but you might as well be 50 and new... (IP1)

Another example shows that conflicts between young and old employees may occur:

Sometimes younger employees enter the organization with plenty of knowledge about laws etc., and I have sometimes noticed that older employee can become a bit skeptical... like I "have done this in my way for so many years"...(IP6)

Furthermore, one operational manager sees a lesser risk in hiring 55+ employees, since it is less likely that they will change jobs, than e.g. 25-year olds. Further, another operational manager describes that older employees are very proud of their job, but also resistant to change. When dealing with change projects she has received reactions e.g. "I don't want to participate in that" and "Yeah yeah OK, I hear what you're saying..." (with an undertone of not caring). The manager claims that these attitudes are deeply set and difficult to change, and that nothing is really done about them. She also experienced that one third of the team resigned, as they no longer felt needed after a re-organization. All of those who left were 55+. The operational manager views this as a possible result of the differences in educational level between many of the older and younger employees, i.e. that the older employees cannot accept that someone younger might know more about the job. Thus, there is an interplay between negative attitudes towards young and old people in the organization.

One more subtle negative attitude towards older employees we found is invisibilization, as one of the operational managers describes feeling invisible in manager meetings, and believes this is related to being an older employee and managing a department that is considered to be of low status:

Young managers come in...and they have a very difficult time seeing that we who are older also have something to give... they come in and gladly step on anyone in their way in order to reach their goals...(IP6)

To conclude, it seems that norms of negative managerial attitudes towards both young and old people do exist within the organization. We also see signs that attitudes towards

younger employees might be due to the fact that older employees may feel uneducated and unappreciated. However, it seems that young people are also often perceived as lacking practical experience, which ultimately creates tension.

5.3. Age management in practice

Furthermore, we also found a need to map out current practices regarding age and employment in the sub-cases. We found many examples of age management related practices, e.g. competence transfer (mentorship) between generations (experienced teachers to newly employed teachers), health benefits, health check-ups, re-employment of retired employees, the 80/90/100 program and outsourcing the more physically demanding parts of the job. However, we also identified some parts where there is room for improvement.

5.3.1. Preparation for retirement

One thing which we found was that there is a lack of preparation for retirement. We also found that there is insufficient knowledge regarding whether guidelines exist on these matters.

One operational manager however argued that it is not a good idea to start talking about retirement plans with employees too early, as it may "awaken the sleeping lion". Another operational manager mentions that the organization is not good at preparing retirement and that they might not start talk about it until a month before the person retires. She argues that this creates issues regarding the handing over of work responsibilities. This takes us to the next section of competence transfer.

5.3.2. Competence transfer

An example offered by one of the operational managers is that they are constantly developing process maps in order to make competence transfer to new employees easier. However, two other operational managers at the company indicate that they would need to overlap positions when employees are retiring to enable competence transfer, but are not allowed to. In contradiction, another operational manager mentions that the possibilities for competence transfer are better now and recalls how a specialist decided to appoint his "crown prince" many years before he was going to retire. The informant argues that the organization would need more examples of that kind, as competence transfer is usually very ad hoc and not at all

structured. The informant further thinks that the organization have to be more clear in pointing out what roles are key to the success of the organization, and ask these to take on more of a mentor role as well as spread their knowledge before retirement. However, she thinks that there is an unwillingness to do this since the employer would then have to show this, also in the wage they give to key employees. The informant argues that if there were more flexibility regarding wages, it would be easier to tell a specialist that the person is expected to act as a mentor in addition to performing the everyday tasks of the job.

Furthermore, we found that competence transfer exist in the city district council in a more structured manner. New employees are entitled to have a mentor, i.e. a more experienced co-worker who introduces them to the job. One of the operational managers mentions that this is a good way of making use of all knowledge and experience that older teachers have, and that it might make the job more motivating and less straining during the last years. Two of the operational managers also emphasize age diversity within teams as a success factor and operational managers at both the company and the administrative unit mention that they often try to pair up younger and older employees, so that the older more experienced employee can introduce the new employee to the work responsibilities.

5.3.3 Re-employment

Another example of age management related practices is that the organization re-employs their retired employees:

We actually have quite a number of retired employees in the organization...for example managers...when there is a gap or we have not been able to find appropriate candidates for a position, we have sometimes called and asked retired personnel if there is any interest in working, and then we have hired them on senior contracts.
(IP3)

However, it seems to exclusively be on a temporary basis.

5.3.4 Health checkups

Further, we found that accounts from both HR practitioners and operational managers that there are health checkups offered to employees at a certain age. However, one operational manager mentions that it is difficult to bring up health challenges related to age with employees. She has experience of having to ask another manager about an older employee who seemed to become forgetful and unfocused in periods of stress. The participant felt that

the other manager tried to excuse this and shy away from the topic, but she was not convinced as she felt that this had increased with age. The respondent herself has one employee who exhibits similar behavior. However, she has not brought this up with him, but rather just gives him easier tasks since "he soon will retire".

5.3.5. Outsourcing physically demanding work

Furthermore, one operational manager state they have not had to re-deploy anyone because of age:

We have had to re-deploy employees, but never because of age I think...we are able to outsource the more physically demanding parts of the job (IP6)

However, the same manager also mentions how there are limited possibilities to go from a "blue collar" to a "white collar" job, if you are physically worn out. The manager also mentions that it seems that there are mostly "white collar" employees who can control their own work situations to a high degree that work after the normative retirement age.

5.3.6. The 80/90/100 program

We further found another example of age management as the 80/90/100 program is used. The program, which you can apply for and use between the ages of 60-65, has been widely used and appreciated according to one operational manager. However, two of the operational managers find that the program is problematic for them in the sense that they are appointed a certain headcount in their budget, and that every employee counts as a full time position, even if they in practice work 80 %. One of them expresses this in the following manner: "Offer flexible work patterns if you want - as long as it doesn't affect my budget negatively." (IP7)

5.3.7. Equality policy

We also found that the organization has an equality policy where age is included, as stipulated by the Discrimination Act equality policies. However, amongst the 7 grounds of discrimination, little emphasis is being put on age according to one operational manager:

We work with equality questions... and if I am not mistaken age is one of the parameters...but you do not talk much about age from any direction really... (IP1)

5.4 Responsibility for age management

In order to answer our research question; "who and what influences how HR practitioners and operational managers relate to age and employment in the case setting?", we also found that it is important to investigate the role of HR practitioners and operational managers and how they cooperate regarding staff issues.

We found that one operational manager at the company mentions that the "soft" side of HR is gone due to downsizing, and that more HR responsibilities are now line manager tasks. The majority of the operational managers describe that they mainly discuss the more "heavy" staff issues with HR: "It is mostly rehabilitation...long-time sick leave...re-deployment...those type of things" (IP6)

Further, one operational manager mentions that his unit has a management policy, and usually contacts HR when there is a need to discuss any issues in the policy, but have never done this with age-related matters. We found a difference between the company and the city district council regarding how operational managers discuss staff issues between each other. The operational managers at the city district council mention that they discuss staff issues with other managers in addition to HR practitioners occasionally. However, a majority of the operational managers at the company mention that they have manager meetings in which they could discuss staff issues, but rarely do, as they focus on what they refer to as operational issues. Two of these managers however mention that they discuss staff issues with another operational manager on a less formal and regular basis.

Whilst a majority of the operational managers think that HR would need to create a policy and take the initiative to start working in a more structured way with age management, one operational manager also thinks that there have to be guidelines on a societal and political level for anything to happen.

5.5. Propositions regarding age management

Further, when investigating what norms that exist in the organization, we found that both operational managers and HR practitioners have identified several things that could improve.

As previously mentioned, the organization implements the 80/90/100 solution, which however is described as inadequate by many of the operational managers. Despite this, nearly all informants, including the external consultant who we interviewed, think that flexibility is

the most important aspect to make people work longer and something which should improve in the organization:

Allow reduced work time .. I think if you reduce it before retirement, say to 50%then I think many would stay between 65-66.” (IP6)

Another operational manager expresses:

It should not have to be all or nothing .. to work 100% or not at all ..instead you should be able to find ways in between.. both that people can work as substitutes but also that they could be offered part-time.. I can also imagine a version where you work a certain proportion and the other you function as a mentor. (IP1)

Depending on your role in the organization there seems to be varying options of changing tasks. An operational manager who spoke about her own situation emphasized the difficulty in changing jobs after a certain age:

..Who would hire a 62-year old?.. there is nothing strange about that and I have to consider how I would act in the same situation and it is probably in the same way. (IP11)

Another operational manager describes that an employee from another department changed roles at the age of 60 and was thus given other job duties. The employee started off by saying that he would only work until 63. Then he decided to stay one year longer every year, and when he was 67 he did not want to retire. The employer did not do anything to influence the employee’s retirement decision, but thinks that it was the change in role and responsibilities that gave the employee new energy and motivation for the job as well as that the employee felt included and needed. The same respondent mentions that the workplace used to be more age segregated socially, i.e. that employees would mostly talk to other employees in their age group, but that this has changed, partly because older employees are now ”younger in spirit”, which makes it easier to socialize across age groups. The manager recognizes that each generation has its own values, but that it is easier to find common understanding now.

5.5.1. Retirement decisions

We also inquired how the informants regard retirement in order to investigate if they perceive that the management could do anything apart from allowing more flexibility. We found that many of the operational managers identified the family situation as a factor that influences retirement decisions, e.g.: "I want to be able to spend time with my grandchildren when I have retired..." (IP11). One operational manager further mentions that having many hobbies is something that will make retirement a positive experience for the manager personally. One of the operational managers mentions that she does not believe that employers can influence retirement decisions, but that being able to work part-time a couple of years before retirement can prolong employment.

To conclude, we have found that there is an understanding of the demographic challenge amongst HR practitioners and that most have heard of the concept of age management, while the knowledge is lacking amongst operational managers. Furthermore, we found that some operational managers were uncertain regarding exactly what rules and policies that exist for older employees. Most operational managers also thought that HR has to create a policy and take the initiative to start working in a more structured way with age management. While there are no explicit age management strategies in the municipality, we have found examples of age management practices; e.g. competence transfers, the 80/90/100 program, health check-up for older employees and re-employment of retired employees.

Regarding prevailing norms, we found that negative attitudes related to age, both towards young and old people do exist, and that this might be due to the fact that the older employees may have an academic complex and that they feel unappreciated. However, it also seems that young people are often perceived as lacking practical experience, which ultimately creates tension. Furthermore, most informants referred to that flexibility could increase ability to cope with work. However, many operational managers also described that the 80/90/100 program does not function well.

6. Analysis and discussion

In this chapter we will analyze and discuss our empirical results with previous literature and our theoretical framework. As previously mentioned, we aim to describe a) how institutional pressures on organisations maintains as well as challenges current norms and practices

regarding age and employment, and **b)** how organisations can respond strategically to these pressures. We will also answer our research question; “who and what influences how HR practitioners and operational managers relate to age and employment in the case setting?”

We have analyzed the empirical results using Oliver’s model of strategic responses to institutional processes (1991). However, as our empirical results offer little material to analyze the fifth factor in Oliver’s model – context – we have chosen to structure our analysis around the four first factors – cause, constituents, content and control – and weave data relating to context into the other four categories.

Further, in order to fulfill our purpose and answer our research questions, we first have to map out the institutional pressures regarding age and employment. The first institutional pressure we identify is to **keep the status quo regarding age and employment**, i.e. not to work with age management. As age-discrimination is illegal, there is still pressure to provide employees with the same opportunities regardless of age, and to ensure equal treatment. The second institutional pressure is to **challenge the norms regarding age and employment, and to work actively with age management**. While still being pressured to provide employees with the same opportunities regardless of age, the organization is in addition pressured to take a proactive stance towards potential differences and possibly take affirmative action towards certain age groups.

6.1 Causes of institutional pressures

Oliver argues that resistance to organizational pressure will be higher if perceived economic gains and/or social legitimacy is expected to be low (see figure 3). We identify several legitimacy-related causes of the institutional pressure to maintain current norms and practices. Informants state that the organization’s recruitment efforts are targeted towards young people. Further, the retired employees are mostly re-employed on a very temporary basis even if the labor supply need is huge. We argue that one reason why is that it is perceived as socially irresponsible if the municipality took an active stand for making people work longer as there is a prevailing idea that older employees have to make room for younger employees (e.g. Kadefors, 2012). Although this does encourage later exits - which can be interpreted as good age management - it can also be perceived as a *pacifying tactic*, in the sense that the organization does not want the older employees to start feeling entitled to work after 67, as this is potentially perceived as at odds with the focus on young employees.

In addition to this, respondents emphasize discrimination and prejudice against young employees – often from older employees – the former being an employee group they focus heavily upon (Gothenburg municipality, 2015). Further, the prevailing youth ideal and obsession with age (e.g. Sjöberg & Mild Nygren, 2012) is an explanation to why more efforts are geared towards younger people. This indicates that the organization perceives a threat to its internal as well as external social legitimacy if it challenges current norms and practices. However, social legitimacy can also be threatened by not challenging the norms and practices, as there are concerns voiced that Sweden is age-obsessed and that old age is deemed as undesirable (e.g. Sjöberg & Mild Nygren, 2012).

Further, both indirect and direct discrimination on the grounds of age is prohibited. As the respondents – especially the operational managers – highlight that it is young employees who fall victim to negative attitudes connected to their age, the organization perhaps does not perceive itself to be age-obsessed in such a way that it impacts older employees negatively. As mentioned in chapter 2.5.2, concerns have been raised in that it is deemed more acceptable to be prejudiced against older people as everyone will eventually become old (Johansson, 2014). This type of institutionalized attitude is evident in the answer from the manager who asked theoretically “Who would hire a 62-year-old?”.

Furthermore, individualism is a national value (The Hofstede center, n.d.), which arguably demands that the individual should be able to choose to work longer. There have also been age management research interventions that e.g. the municipality has partaken in, and not following advice in scientific reports might make the organization seem less socially legitimate.

Oliver also argues that if efficiency and economic gain is assumed to be low, resistance to institutional pressures will be higher (see figure 4). Examples in our results show that several respondents report that it is taken for granted that no one is going to want long-term career development after the age of 50, e.g.:

I usually do not encourage my older employees to have training and development, because in general I find that they do not want any career development after 55. (IP6)

Not generally encouraging employees over a certain age to have training and development might thus be a way of ensuring that these investments do not go to waste, as respondents also claim that few people in the organization work above – or even until – the normative

retirement age in the organization. Previous research shows that life-long learning is an element of good age management (e.g. Naegele and Walker, 2006, p. 5-7) and that mental abilities may even improve with age (Ilmarinen, 2006). However, our results show that attitudes can act as barriers to offering life-long learning.

An operational manager also mentioned that there are limited possibilities to transition from a “blue collar” to a “white collar” job within the organization if the employee is physically worn out due to age. This could thus be interpreted as a strategic response with economic motives, which perpetuates current norms and practices in society at large (e.g. earlier retirement for those with physically demanding jobs). Another way of seeing it is as *acquiesce through habit*, which is consistent with general prejudice about older people. Another economically motivated practice is that the organization – according to one operational manager – does not want older specialists who could act as mentors to young/new employees to know that they are important, as they would then have to show that in the salary they offer. In this way, they might use *manipulation* to avoid changing norms and practices as it might lead to higher costs. Although the previous examples indicate that the organization perceives potential economic gains as low, one manager for examples mentions that she usually seeks to re-hire retired staff when she can’t fill a position:

We actually have quite a number of retired employees in the organization...for example managers...when there is a gap or we have not been able to find appropriate candidates for a position, we have sometimes called and asked retired personnel if there is any interest in working, and then we have hired them on senior contracts.
(IP3)

This can be interpreted as that the managers perceive both economic gain and efficiency in this practice, which is consistent with e.g. Walker (1997:5). However, this is not something that is offered to all employees who have retired, therefore norms and practices regarding the right to work after 67 are not challenged.

To conclude, it can be perceived as both socially legitimate, efficient and economically wise to maintain current norms and practices. However, we have also identified how challenging the status quo could lead to higher social legitimacy, efficiency and economical fitness for the organization. In order to make sense of how the organizations can priorities these demands, the constituents of the institutional pressure must be mapped out and analyzed.

6.2. Constituents exerting institutional pressures

Oliver argues that organizational resistance to institutional pressure will be lower if the organization is highly dependent on the constituent exerting the pressure. As the municipality acts on the instructions of the government, this is arguably the constituent that they are most dependent upon. Oliver also describes how organizations often face conflicting external pressures from different constituents, and that the greater the degree of constituent multiplicity, the greater the likelihood of resistance to institutional pressures. We find that there is also conflicting pressure from each constituent, not only between them, i.e. it is difficult for the organization to get clear signals regarding age management. For example, the government has commissioned retirement age investigations (SOU 2013:25; SOU 2012:28), which show that employees will have to work longer and organizations must work more with these issues.

The government arguably has both social legitimacy-related and economic reasons for exerting pressure on e.g. the municipality to implement better age management. On the other hand, no decision has been made to change the laws regarding e.g. retirement, and according to our results the municipality has not been given any clear instructions on what to do in the meantime. One explanation might be that the constituent itself might be under conflicting pressures regarding age management, as e.g. the high unemployment amongst young people and the currently high immigration rates of refugees are demographical challenges that might take away the focus from the age-related demographic challenge. Further, Scott (1983) argues that institutional pressure from the state often contains particularly conflicting demands.

One sign that the pressures from the government are not clear is that many HR practitioners only have a vague idea of what age management is, and none of the operational managers are familiar with the term or has heard discussions about the ageing population in the organization. At the same time, the municipality acts on behalf of the people, which makes public opinion an important constituent. Our results did however not suggest that the organization perceives pressures from public opinion to change current norms and practices. While age discrimination is arguably agreed by most to be unfair and unjustifiable, one must differentiate between the pressure not to discriminate and the pressure to actually change current norms and practices. Taken-for-granted beliefs about age such as the idea that old people must make way for young people (e.g. Kadefors, 2012), still pressures the organization not to invest in their older employees, thereby pressuring the organization to maintain current norms and practices.

Further, older employees themselves do not seem to be a constituent that pressures the organization to challenge dominant norms and practices. We did not find any examples in the interviews where older employees were mentioned as discussing these issues other than about their own situation. This lack of pressure from the group arguably most affected could be that the institutionalized beliefs in young age as ideal has an effect on attitudes towards older people, which makes it undesirable to claim one's belonging to that group. Instead, old age is something that individuals might try to conceal. The strong individualism in Swedish society (The Hofstede center, n.d.) can also explain why older employees do not exert organized pressure to make the organization implement better age management, as they might not be comfortable with being perceived as group members over individuals, in addition to feeling stigmatized (Friis et al., 2008).

Oliver also argues that if constituent multiplicity is high, the response will depend on whether conflicts are resolved, whether uncertainty can be reduced, and whether awareness of the institutional pressures is raised. Therefore, in order for the organization to be able to respond with *acquiesce*, to the pressures of constituents who want the organization to challenge current norms and practices, these constituents must first provide the organization with an understanding of the pressure and present a solution on how to resolve conflicting pressures. This could be e.g. the government showing the municipality that it can work with age management geared towards improving conditions for all age groups (e.g. Walker 1999) as this might ease conflicting institutional pressures, and resolve the tension created by conflicts between younger and older employees. As of now, age management is understood by many of the HR professionals in the organization as necessarily targeted towards older people, which means that age inclusive age management might not be perceived as a viable option.

Although constituent multiplicity is relatively low in numbers, the most influential constituent – the government – exerts conflicting pressures. We argue that this is a reason why the organization for example has been involved in age management projects previously and e.g. HR practitioners are aware of the potential effects of the demographical challenges, but still there is no age management strategy in the sub-cases. This, we argue, is related to the content of the pressures.

6.3. Content of institutional pressures

Oliver hypothesises that organizational resistance (i.e. *avoidance, defiance and manipulation*) will be higher if the content of the institutional pressure is not compatible with the goals of the organization and/or the content severely limits the organization's own freedom of choice (see figure 4). As Gothenburg municipality is such a large and complex organization, it is difficult to find a common goal for all its organizational units that are either compatible or incompatible with the institutional pressures surrounding age management. We argue that the content of the pressures to challenge dominant norms and practices regarding age and employment are compatible with the goals of the organization as these are to make sure there is a sufficient labor supply (interviews; Gothenburg municipality, 2015).

The current pressures to keep the status quo - i.e. legislation not changing to offer more protection and opportunities for employees over 67 – does not severely limit the organization's freedom of choice since it can still offer employees who they need to work on temporary contracts after the age of 67. However, if the upper age limit in the Employment protection act is raised, it might affect the public's definition of a normal retirement age, which would perhaps make employees who can work longer than they had intended to postpone retirement. This fits with the organizational goal of a sufficient labor supply. Even though none of the informants mentioned recruitment of older employees as a conscious age management practice, one manager thought that it is less risky to hire 55-year-old's, as they are less likely to change jobs than 25-year-old's. This shows that the content of the non-coercive pressure can be compatible also with manager goals.

Part of the institutional pressure to challenge dominant norms and practices is to also challenge perceptions of younger and older people as having certain traits. Our respondents give multiple tales of conflicts and negative attitudes to the other age group among younger and older employees, and many of the operational managers think that there are big differences between the two age groups: "...my older employees are very proud of their job.. but they are not eager to participate in change projects" (IP6).

This is a sign that the content of this pressure is compatible with organizational goals of resolving workplace conflicts. Further, the content of the pressure has the potential of increasing competence transfer, as many informants claim that old employees do possess valuable knowledge and experience and that mentoring could be a meaningful activity.

Multiple informants also mention that it is hard to introduce freshly educated young employees in the organization as there is a gap between theoretical and practical knowledge, as expressed by one of the HR professionals:

Managers talk about young employees as coming with a lot of knowledge from school and that they are all strategists...but they lack practical experience which makes managers frustrated... (IP4)

Since the content of the pressures to change current norms and practices is late exits, this fits one of the most important organizational goals, i.e. to secure the labor supply. On the other hand, the organization works hard to attract young employees (interviews) and thus the organization might perceive that changing its norms and practices is at odds with these ambitions. Also, many operational managers describe how some old employees have negative attitudes:

...I believe that young employees can become quite 'belittled'. According to existing 'rules' you are considered a new employee for the first 10 years. When you are young, you do not have the right to say anything...(IP2)

In addition, a few operational managers express how they have seen signs of decreased cognitive abilities in some older employees. Even though research (e.g. Ilmarinen, 2006) shows that while physics may decline, mental functions might even improve as people age, operational managers are more directly affected when age leads to decreased cognitive abilities in employees. One manager also said that it is difficult to bring up the issue of decreased performance abilities connected to age. Also, a few operational managers mentioned the negative effect the 80-90-100 program had on their operations: “Offer flexible work patterns if you want - as long as it doesn’t affect my budget negatively” (IP7).

This can explain why the HR practitioners all emphasized individuality over general age differences – they do not as operational managers relate to the content of the pressure to challenge current norms and pressures as something that could limit their freedom and be at odds with goals of stability in daily operations, instead HR practitioners can lean against the national value of individualism (The Hofstede center, n.d.). Further, HR practitioners are arguably more aware of the Discrimination act, and are therefore used to talking in politically correct way about social groups, in order not to raise suspicion that the organization discriminates anyone. To conclude, at least operational managers perceive the pressure to

raise the upper limit in the Age employment act as severely limiting organizational freedom of choice, even though it might be good for securing the labor supply.

However, in order to understand how conflicting pressures are responded to, we must also understand how the pressure is exerted, i.e. the control factor.

6.4. Control of institutional pressures

Oliver (1991) argues that when voluntary diffusion is low - i.e. when the content of the institutional pressure is not well spread among the organizational field - organizations will show greater resistance (see figure 4). There is of course legal coercion against age discrimination, but as mentioned in the literature review, it is quite rare for organizations to be convicted of this (Ellung, 2015). As previously mentioned, there is a clause in the law regarding the right to make an exception regarding equal treatment based on age when there are good reasons to do so. Even though this clause could be used to the benefit of older employees, it is also easy to interpret it the other way if an organization wishes to. Thus, there is legal coercion, but only regarding discrimination, and the coercion is neither strong nor absolutely clear. Further, Sweden was comparatively late with stating a law against age discrimination (Dimming, 2007), which might mean that the legal coercion has not yet become fully institutionalized. This is suggested by one example from our data which shows a respondent mentioning that they work with equality policies, but is not sure that age is one of the 7 grounds of discrimination.

We argue that there is even less legal coercion behind age management beyond the minimum requirement of not discriminating, as there is no legal coercion to take affirmative action towards under-privileged age groups. The Discrimination act is arguably targeted more towards lack of equal treatment rather than the obligation to take affirmative action. One reason that the organization might not even perceive the coercive control that does exist is that the average age is high and there are many older employees in the organization, which means that older employees are often in the majority, and it might be difficult to perceive that this group could then be discriminated or under-privileged. Instead, the majority of the informants talked about possible age discrimination only in terms of older employees discriminating younger colleagues.

Further, an alternative to legal coercion that is otherwise a strong pressure on the organization is agreements with the unions. Regarding age management, the stance of the unions is generally that society must focus to improve the work environment for groups that

retire early rather than strengthen the right to work after 67 (Andersson, 2015). This might explain why one manager said that no employees had had to be re-deployed due to age related issues as they could outsource the more physically demanding parts of the job, i.e. perhaps pressure from the unions make them focus more on improving the physical work conditions for groups with physically demanding jobs than on making people work after the normative retirement age.

As in addition, the voluntary diffusion of age management is low (SVD, 2012). - i.e. when the content of the institutional pressure is not well spread among the organizational field - the coercive control needed to maintain the status quo regarding age and employment is arguably not particularly strong. Instead, institutional pressure to maintain current norms and practices is voluntarily diffused to such a high degree that the response of the organization takes the form of habit. For example, our informants mentioned pull factors (e.g. family) as having an effect on retirement decisions, and the push factor of scheduling (i.e. not being able to work part-time). However, the informants did not mention the push factors of negative attitudes and lacking age management strategies. Neither did the organization seem to have guidelines for when and how to start talking about retirement plans. This indicates that the HR practitioners and operational managers do not perceive the full scope of their ability to affect retirement decisions. We argue that this is blind compliance of taken-for-granted rules or values (Oliver, 1991).

From our analyses of the four factors of *cause, constituents, content and control*, we find that a number of issues inhibit the pressures to challenge current norms and practices. First, organizational actors are little aware of this pressure, thus the causes of the pressure is not clear to them. In addition, the outcomes regarding social legitimacy, efficiency and economic gains are uncertain, and at worst negative. There is also a lack of powerful constituents exerting clear and unambiguous pressure. Lastly, there is a lack of coercive control and voluntary diffusion. All in all, this makes habitual perpetuation of current norms and practices a likely response according to the theory (Oliver, 1991).

6.5 Concluding discussion and suggestions

Our results indicate that there are several ways in which institutional pressures on organisations maintains as well as challenges current norms and practices regarding age and employment. We have also found that although there are conflicting pressures, the level of

awareness of other potential responses than habitual acquiescence to dominant norms and practices is low.

First of all we have by using Oliver's (1991) model on strategic responses to institutional processes shown that certain norms, attitudes and practices are taken-for-granted in the municipality. Further, we have identified institutionalized age prejudice to be an explanation why the organization focuses its efforts on young people, and that this acts as a barrier to better age management. However, judging from empirical data, the organization will have to be able to retain their older employees to a larger extent, while also getting an inflow of new employees. We therefore argue that it is important that prevalent taken-for-granted norms are made visible and questioned.

We have found accounts of a very strong institutionalized culture, which is perceived by operational managers as maintained by older employees who have worked in the organization for a long time. According to several operational managers, these older employees are change-resistant and negative towards younger employees. However, nothing is really done in order to combat attitudes, and they are also described as very hard to change. As e.g. Ilmarinen (2006b) argues, it is important that individuals take responsibility for their attitudes, while managers are crucial for the implementation of age management. We therefore argue that they need to take a larger responsibility than today if attitudes are to be combatted.

We also suggest that cooperation and communication between operational managers and HR practitioners has to improve. First of all, the two groups had divergent understandings of the impact of age, as operational managers perceived big differences between age groups while HR practitioners emphasized individuality. Judging from empirical data, HR is to a large extent perceived by the managers as having the responsibility for questions related to age management. However, operational managers only discuss "heavy" staff matters with HR.

Further, as previously mentioned, Furunes et al. (2011:1237) argue that managers have to focus mostly on day-to-day activities and that there is not much time which can be spent on strategic issues such as age management. Further, we found that while HR practitioners are more aware – i.e. more knowledgeable of age management and the demographical challenges – of the pressures to change current norms and practices, they have not necessarily given the topic much more thought than that. Operational managers on the other hand seem largely unaware of the pressures to change current norms and practices, although the content of the pressure arguably affects them more than the HR practitioners.

HR practitioners gave signs of relating to age as “nothing but a number” as they argued that everything is about individual differences. We argue that this is a sign that the organization either has not experienced strong enough institutional pressure to thoroughly discuss this, or alternatively, the organization is avoiding the pressure to challenge current norms and practices by reformulating the problem.

We argue that there are two broad understandings of age and employment in the organization:

Re-formulation 1: individual solutions. Individual retirement plans cannot or should not be affected by the employer. Employees who will soon retire might express that they lack energy, but so might younger employees. Age is nothing but a number.

Re-formulation 2: older employees are the problem. The organization is dominated by older employees, and young employees are made to feel unwelcome by change-resistant older employees. There is a conflict between the two groups, and one has to be prioritized over the other. Age is more than just a number.

It is predominantly HR practitioners who profess to the first understanding whilst the second understanding is more common among operational managers. This shows that HR practitioners and operational managers in the setting relate differently to age and employment. We argue that if HR practitioners and operational managers relate to age and employment in such different ways – in addition to only cooperating on “heavy” staff issues – the organization will not be able to respond to institutional pressures regarding age and employment strategically in order to fulfill organizational goals of sufficient labor supply as well as resolve generational conflicts that potentially decrease both organizational performance and employee satisfaction.

We can also see that the lack of discussion about staff issues among managers in the company means that the managers themselves, as well as the organization at large, are unlikely to understand that their individual experience relating to age and employment might be part of a bigger pattern. In conclusion, this makes the responses to institutional pressures regarding age and employment highly dependent upon the individual manager, and thus less strategic for the organization.

However, age management geared towards improving conditions for all age groups (Walker, 1997) could perhaps be an option for the organisation. A possible outcome of this is

that the organization could begin to challenge norms and practices regarding age and employment internally, in order to solve conflicts between age groups and increase competence transfer. This would allow them to focus on solving the urgent organizational problem of a lack of labor supply, as they have already concluded that this must be done by focusing on both age ends of the labor force (Gothenburg municipality, 2015). Additionally in this way, the organization can not only find a strategic response to institutional pressures to challenge current norms and practices, but even create new norms and practices related to better age management.

An obstacle to this is that age management was understood by many of the HR practitioners as targeting older people, which means that age inclusive age management might not be perceived as an option. We therefore argue that awareness and understanding of the concept has to improve in order for the organization to perceive challenging dominant norms and practices as meaningful.

Also, we suggest that the organization pays attention to organizational fit regarding age to e.g. recruitment and employer branding efforts. One question that we rhetorically ask is, how young does the organization has to be? If the average age in the organization is high, perhaps the organization should focus more of its efforts to other age groups as well as younger employees. We suggest that one reason why the organization focuses so much on young employees is that it imitates other organizations and reproduces habitual actions, instead of considering who they are as an organization.

Further, we argue that the case organization is in a similar situation to Vattenfall when they implemented an age management program, and can learn from this example if they decide to follow suit. Vattenfall is also a large organization that identified a need to respond strategically to institutionalized norms and practices regarding age and employment, in order to maintain their skills supply. The age management program Vattenfall implemented was successful. Further, we also described how another municipality implemented an age management program that was successful. However, it was also stated that a more continuous approach would be needed in order to change dominant norms and practices (Skoglund & Skoglund, 2005). This shows that age management is an on-going process and not just an implementation of a strategy.

This study has served to help organizations become aware of the institutional pressures that surround age and employment, thereby increasing the chance that they make strategic decisions regarding age management. This differentiates our study from previous studies, which often do not focus on barriers to implementing age management. There is a

need for further studies to also focus on older and younger employees' understanding of age and employment, i.e. to learn more about potential barriers to age management from other perspectives than HR practitioners and operational managers.

As this is a case study containing contextual and subjective opinions and accounts, the transferability of our results is limited, which is a common criticism of qualitative research in general (Gioia & Watkins 2015, p. 10). However, we find that although the views and experiences expressed in the results are unique to the respondents and to the case, there is no reason to doubt that Gothenburg municipality is representative for age management within the public sector in Sweden. In this sense, the findings might be applicable to a larger number of organizations. The study is also concerned with institutionalized attitudes and behaviors. These are institutionalized on a societal level, and should therefore carry relevance far outside of the case organization, even if there might of course be institutionalized behaviors and attitudes on the organizational level.

7. Conclusion

We managed to show that divergent understandings of age and employment between HR practitioners and operational managers – together with a lack of discussion among the two groups – inhibits the chance that the organization begins to challenge norms and practices by making a strategic choice regarding age management.

Our research question was:

Who and what influences how HR practitioners and operational managers relate to age and employment in the case setting?

We found that largely the same institutional pressures influence the two groups, but while HR practitioners relate to age and employment almost as a non-issue and emphasize individuality, operational managers tend to view old age among employees as something related to bad attitudes and scepticism towards younger employees. The divergent understandings are related to their different professional roles and the lack of communication on this topic between the two groups. Neither of the groups particularly recognize their agency in maintaining or challenging current norms and practices.

Thus, our most important practical as well as theoretical contribution is that we have showed how institutional pressures on organisations maintains as well as challenges current norms and practices regarding age and employment. Our data only partially allowed us to fulfil our purpose of also answering how organisations can respond strategically to these pressures. We found that the case organization mostly responded by habit, i.e. the least conscious response. Instead, we managed to find and analyze factors that inhibit a more strategic response. We argue that this contribution is equally valuable. Further, we offered suggestions for how our case organisation and other organisations can resolve barriers to age management, which can have positive effects on the societal, organisational as well as individual basis.

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9. Appendices

9.1. Interview guide

General questions

1. What are the main challenges in the organization when it comes to mental or physical work? What do staff report?
2. When you recruit, is it easy to find qualified staff?
3. What do you do to retain and develop the staff you have? What are your career opportunities / training opportunities?

Characteristics of older workers

4. Tell us about your older colleagues/employees. (Do you see any differences between older and younger? Strengths and weaknesses? At what age do you think one can be characterised as an older worker?)
5. Describe the age pyramid in your organization. What proportion of workers are over 55 years?
6. At what age do you think one can be characterized as an older worker?
7. At what age do you think it is desirable that employees retire?

Attitudes to age

8. Have you experienced prejudice related to age in the organization? against yourself or seen it happen to others? Who has these prejudices?
9. Do you see any differences between older and younger employees? Strengths and weaknesses?

Knowledge of age management

10. Have you talked about population ageing in the organisation?
11. Have you spoken about how it will impact staff development in the long term?

- Who in that case, talk about it and take the initiative?
- Who do you think should be responsible?

Age management activities

12. Do you have any initiatives directed towards older workers? (Eg wellness, scheduling, other tasks / redeployment)?

13. Are there any guidelines for when leaders of the organization is to talk to an employee pension plans?

14. What are the possibilities to work after the age of 67?

15. How do you talk about the challenges regarding employees whose health and / or performance become impaired during aging?

- Do you talk openly about such relationships?
- Even directly with the person?

16. Does it happen that older people themselves take up the opportunities and challenges associated with age? Wish the adjustments?

Skills development and transfer

17. Do you have any skills transfer between generations, such as mentoring?

18. Do you experience general differences in the approach to training and career development among employees of different age groups?

Concluding questions

19. How do HR and line managers to cooperate on these issues?

20. Is there anything you are hesitant regarding actual or potential interventions targeted at older workers? Give examples (What are the risks?)

9.2. Letter to the informants

Information about the study on age conscious leadership / age management

Age management is often defined as "actions that counteract age-related barriers and / or promote age diversity "(Naegele & Walker, 2006: 3), and usually international termed age management. Our study aims to to investigate age management in the Municipality of Gothenburg. Due to the major demographic changes taking place in Western countries (specifically that the average age of the population growing),age management may become an important strategic tool for organizations. Earlier research shows that the concept of age management is not widespread in Swedish organizations. Our study therefore aims to increase understanding and knowledge of the subject, specifically in the Municipality of Gothenburg.

We who are conducting the study are students of the Master program Strategic HRM (Human Resource Management) at the University of Gothenburg. We are also part of a larger project for Age Management, along with other master students and researchers. Our supervisor is Rebecka Arman who works at the department for Management & Organisation at the university.

The study's implementation

To achieve our purpose, we will conduct interviews with both operational managers as HR professionals within the City of Gothenburg and that is why we are inquiring you to participate. Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You can cancel your participation, at any time without giving reasons. You will additionally be completely anonymous.

The interview is expected to take between 1-1.5 hours. Therefore, we wish that you are available during that time span.

Further, in order to be able to focus on the interview, we wish to record it. However, this is voluntary on your part. The recordings will afterwards be transcribed and then erased. The results will be published in a thesis at Gothenburg University, which, if desired, we gladly share with you.

For questions do not hesitate to contact us at

xxx alternatively xxx or on phone number xxxx

Best wishes,

Sofia Widfeldt and Lisa Christenson

Gothenburg, March 1, 2016