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Embodied ageism: "I don't know if you do get to an age where you're too old to learn"

Sarah Vickerstaff [b], Mariska van der Horst [a,*]

[a] *Department of Sociology, VU Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands*
[b] *Division for the Study of Law, Society and Social Justice, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NZ, United Kingdom*

A B S T R A C T

More people are extending their working lives through choice or necessity and as a result there is an increasing focus on the experiences of older workers. Access to training and development at work are seen to be one way of maintaining the motivation, productivity and job satisfaction of older workers but at the same time we know that older workers typically get less training at work than younger members of the workforce. This article explores how ageist environments in society and in work organisations impact how older workers view the opportunities for training at work. Speech about training and development is analysed in semi-structured interviews conducted with 104 older workers, 25 line managers and 27 human resource and occupational health managers in the United Kingdom. Managers commonly spoke in ageist terms about older workers being less motivated or less able to undertake training and development. These stereotypes were also embodied/internalised by many older workers, who expressed the view that they were now 'too old' for training and/or promotion, either because of their career stage or because of the 'inevitable' physical and cognitive decline that comes with age and which makes learning new things more difficult. As access to training and development are recognised as one way of facilitating good and longer working lives, understanding the impact of ageist environments as well as direct discrimination against older workers is necessary to enable, encourage and motivate older workers to engage in development activities.

Introduction

As retirement ages rise and people stay in employment for longer, either through choice or because they cannot afford to retire (Fideler, 2020), experiences and opportunities in later working life increasingly come under the spotlight. Many governments are keen to encourage longer working lives and policies like rises in the age at which people can collect their state pension are designed to nudge people in this direction (for a wider discussion of such policies see Street & Ní Léime, 2020).

In this context, it is recognised that access to training and career development may have an important role to play in facilitating longer working lives by sustaining job satisfaction, motivation and productivity, encouraging job moves and helping the older unemployed back into work (Hyde & Phillipson, 2014; OECD, 2006; Picchio & van Ours, 2013). Recent research reiterates that receiving training is related to higher job satisfaction for both older and younger workers (Visser, Lössbroek, & van der Lippe, 2021). Nevertheless, it is widely indicated that managers privilege younger workers for training and development although the reasons why are debated (see below). Research also hints at the idea that older workers themselves may be disinclined to take up opportunities, but this is less well researched in the literature.

The context in which many organisations are operating has changed since a lot of the previous research was undertaken. In the United Kingdom (UK) we now have no mandatory retirement age, (more) legislation against age discrimination, and rising state pension ages (Phillipson, Vickerstaff, & Lain, 2016), so it is timely to consider how attitudes towards training and development for older workers play out in this context.

In this article we approach these issues by addressing how age in the workplace is articulated and how this may create a climate that can affect both what older workers are offered and their willingness to participate in training and development. The discussion proceeds in six parts. First, we briefly review the existing literature on older workers and training and development; second, we introduce the concept of embodied ageism; third, we describe the current study and the methods

employed; fourth, we provide the results; fifth, we discuss the findings; and, finally, we consider the implications of the research.

Older workers and training: existing evidence

There is a wealth of evidence which demonstrates that older workers get less training at work than other age groups (for example Carmichael & Ercolani, 2014; Hyde & Phillipson, 2014; Loretto, Phillipson, & Vickerstaff, 2017; McNair, 2010; Stokes, Bryson, Bewley, & Forth, 2015; Taylor & Unwin, 2001; Vickerstaff, Phillipson, & Loretto, 2015). Evidence on the role of line managers suggests that they play a significant role in privileging younger workers for training and development (see for example Beck, 2014; Martin, Dymock, Billett, & Johnson, 2014).

Previous research has focused on whether organisations discriminate against older workers when it comes to accessing training and development activities (for example Canduela et al., 2012; Lazazzara, Karpinska, & Henkens, 2013; Loretto & White, 2006; Van Dalen, Henkens, & Wang, 2015). Potential explanations for why organisations give older workers less training include the (perceived) rationality of such discrimination. For example, a persistent myth is that older workers will stay with the company for less time than younger workers (Findsen, 2015). A human capital argument based on this myth is that the expected return on investment in older workers is reduced due to proximity to retirement and therefore there is less incentive for employers to invest in training older workers (Carmichael & Ercolani, 2014). Alternatively, discrimination may be based on prevalent stereotypes about older workers, which include that they are less interested in training and development and are more difficult to train (Ng & Feldman, 2012).[1] As Carmichael and Ercolani point out, these two explanations may be mutually reinforcing; if managers believe older workers are harder to train, they will expect the gains from training to be less (2014).

There has been less focus on older workers' *own* attitudes to training and development. Some early research identified that older workers' views may be a factor in explaining lower rates of training. Cully, Vanden-Heuvel, Wooden, and Curtain (2000), for example, found with Australian data that older workers were more likely to feel that there was no need for further training and hypothesised that this could be because of already accumulated skills or that they judged their opportunities for promotion and advancement to be limited and hence the utility of training was reduced. They also suggested that a lack of confidence might be a factor inhibiting older workers. In the UK, Irving, Steels, and Hall (2005) interviewed both employed and unemployed older workers, and similarly found a self-deselection attitude that people felt they were too old for further training. This suggests what others have described as a degree of "collusion" between older workers and their managers to decrease access to training (McNair, Flynn, & Dutton, 2007: 6).

It is clearly important not to fall into the trap of seeing older workers as an homogeneous group (Smith, Smith, & Smith, 2010). Some variation will be related to gender and/or education, including identified gender differences in older workers' access to training, which in part reflects that women and men tend to work in different sectors of employment and women are more likely to work part-time (Carmichael & Ercolani, 2014; Lössbroek & Radl, 2019). We might also expect differences by profession and career. For example, in certain circumstances, there may be a 'low-skill equilibrium', where employers aim to keep prices low by relying on standardised production for which a limited skill-range is needed from most employees, reducing the incentive of the employer to invest in training and development. Employees in these jobs may also have little incentive to participate in training and development, as the employer is not seeking, nor willing to reward, higher skill levels (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013). Moreover, employers are mainly interested in topping up already existing skills,

and therefore may prioritise employees who already have more education (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013). Given the educational expansion in Great Britain, as well as other countries (Breen, Luijkx, Müller, & Pollak, 2010), this may affect the opportunities given to older workers. It may affect older workers' motivation for training also, as having less formal education may affect their perceived ability to learn (Smith et al., 2010). As Bown-Wilson and Parry (2013) commented, there has been little research on career motivation in older age groups, a gap they begin to fill in their study of managers and professionals. Their qualitative study demonstrates a range of motivations in older age, which we might expect to find in other sub groups of (older) workers.

What is clear from existing research is that age-related training gaps are likely to be an outcome of interactions between managers and the managed in particular contexts and are based on ideas about age appropriate activity. Most of the UK research elaborated here stems from before major national policy changes and the increasing normalisation of the assumption that as we live longer we should work for longer (Vickerstaff, 2010). In addition, (more) anti-age discrimination legislation has been enacted (Phillipson et al., 2016). We might therefore expect that perceptions of the relative utility of continuing training and development would have increased for both employers and employees. Our study looks at how training and development are talked about now that radical changes in legislation and policy have been made and tries to amplify how age is articulated in the workplace.

Ageism and embodied ageism

Part of how age is articulated in the workplace is related to ageism as this -ism is a common part of organisational life. Some of this has been referred to as chrononormativity; the strong expectations in society and in work organisations that appropriate behaviour is age-based (Leonard, Fuller, & Unwin, 2018). For example, young people take up particular starter jobs and training opportunities (like apprenticeships); mid-career people are looking for advancement and older people are 'naturally' coming to the end of their working lives. This age grading is reinforced by prevalent stereotypes. In their meta-analysis of the empirical evidence for six common age stereotypes of older workers, Ng and Feldman (2012) found some evidence of older workers being less willing to participate in training. How older workers respond to ageist stereotypes might be expected to have an impact on training and development in organisations but is rarely researched.[2]

A Dutch survey comparing the views of employers and the general public found that the general public confirmed stereotypes about older workers more strongly than employers (Van Dalen & Henkens, 2005). This has been referred to as a self-fulfilling prophecy where older workers subject to ageism start to behave accordingly (Van Dalen, Henkens, & Schippers, 2009), and might take the form of 'stereotype threat' when an older worker feels a risk of confirming a stereotype and therefore underperforms (Lamont, Swift, & Abrams, 2015; Steele, 1997).[3] It could also take the form of self-sabotage (Romaioli & Contarello, 2019), self-ageism (Swift, Steeden, Dias, and Randsley de Moura, 2021) or embodied/internalised ageism whereby older workers perceive themselves as being less productive and less competent because of their age. As Levy puts it, "research suggests that after a lifetime of exposure to a culture's age stereotypes, older individuals direct these age stereotypes inward" (2001: 579).[4]

Anyone who has lived in a social context in which negative images of

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[1] See also Posthuma and Campion (2009) and van Dalen et al. (2009).

[2] Exception being Maurer, Barbeite, Weiss, and Lippstreu (2008); on the impact of internalised age norms on mid-life careers, see Ferraro, Prussia, and Mehrota (2018); and on the position of 'older apprentices,' see Leonard et al. (2018).

[3] For research on how stereotype threat is related to exclusion from the labor market, see e.g. Kulik, Perera, and Cregan (2016).

[4] See also Gullette, M. M. (2013).

what it means to be 'old' are prevalent is likely to internalise age norms (Levy & Banaji, 2002).[5] In the existing literature, embodied/internalised ageism is an undifferentiated category; older workers may themselves believe and act upon ageist stereotypes but this is a static understanding: are all stereotypes equally embodied, do different stereotypes have different effects in particular settings for diverse people? Answers to these questions will help our understanding of embodied ageism, and provide a basis to tackle its effects. In this study, we will focus on one aspect of this: the role of age stereotypes and age relations in training and development of older workers in organisational settings.

To study embodied/internalised ageism as a dynamic process, we take a social relational approach. In the work setting, institutional ageism manifests through policies and routine practices where age norms are inscribed and taken for granted (for example 'the normal age' to reach a particular job position) (Martin et al., 2014).[6] At the same time, ageism shapes day-to-day interpersonal interactions. In this way, ageism is part of the organisational environment. Our approach to age in organisations follows Calasanti's theorisation:

> The concept of age relations conveys a similar sense of power relations as those based on gender, race, and ethnicity. In this instance, we observe that age serves as a social organizing principle such that different age categories gain identities and power in relation to one another (2020: 4).

This approach sees age as social, dynamically and continuously constructed, performed and reproduced through interactions, social norms, prevalent narratives and practices.[7]

Our aim was to research how age is enacted and reproduced by older workers and managers with respect to training and development. We examine (1) how managers frame issues around age and the training and development of their older workers and (2) how employees' views of ageing in general and their own ageing in particular are constructed and perpetuated in relation to training and development.

Data and method

This article is based on the reanalysis of individual semi-structured face-to-face interviews ($N = 156$) with employees ($n = 104$) and line managers, human resource and occupational health managers ($n = 52$) in UK based organisations. Interviewees were selected using a maximum variation sampling strategy out of employees aged 50 or over who volunteered to participate (cf. Patton, 1990). Managers were selected because older workers reported to them. The data were collected between 2014 and 2016 and interviews were held at their place of employment in a confidential setting during working hours. A typical interview was between 45 and 50 min, they were digitally recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

The semi-structured interviews covered a wide range of topics associated with extending working lives and the management of older workers: views on recent changes in public policies such as rising state pension ages, no mandatory retirement age and legislation against age discrimination were elicited as were experiences of discrimination and work or retirement plans for the future. Human resource and line managers were asked whether changes in public policy raised issues or concerns for their workforces. They were also asked whether they thought that any new initiatives were needed in areas such as training and career development for older workers. Employees were asked directly if older workers were treated differently from younger workers and whether they felt there was an upper age limit for the work they did:

it was in the context of these questions (but not exclusively) that employees typically talked about or were prompted to talk about training and development opportunities.

The qualitative data were analysed in multiple stages in NVivo 12. An initial deductive coding frame was developed based on the original project's broader research aims and empirical and theoretical interests (see Wainwright et al., 2019). However, there was also an inductive open coding approach so that themes and issues could arise from the data. In this process it became clear that employees and managers commonly employed ageist language and stereotypes about others and, in the case of employees, also about themselves. For this article a further coding process addressed comments and talk about age and about training and development specifically, as shown in Table 1.

The focus of this analysis is not on specific policies but on how employees and managers talk about age and training and development. Our premise is that how managers and employees speak about age and specifically about age and training and development gives us a window on the age environment and on how age is constructed and performed in the organisation.

In the analysis below employee interviewees are identified by gender, age and role; managerial employees by their role and the sector they worked in. Direct quotations are used as indicative of commonly expressed views or points unless otherwise stated.

Results

This section starts with discussing how both managers and employees engaged in ageist talk in general, before looking specifically at how age was framed with respect to training and development. We identified two distinct categories of comments about training and development, one focused around career stage and the other around competence.

An ageist environment: ageist talk

The managers

The human resource and line managers were all asked what the impacts of the changing public policy environment was for their areas of responsibility and whether they were experiencing any issues around capacity to work amongst older employees. Nearly every manager alluded to 'equalities legislation' (age is a protected characteristic under UK law) and/or their organisation's approach to issues of equality. They were keen to stress that direct discrimination either did not happen or was rare. In talking about the older workforce, however, there were recurring themes and the 'decline narrative' that with age comes less health and capability was ubiquitous:

> Because obviously with ageing comes ill health, perhaps dropping performance, mental abilities start to deteriorate, people forget things, whatever, that can happen (Line manager, hospitality sector).

> So people, you know, just generally aren't as capable at an older age (Line manager, engineering sector).

Along with allusions to increasing health issues, the language used by managers was also full of references to older workers having less energy, wanting to slow down, not wanting to take on new things. Such comments were often made in comparison to younger groups in the workforce:

> I think that the experiences and knowledge is there, but I do think that's sometimes weighed up against the energy of the younger generation coming through and their up to date knowledge and their ability to retain things (Human resource manager, hospitality sector).

There were also many remarks about the older workforce finding change difficult and not having the technological skills of younger

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[5] See also Ayalon (2022) and Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko (2016)
[6] See also Krekula (2009) on age coding practices
[7] For further discussion of this, see Calasanti (2020), Calasanti and Sleven (2001), Gullette (2004), Krekula, Nikander, and Wilinska (2018), Riach (2007), and Vickerstaff and van der Horst (2021).

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Table 1
Framework for qualitative analysis.

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
RQ: How is age talked about? RQ: To what degree do older workers and management accounts involve positive or negative stereotypes about training and development for older employees?	Code for comments about age and access to training and development, willingness or motivation to train and experience of training and development.	Review coded material from stage 1 and code for: 1) stereotypes about age: memory issues, physical capability, productivity, attitudes towards training and development and IT, dependability, expertise, knowledge, 2) for language about age	Review codes, and differentiate between employees and managers. Identify any common or particular language forms.	Develop conceptual categories

cohorts. At the same time, many managers were also keen to point out the benefits of mixed age teams and the advantage that older workers had in terms of experience and reliability. These latter attributes are often seen as good soft skills but may be unwittingly framed in an ageist manner:

> they've really come on [an older worker who has been redeployed] and actually ended up as real sort of steady–, they're not going to be the highfliers, you know, that's for the youngsters with the ambition, but, you know, people who are really steady, lovely customer service manner about them, trying to be as helpful as possible, will ask questions, you know, and you thought, yeah, that's a good reliable steady person (Line manager, local government).

The employees

Age-based stereotypes were also referred to by some of the employees. Even if they did not necessarily believe the stereotype themselves, they were affected by what they imagined others would think.

> I've thought about that as well, looking for mobility into some of their organisations, just for the last couple of years, and then I think, well, is this organisation going to need an old fart to, for the last two years, knowing that he's only popped over here until he gets retired (Male, 57, managerial employee).

> I mean if you're looking for another job and you're over 50 then you're at the bottom of the pile. They're going to think, "Well we're going to have this guy, he's only going to be with us for a few years and then he's going to retire, he's going to be ill health," and various things. So you tend to get overlooked, which is why I'm sort of stuck in, you know, not being able to move out too much that way, so there's that problem (Male, 58, managerial employee).

Many interviewees expressed a fear of being viewed as old and used judgmental language such as 'pottering about', 'being a dinosaur', 'doddery' in describing themselves or other older employees. Respondents were clear that being older is negative in society:

> society views anyone over 50 anyway as past it. You ask a 20-year-old what 50 is, you know, he's a…he's a dinosaur (Male, age undisclosed, manager in engineering sector, interviewed as an employee).

> The only thing I worry about sometimes is–, is looking old, I know that's a vain thing to say, isn't it? You know when you're surrounded by, you know, young girls that–, that come and join the team or the company, they're very young and pretty and whatever, that's the only thing, sometimes I feel like do other people think my God, you know, this old woman working here and… And as I get older and I look older and older and older will they think to themselves… (Female, 53, white collar worker).

For some who thought themselves lucky because they felt that they did not look their age or that they could 'pass' as being younger, the ageist climate manifested in a different way:

> No, so I blend in with the 40s, I still wear jeans and I'm still clinging on there (Female, 64, blue collar worker).

And because I'm quite fortunate, I'd say, I'm not being big headed but I don't look my age if you know what I mean, I feel it but I don't look it. So I kind of get away with it (Male, 49, blue collar worker).

Age and training and development

Training and development is a potentially broad category of activity. It includes policies around career development and progression, which may involve specific training or other opportunities to expand skills and experiences. It also covers job specific training and more general training such as health and safety or training around specific new policies or processes in the organisation. In our interviews, we were asking about training in the company rather than people being sent off or sponsored to undertake external education or training.

A number of managers alluded to the cost-benefit of training older workers. They questioned the economic value of developing older employees and in one instance gave the example of standard training taking longer with an older recruit:

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

> it's going to take us about a year and a half to train this person and then you sort of need about three years productive driving to make your money back on the investment going in, and we did take–, our oldest trainee, if you like, was 59 and from internal, he'd been a conductor and he was sort of flying the flag, like okay, no age limit. But he just had bad back problems and his training took twice the time it should have taken (Line manager, transport sector).

In a context where training budgets are tight, these kinds of views may lead to direct discrimination, as one manager commented:

> So if you're rationing something then you have to make some decisions about who's going to get the most out of it, which is harsh but that's the reality, really (Line manager, local government).

As noted in the introduction, lack of motivation or interest in training is a commonly held stereotype about older workers. Therefore, the assumption is that older workers are not only discriminated against, but also are less motivated themselves to participate in training and development. In our data on how managers and employees themselves talked about their motivation, two distinct categories of comments about age in the context of training and development were identified: a 'too old for' (TOF) narrative about career stage and one about competence. We discuss these in turn.

TOF narrative about career stage

Unsurprisingly, most line managers and human resource managers said that training opportunities were equally and fairly available to all but in answering questions about this it was not uncommon that they invoked familiar stereotypes, such as about lack of motivation amongst older employees:

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

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

The managers often made reference to older workers being at a stage in their working lives where they were not looking for new opportunities or further career progression, they were 'seeing their time out' or just wanting 'a steady end to their career' or 'coasting':

I think certain individuals, as they get older and more established in their role, choose not to pick up on every opportunity that's put before them, but the excitement comes for us as managers for the younger guys who are, "Yeah, what can I do? Give us more, can I do that, can I do this?" and that keeps that process going. […] if the older guys don't want to pick up on it, it's not because it's not available and we would hold it back for them, it's definitely available but sometimes their attitude or their energy towards it is less so than the guys further down the chain (Male, 50, line manager in hospitality sector, interviewed as an employee).

This sort of view was often seen as commonsense by the managers: older workers do not want the stress or pressure they are not seen as 'hungry' and 'they're just geared up for retirement'.

For employees, this narrative was also visible. A minority of employees felt that managers probably made judgements based on age or felt that they personally had not been given an opportunity because of their age:

But I do think they tend to, yes, young men in particular, they do like to progress them. They're more likely to get the training, they're more likely to get promotion (Female, 56, white collar worker).

However, a significant subgroup of employees expressed similar views to managers about having done enough and/or not needing (more) training as they knew how to do their job, making them unmotivated for career development or progression.

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

When I have my yearly review with my line manager, he says you know, "Are you okay where you are? Do you want to progress anywhere?" I say, "No I'm happy to sit here until I retire, thank you very much" (Female, 53, blue collar employee).

In some cases, this sort of response was from someone who had downshifted into their current role precisely to reduce their level of responsibility or because they did not want to advance because they liked the job they were in. For some manual workers, it was a recognition that their work did not change very much and they knew how to do it. It is also important to acknowledge that some work based training can be rather boring and seen as going through the motions. This suggests that for some the apparent lack of drive may be more a judgement about their career paths, a commitment to their existing role, or a comment on the training being offered, rather than any age-related diminution of motivation; such expressions might well be found in workers of any age. For others in our sample they identify it as explicitly age-related:

But yeah I think, you know, some of it probably is my age thinking, you know, I'm–, have I had enough of this, I haven't got that drive (Female, 55, white collar employee).

It is not a safe assumption however that because someone does not want further development that they are under-performing in their current role:

At my age I really don't want to go up another grade to be honest, I'm not looking for a career [laughs], you know, I've done career if you like, but I'm 100% committed to what I do, and I always give 110 (Male, 57, managerial employee).

It is important to note that not all older workers did not want to change jobs and develop anymore. Some employees said they were motivated and resisted the stereotype that as they aged they became less interested in training and development opportunities or became less trainable:

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

TOF narrative about competence

As discussed above, the managers readily commented on older workers being less able to grasp technology, being resistant to change, and generally being slower. In relation to training and development this was expressed often in capability terms.

I suppose one of the things I would have picked up on is the ability to pick up the rate of change and everything that's going on. My staff at the younger end of the spectrum seem to absorb it quicker and get on with things more than the older members of staff (Line manager, local government).

Now my own personal evidence would be, I think there is probably a drop off in performance once people get to a certain age (Line manager, local government).

Some managers gave specific examples in which they attributed someone's difficulties with training to their age:

Now she is a little bit older, she's in her mid-fifties, and she couldn't get the amount of information that she needed to take in (Line manager, local government).

Employees were aware of this ageism amongst managers. Some gave examples:

Now training, I think it was perceived, and I think it was a wrong perception, that these people had no experience of working on computers, which is completely wrong because those guys like everybody else were going down Tesco's and Curry's buying laptops and desktops and playing around on Facebook and YouTube just like everybody else. And it was a wrong, inaccurate perception of senior managers at that time, seeing these guys are more used to chipping out words into slate blocks with a hammer and chisel than working on a laptop (Male, 56, supervisor).

The employee comments also reinforced the views expressed by managers and contained remarks on competence and the embodied assumption that older people are necessarily less productive and less able to learn.

It's working on a computer all day, every day, it's fairly concentrated and I think your levels of concentration can reduce when you get older, in some ways. You find that you need to get up and walk away from the screen regularly because your eyes get tired, your head aches a little bit more, whereas you see some of the younger people they just sit there […]. So I think there is a time when you need to sort of say to yourself, in that respect, "Enough is enough" (Male, 60, white collar employee).

This observation did not seem to be based on individuals telling this man he was less productive and regardless of whether it is true that he needs more breaks than some other colleagues, he attributes this to age and thinks he is less productive and that this inevitably relates to his age. Throughout the interviews there are many references to the decline narrative that with age comes lessening capability:

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

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

I think there's a level as you get older your ability to absorb, maybe on–, maybe there's a couple of things, maybe medically because of the age, maybe there's some, you know, like slowing down of the learning process within us. Maybe that's self inflicting 'cause we put up a barrier, oh I'm 60 so I shouldn't be doing this now, so maybe I think there's a bit of psychology in there that says, that you say you can't but you actually can. And maybe it's just straightforward actually no, I don't want to (Male, age undisclosed, managerial employee).

These comments reveal an element of concern that people felt visible as an older worker and worried that people would expect them to be slower or less able. As one manager noted, it might be necessary to actively manage these concerns:

but you need to create an environment where people are not too ashamed to say, "Actually, I could do with a bit of a refresher," you know, and stick your hand up, rather than, "Oh my god, these kids are overtaking me and, oh, I feel a bit inadequate" (Line manager, local government).

Discussion

In the interviews, training and development activities appeared formally accessible to all employees regardless of age and a majority of respondents affirmed that they did not think that age was a factor in *availability* of training. In practice, interviews with managers revealed that stereotypes about older workers regarding their motivation or ability to train were common, as was the view that older workers found technology particularly difficult. They also expressed the assessment that it was less cost effective to invest in training older employees if they were heading for retirement. This confirms existing quantitative and qualitative research that the gatekeepers of training and development opportunities in organisations, like all of us, are prone to ageist assumptions about the value of training for older employees (Martin et al., 2014). None of the managers interviewed alluded to the fact that it might become more important to train and develop older employees in the context of extending working lives.

What has been less researched is what employees make of these ageist assumptions and the extent to which they may deploy them as well. Some of the employees recognised the stereotypical attitudes of managers (and the wider society) and revealed the potential impact of ageism in that they assumed that *others* felt that they were too old to progress or make career changes; rather than risk failure, an older worker may simply avoid a training opportunity.

Previous research on the impact of ageism has pointed to the importance of self-ageism or internalised ageism, in addition to direct age discrimination and stereotype threat (Swift, Abrams, Lamont, & Drury, 2017). The concept of self-ageism has been understood as the individual holding negative self-perceptions based on age (for recent discussion see Ayalon, 2022). The visibility of age and negative associations with being older was striking in the data across all occupational levels and genders.

Through the examination of language and talk, we have been able to identify a finer- grained understanding of embodied ageism as being socially reproduced and having different components. In relation to training and development opportunities, these were narratives about being too old for further career progression as well as accounts about being too old to learn and train. In practice, these two versions of 'too old for' are probably intertwined but they have different implications for strategies to overcome the resistance to training induced by embodied ageism.

An important finding from the rich data set available was of course variability amongst the cohort of older employees: there were people

working out their time to retirement and others who were highly motivated for further progression. People recognised that managers fell back on stereotypes whilst also deploying them themselves. Age and its meanings were contested and being worked through on a personal and a managerial level. We had a wide range of employees in terms of job levels, from routine manual through skilled manual to white collar, supervisory and managerial but the way in which they talked about age was, perhaps remarkably, similar, both in general and in relation to the two versions of the 'too old for' narratives. This was true across genders.

It is necessary to comment on an important limitation of our data. We have a relatively large dataset for a qualitative study and broad variety of employees in terms of job roles but they were interviewed in the specific context of UK policy and law and questions were framed with respect to this location. Another setting might produce different orientations and existing research suggests that while some aspects of ageism are universal, there are specific nuances from country to country (Abrams, Russell, Vauclair, & Swift, 2011). It would be very interesting to see whether studies in other cultural and policy contexts produced similar results. We were also analysing talk about age and training in general, were not asking about specific examples of training that employees had undertaken. It would also be useful in future research therefore to investigate how employees and managers talk about specific training and development that they are undertaking or being offered. This is likely to extend our understanding of the motivations and aspirations of different groups within the workforce.

Implications

Governments across Europe are calling with increasing urgency for employees to extend their working lives and are implementing a range of policies designed to encourage or nudge people to delay retirement (Street & Ní Léime, 2020). It is widely agreed that continued access to training, development and career progression will be significant in keeping some older workers in employment for longer (Hyde & Phillipson, 2014; OECD, 2006; Picchio & van Ours, 2013; Visser et al., 2021). This study confirms earlier research that managers perpetuate ageist assumptions about the suitability of older workers for development and career progression activities, so there is clearly a need to continue to counter the impacts of ageism in organisations through training for managers. This may be especially the case given that training budgets in organisations are invariably under scrutiny, and under these pressures ageist assumptions may play a larger role.

The research reported here focused on a relatively neglected aspect of the role of ageism in inhibiting older workers access to training and development, namely the ways in which embodied negative views of age may affect orientations towards development activities. Organisations and society more broadly may want to tackle age stereotypes in order to keep older workers motivated to stay in work (cf. Bal et al., 2015). The research reported here suggests that this must also include an awareness of how older workers themselves may restrict their demand for, or resist, training and development because they expect everyone else to judge them as too old for progression or they have internalised a sense that they are too old for further career development or they fear diminished capability. Unconscious bias training on how we all think about and articulate age would open up discussions about how entrenched and normalised ageism is.

Interventions designed to encourage older workers to engage in training and development might usefully engage with the 'too old for' narratives we explored here. Regarding the view that older workers may not be interested in further career development or progression, the approach could focus on appraisal and mid-life career discussions which may determine that the individual is indeed happy with the status quo or identify possible avenues for further development (Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), 2022). Given that older workers are likely to experience and recognise the ageist environment in their workplace it is also important that managers seek to create an open and reflective

culture in which it feels safe for older workers to talk about worries related to age. Opportunities to explore these issues may counter the assumptions that everyone past 50 is on the slow road down to retirement. It might also show that organisations retain an interest and investment in its older employees and thereby encourage people to think about their working lives going forward (McNair, 2010: 124; NIACE, 2015).

It would also be desirable to critically assess the training being offered and whether resistance is based on a negative assessment of its worth. It may be the case that the older workers' judgement is that the training offered adds nothing to their existing role or capabilities (Smith et al., 2010). As Beach et al. (2021: 11) commented: "Employers must clearly demonstrate the value of training to help workers understand how it will enrich their experience and performance".

With respect to tropes about age diminishing one's capacity to manage or learn from training and development opportunities, it may be necessary to look at how the training is framed and delivered in order to counter negative stereotypes. Creating 'a general expectation of training' in the organisation may counter the idea that it is just for the younger members of the workforce (McNair, 2010: 108). Encouraging interactions between generations in the workplace may serve to demonstrate that individual capabilities and aptitudes do not conform to ageist stereotypes.

The prevalence and impact of ageist assumptions in society shape the world of work. These ageist assumptions have to be addressed head on if older workers are to be able to thrive and continue to develop in the workplace.

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Authorship declaration

Both authors have made a substantial contribution to the study design, analysis of data and intellectual content and argument. They have both approved this version of the article.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Data availability

The dataset analysed for this study can be found in the UK Data Archive, with reference SN852868. https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/studies/study?id=852868.

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