

THE PROFESSIONAL SITUATION OF SENIORS IN THEIR OPINIONS AND THE OPINIONS OF EMPLOYERS

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Objective: To assess by managers the main professional competencies of older employees and compare them with the competencies of younger employees.

Diagnosing what percentage of workers aged 50+ are employed in the companies represented by the surveyed managers.

Assessment of the professional situation of employees aged 50+ by seniors and employers. Gathering information about the work they do, i.e. determining whether it requires professional development, whether they have the opportunity to develop their competences, also what the relations are like between young and older employees in the company, whether they encounter age-based discrimination.

The survey verified the opinions of seniors regarding their willingness to continue working after reaching retirement age.

The aim of this article is to make managers aware of the need for rational use of labour resources, especially since in the next 10-20 years employers will have to face the problem of a strong decline in labour supply in Poland.

It highlights the fact that older workers are superior to younger ones in many ways. It can therefore be stated that effective age management in a company requires the use of such activities that will allow the best use of the advantages of older workers and minimize their disadvantages.

Methodology: The research method used was surveys and the research tool was survey questionnaires prepared using Google Forms and given to middle managers to fill in, and employees 50+¹.

Findings: Managers express a positive opinion about the competences of older workers, but at the same time they rarely employ them in their companies. Perhaps they do not know the tools and methods of using them to persuade employees to continue working. At the same time, employers do not admit to ageism in the labor market. Their declarations indicate that they are open to employing workers over 50, although reality does not confirm this fact.

Older workers, when asked whether they want to continue working or give up work completely after retirement, in most cases intend to be professionally active. Over 60% of respondents want to work (including over 40% full-time) and only 27% declare their intention to completely give up work after reaching retirement. And in this case, the declarations do not correspond with reality.

¹ When surveying employees aged 50+, the publication Age discrimination on the Polish labor market – diagnosis, Polish Economic Institute, Warsaw 2021, was used.

Limitations/implications. There is a lack of “hard” evidence that age management is actually effective, which could clearly convince the employer that its implementation will also bring benefits to their company. The effectiveness of the actions (related to age management) used by companies should be assessed. Conduct a post-implementation evaluation of the tools used. These would be suggestions for future research.

The limitation of professional activity of people aged 50+ is also the lack of a comprehensive senior policy in Poland. Despite the fact that since 2012, which was designated the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations, the importance of education and coordinated actions in this area has been increasingly emphasized – few initiatives are undertaken in this area. The effect of this is the failure to use the social capital that older people have. There is also a lack of organizations and institutions responsible for undertaking work activating seniors in the area of adaptation to old age – not only in Poland but also in Europe. Moreover, to date no source of financing has been indicated that would allow for the adaptation of working conditions to the needs of this population.

Only 3-9% of respondents said that they had witnessed or been the subject of age-based discrimination in the workplace in the last 5 years.

Practical implications. The research results in the conviction that the largest employment reserves currently exist among the elderly. The share of employment of people aged 55-64 is only 31.6%, while in Sweden, for example, it is over 70%. In the coming years, employers will be forced to face the problem of a strong decline in employment.

It is therefore about management actions undertaken by employers that will make it possible to retain older employees in their professional work, but not by subsidising (explicitly or covertly) their employment, but by using their strengths and weakening the disadvantages of older people, making it possible to ensure the profitability of their employment.

Social implications. It can be assumed that the conclusions drawn from this research will influence social attitudes towards older people, business owners, management staff and will be free of ageism. They will also influence the attitude of older people towards work.

It is very important to stimulate the activity of all those people who, as they age, gradually move into the group of older workers and over time become inactive.

The survey results indicated that only a small percentage of respondents agree with the statement that young and old people function together in their workplace. This makes it difficult proper intergenerational relations in the workplace. It is worth considering creating places where older and younger people can (and will want) to exchange experiences.

Originality/value. Combating age discrimination by employers and co-workers. The target group is business owners, managers and older people who, upon reaching retirement age, withdraw from professional activity. Poland has not only the lowest rate of professional activity of 50+ but also the lowest retirement age. The average age of withdrawal from the labour market is lower than the statutory retirement age, as a result of which more than half of people of pre-retirement age remain outside the labour market (early retirement, disability pensions, pre-retirement benefits, etc.). On the one hand, it seems that employers are convinced that the main goal of employees 50+ in the coming years is to end professional activity and retire. On the other hand, the surveyed respondents declare that after acquiring retirement rights they will continue to work, often full-time.

The conclusion is that both sides are unable or unwilling to use the opportunities they have.

Keywords: older workers, ageism, employers, competences, age discrimination, age management.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Population ageing and low fertility have been considered a threat to the labour market in Western Europe for over 30 years. The resulting **decline in labour resources threatens to cause a serious shortage of workers and a collapse of the pension system in the near future**. Growing awareness of this problem is changing the objectives of the labour market. In many countries, one of the main priorities of this policy is to increase the professional activity of older people, and age management in the company is considered an important factor in achieving this.

The work of older people has always stirred deep social controversy, which was most clearly revealed in the disputes over the statutory retirement age. In Poland, an attempt to raise it at the beginning of the 21st century ended in failure. As a result of the elections, the statutory changes that extended the period of work necessary to obtain a pension were withdrawn.

However, problems remained. Labor shortages began to appear in many segments of the labor market (Bednarski et al., 2020), which was associated with the phenomenon of rapid withdrawal from employment of people who had reached retirement age. Research carried out as part of the SHARE project (Perek-Białas, Zwierzchowski, 2019) shows that in 2017 in the group of 60-64 years the employment rate was still 25.8%, but in the group of 65-69 years it was only 5.5%. This means that after men obtain retirement entitlement, a significant exit from the labor market occurs by older people.

It seems that the tensions related to the growing share of older people in society will grow. At the end of 2020, people aged 60 and over already constituted 26.6% of the entire society, and in 2050 it will be about 40% of the entire population (GUS, 2021). And it is difficult to expect a reversal of this trend, because it is the result of the so-called second demographic transition (Bednarski, 2022).

This means the emergence of numerous socio-economic problems, among which the issue of seniors' work occupies an important place. Their work can bring important benefits for the economy and for the interested parties themselves.

2. Definition of an older person and age management

Management **refers to a set of activities within enterprises and institutions that allow for rational and effective use of existing human resources, including older employees** (Sztanderska, 2008).

There is an urgent need in Poland today to extend professional activity from the perspective of:

- enterprises – because they will be faced with growing shortages of employees in the coming years and because, along with the premature departure from employment of older people, enterprises lose the human capital acquired by these people through many years of professional experience,
- employees – because under the pressure of new pension regulations (resulting in low pensions in the event of early exit from the labour market) they will be more interested in longer professional work,
- society – because we are facing the collapse of the pension system and public finances if the period of professional work is not significantly extended.

Age management can thus encompass both the employer's attitude towards older workers and the attitude of older workers towards work and career. In my research, the main emphasis was placed on those aspects of age management that relate to employers and are therefore important for human resources specialists and company management/owners.

It must be remembered, however, that it is very important to stimulate the activity of all those people who, as they age, gradually move into the group of older workers and become inactive over time.

In order to increase the employment rate of older people, it is necessary to weaken the negative impact of two groups of factors (Walker, 1985; Funk, 2004), i.e.:

- push factors – from employment by ceasing to place professional demands on older people that they cannot meet and by eliminating their worse treatment in comparison to younger employees, e.g. in the area of professional advancement or access to training,
- pull factors – from employment by limiting the possibility of early retirement and introducing a strong dependence of the amount of the pension on the age at which it is received.

Focusing on the employer's actions, the perspective of counteracting the displacement from employment should be adopted. This refers to such management actions undertaken by employers that will allow older employees to remain in professional work, but not by subsidizing (overtly or covertly) their employment, but **by using the advantages and weakening the disadvantages of older people, enabling the profitability of their employment.** To this end, it is necessary to be aware of the potential advantages and disadvantages of older employees.

However, it should be clearly emphasised that age management should not be treated as a policy of preferring older people – which would be inconsistent with the regulations prohibiting discrimination, including on grounds of age – but only as a policy of equalising opportunities for people of different ages.

Since age management aims to increase the employment of older people, it is important to define who is considered an older person.

There is no clear resolution of this issue in the literature. Some authors of studies and publications on the situation of older people in the labor market include people who are over 40 or 45 years old in this group, others consider 50 or 55 years old as the cut-off age, while still others consider retirement age to be 60 or 65 years old (Furunes, Mykletun, 2005).

The UN and WHO define older workers as people aged 45 and over who are gainfully employed (Sztanderska, Litwiński, 2008).

In Polish studies and publications, people aged 50 and over are generally considered older (e.g. Rysz-Kowalczyk, Szatur-Jaworska, 2007; Schimanek, 2006; Mól, 2008). For the purposes of my own research, I have also adopted this classification.

Barnett, Spoehr and Parnis (2008) based on their own research findings state that no age limit will be a good way to separate those who are fully capable of working from those who are already limited, because there are many differences in the susceptibility to illness and injury due to individual health and physical condition as well as genetic factors. However, the age limit can be treated as a general guideline that allows for comparison of different groups of employees for research purposes.

It should also be noted that **actions towards employees are most effective when they are spread over the entire period of professional life**, due to the long-term impact on the ability to work of factors such as: health promotion and disease prevention, training, education, continuing education and equipment of the workplace. With this approach, setting an age limit is not necessary. **The goal of age management is important – to maintain professional activity at least until retirement age or even longer.**

For this reason, perhaps, most publications on age management do not specify the age limit above which employees should be covered by activities supporting their ability to work (e.g. Naegele, Walker, 2006; Taylor, 2006). They only use the general term “older employees”, which can be treated as a kind of shorthand for people whose work efficiency is relatively lower due to the decline in efficiency that progresses with age or due to discrimination on the part of the employer, e.g. in the form of lack of access for older people to training and professional advancement. This is therefore a certain simplification, because after all, not all older people are less productive than younger people. Supportive activities should therefore be directed not at older people but at people with limited work efficiency due to age, because otherwise they could be considered a manifestation of discrimination against younger employees, i.e. an illegal action.

Moreover, it is often emphasized that age management policy (or at least some of its tools) should apply to all employees regardless of age, i.e. it should cover the entire period of an employee's professional career (life course) approach (e.g. Taylor, 2006).

3. Health status of seniors

In developed countries, both indirect indicators (life expectancy) and direct indicators (disability, frequency of serious illnesses and hospitalizations) indicate progressive improvement in health (Lutz, Scherbov, 2003). Not only is life expectancy longer, most of the increase in highly developed countries is the result of a reduction in mortality after the age of 60, with the most dynamic increase in the life expectancy of the elderly. At the same time, the moment of occurrence of serious disability is clearly delayed, indicating the possibility of coexistence of old age and good health.

The progressive improvement in health could translate into an extension of the period of professional activity. However, this is not the case. Although studies conducted among older people indicate that there is generally no evidence to clearly link the fact of turning 50 with a decrease in mental and somatic predispositions to work (Szukalski, 2006), such a view still exists, both among seniors, people approaching old age, and among employers. The situation on the labor market in European countries over the last thirty years has been the cause of maintaining incentives for earlier professional deactivation, which in turn has created and perpetuated social expectations to replicate such a pattern of ending a professional career in the future.

Successful ageing, which in recent years, under the influence of WHO, has been increasingly identified with active ageing (*active ageing*).

This concept refers in short to the need to ensure access to three key areas in old age, which determine the optimal quality of life: health, independence and productivity (Walker, 2006). Its core is based on the belief that:

- successful aging is associated with both professional and social activity dynamically adjusted to the health condition, of a preventive nature – both at the individual and group level,
- additional tangible and intangible goods are produced,
- group cohesion increases thanks to the strengthening of the sense of intergenerational solidarity.

4. Employer Research

The research was conducted to obtain the opinion of management staff on the characteristics of older employees. The results obtained were compared with similar assessments of younger employees. The information was collected in February 2023 using an online survey. The study involved 100 managers employed in the technical industry in sales positions.

Managers participating in the study – characteristics.

Table 1

Gender of study participants

Gender	Number of people	%
women	39	39
men	61	61
Together	100	100

Source: own study.

Over 60% of the respondents are men (Table 1), while slightly over 1/3 of the group are women. This distribution is probably due to the fact that men are still much more often employed in managerial positions.

The table presents the distribution of the age variable in the group of employers of the study participants.

Table 2

Age of study participants

Age category	Number of people	%
21-30 years old	16	16
31-40 years old	61	61
41-50 years old	13	13
51-60 years old	10	10
Together	100	100

Source: own study.

The respondents are dominated by people aged 31-40 (61%). The youngest and oldest people together make up slightly more than 1/4 of the group (Table 2). These extreme age categories are the least represented.

What education do the study participants have?

Table 3

Education of respondents

Education	Number of people	%
medium	32	32
higher	59	59
higher postgraduate studies	9	9
Together	100	100

Source: own study.

Almost 70% of respondents have higher education. The rest have secondary education (Table 3).

The assessment was made by analysing 100 questionnaires (3 questionnaires were rejected due to formal deficiencies).

The following employee behaviours/characteristics were assessed:

- **expert knowledge** (employees know their job well; have the appropriate specialist knowledge; have the required experience),
- **independence in work** (they cope with tasks independently; do not require constant supervision; they take their own initiative in activities),
- **motivation and commitment to work** (work is an important value for them; they strive for promotion, plan their career path; they invest a lot of effort and emotions in their duties),
- **knowledge and orientation in modern technologies** (they are well acquainted with the operation of modern devices; they are excellent at using the Internet; they willingly and correctly use communication devices, computers, intercoms, etc.),
- **development potential** (they learn new things willingly and quickly; they take an active part in training; they try to constantly gain knowledge and experience on their own).

Managers evaluated young and older employees, who were given the following abbreviations:

- “Young” – young employees (up to 40 years of age).
- “50+” – older employees aged 50 and over.

Each feature was rated on a five-point scale: high, rather high, average, rather low, low. For the purposes of analysis, extreme answers were grouped, obtaining three answers.

Feature I.

Expertise (%)

Expert knowledge	Elderly 50+	Young
– high	72	38
– average	16	30
– low	12	32

Source: own study.

The expert knowledge of older employees was rated almost twice as high as the expert knowledge of younger employees.

Feature II.

Independence in work

Independence at work	Elderly 50+	Young
– high	82	40
– average	10	50
– low	8	10

Source: own study.

Employers rate older employees as very independent at work twice as highly as younger ones.

Feature III.*Motivation and commitment to work*

Motivation and commitment to work	Elderly 50+	Young
– high	64	52
– average	20	28
– low	16	20

Source: own study.

Older employees are also assessed by their superiors as more committed and motivated to work.

Feature IV.*Knowledge and orientation in modern technologies*

Knowledge and orientation in modern technologies	Elderly 50+	Young
– high	30	85
– average	45	10
– low	25	5

Source: own study.

When it comes to knowledge and orientation in modern technologies, younger employees are in the lead. They are familiar with modern technologies and are able to use them in practice.

Feature V.*Development potential*

Development potential	Elderly 50+	Young
– tall	44	38
– average	40	49
– short	16	13

Source: own study.

The development potential of both groups, understood as acquiring knowledge and learning new things, is at a similar level. It is true that in this case older employees are assessed higher than younger ones, but the difference is relatively small.

The survey also asked what percentage of the staff are employees over 50, and whether the employer represented by the survey participant would employ a person over 50 years of age in his company.

To sum up the results obtained, the following answers should be formulated. Employees aged 50+ achieve:

1. **better results in terms of expert knowledge** than young workers.
2. **better results in terms of independence at work** than younger workers.
3. **better results in terms of motivation and work commitment** than younger employees.
4. Employees aged 50+ achieve **worse results in terms of knowledge and orientation in new technologies** than younger employees.
5. Employees aged 50+ achieve **better results in terms of development potential** than younger employees.

In general, the vast majority of employers assessed almost all the features of employees aged 50+ as good or very good. It should be emphasized that this assessment concerned their own employees, not general opinions about older employees. The feature that received the fewest positive assessments was knowledge and orientation in new technologies (although even here 1/3 assessed it positively).

The next question in the survey was:

What percentage of the staff in your company (*employing at least 10 employees*) are people over 50 years of age?

There are no such people at all – 4%:

- from 1 to 10-22%,
- from 11 to 20-26%,
- from 21 to 30-18%,
- from 31 to 40-11%,
- from 41 to 50-6%,
- over 50-8%,
- the company employs less than 10 people – 5%.

In almost **half of the companies**, people over 50 years of age do not constitute more than **20% of the staff**. In **18% companies**, people over 50 years of age constitute from **21** to even **30% of the employed staff**, and in the case of **25% of companies**, people who have reached the fifth decade of life constitute over **30% of the crew**. Taking into account demographic trends, the employment rate of people over 50 years of age will probably grow. Data from the National Census of Population and Housing 2021 show that over 1.8 million people in the age group 60/65 and more have increased in Poland over the past decade, and thus over every fifth resident of Poland is over 60 years old. In turn, in 2050, people over 70 years of age are to constitute as much as 24% of the total population.

The survey also asked the question:

Would your company employ a person over 50 years of age?

- Yes – 66%.
- No – 18%.
- Hard to say – 16%.

The answers show that the surveyed employers do not admit to discriminating against seniors on the labor market. Their declarations show that they are open to hiring employees over 50 years of age. This is indicated by as many as 66% of the surveyed companies. However, as the experiment of the Polish Economic Institute (2021) shows, the reality is different. Young candidates under 30 received an invitation to a recruitment interview on average twice as often as older candidates over 50 years of age.

5. Research on employees 50+

In May, another survey was conducted. The target group was employees aged 50+. The quantitative survey was conducted on 166 seniors, i.e. people who were over 50 years old at the time of the survey and were working professionally.

The aim of the study was to learn about attitudes towards older people in the workplace; to determine their needs in terms of improving their qualifications; the degree to which employers use the potential of older people; plans for further professional activity after reaching retirement age, as well as the importance of work in the seniors' value system.

Half of the respondents (50%) came from large cities with over 100,000 inhabitants, one third were rural residents (27%).

The study involved:

- 37% – men and
- 63% – women.

Table 4.

Age of respondents N = 166

Age	Number of people	%
– 50 – 59	103	86
– 60 – 69	49	41
– 70 and more	14	12
Together	166	100

Source: own study.

Respondents aged 50-59 years predominate (86%), in the next age group their number is much smaller, reaching the level of 12% in the age group of 70 years and over.

5.1. Professional work of older people

Table 5.

Is the knowledge and experience of people aged 50+ appreciated in the workplace?

The knowledge and experience of people aged 50+ are not appreciated in the workplace	Age		
	50-59 N = 103	60-69 N = 49	70 and more N = 14
– they are not +they are definitely not appreciated	65%	61%	66%
– are appreciated+ are definitely appreciated	31%	35%	30%
– It's hard to say.	5%	4%	4%
Together	100%	100%	100%

Source: own study.

Over 60% of respondents over 50 years of age perceive that experience and their professional knowledge are not appreciated in the workplace. This negative image of reality is shared by a similar percentage of people in all age groups.

As many as 65% of people aged 50-59, 61% of people aged 60-69 and 66% of people aged 70+ agreed with the statement that the experience and knowledge of older people are not appreciated in the workplace (Table 5).

Table 6.

The need to develop professional skills of employees aged 50+

Does the work you do require the improvement and development of skills?	Age		
	50-59 N = 103	60-69 N = 49	70 and more N = 14
– yes	87%	85%	81%
– no	13%	15%	19%
Together	100%	100%	100%

Source: own study.

Regardless of age, the vast majority of respondents (from 81% to 87%) claim that their work requires continuous improvement. Despite this declaration, the number of training courses they take part in decreases with the age of employees. In the group of working 50-year-olds, 80% took part in any training in the last 5 years, while among 60-year-olds, only 67%. The lowest percentage of employees participating in training is in the 70+ group, which is 49%. This creates a situation in which 85% of 60-year-olds believe that their work requires continuous education, but much fewer, because 71%, took part in at least one training course in the last 5 years. In the case of employees 70+, the discrepancy between declaring the need to develop and acquire competences (81%) and participating in training (57%) is even greater.

Table 7.

Number of training courses attended by employees aged 50+

Participation in training courses developing professional competences (in the last 5 years)	Age		
	50-59 N = 103	60-69 N = 49	70 and more N = 14
– 1 training	9%	4%	8%
– more than 1 training	80%	67%	49%
– lack of participation in training	11%	28%	44%
Together	100%	100%	100%

Source: own study.

5.2. Experiencing discrimination in the workplace

Table 8.

Have you experienced discrimination at work in the last 5 years?

Have you experienced discrimination in the workplace in the last 5 years?	Age		
	50-59 N = 103	60-69 N = 49	70 and more N = 14
– yes	7%	9%	3%

Source: own study.

Respondents aged 50+ rarely – according to their own assessment – experience age discrimination at work. Fewer than 10% of people from each age group say they have experienced unfair treatment.

When asked to provide examples, they occasionally mention: being forced to retire, no pay rise, no promotion, interesting – more ambitious tasks assigned to younger employees, appreciating younger employees regardless of their skills, always evaluating the work of younger employees higher than that of older ones (Table 8).

It can be generally stated that manifestations of age discrimination occur at all three stages: the employment of an employee – the search for a job candidate, the duration and termination of the employment relationship.

5.3. Functioning of older and younger people in the workplace

Table 9.

How do older and younger people function in the workplace?

How do older and younger people function in your workplace?	Age		
	50-59 N = 103	60-69 N = 49	70 and more N = 14
a) Younger and older people live next to each other (they constitute two separate groups)	36%	35%	30%
b) Younger and older people live together (function as one group)	20%	15%	20%
c) I don't see a clear division between older and younger people.	39%	46%	44%
d) I don't know	5%	4%	6%
Together	100%	100%	100%

Source: own study.

Almost 40% of people aged 50-59 believe that younger and older people function as separate groups in one company community. This percentage gradually decreases for each subsequent age group, to reach 30% of responses for people aged 70 and over.

There is no doubt that the fact that a small percentage of the survey participants – only 15 to 20% – agree with the statement that younger and older people function together in the workplace, creating a cohesive group, should raise concerns (Table 9). At the same time, the workplace community is relatively rarely perceived as a uniform group made up of younger and older people.

The survey also examined the attitudes adopted by respondents regarding the extension of their professional activity.

5.4. Career plans of seniors after acquiring retirement rights

In the study, older employees' plans regarding their activities after acquiring retirement rights were diagnosed with the question:

Question: If it was entirely up to you, when you retire, would you like to:

- quit your job completely – 31%,
- work full time – 37%,
- work part-time – 15%,
- work part-time – 12%,
- I don't know – 5%.

The desire to completely quit work after obtaining retirement rights was declared by 31%, and remaining active – 64%.

When it comes to the importance of work for employees aged 50+, the research shows that work is of great (34%) and rather great (48%) importance to this age group. It is important to 82% of respondents.

Importance of work for employees 50+ (in %):

- definitely not important – 3%,
- has average importance – 15%,
- it is rather important – 48%,
- is very important – 34%.

The results show that work is an important and very important value for 82% of people aged 50+, including 34% who gave work a very high importance.

6. Discussion

Studies show that employers highly value the competences of older workers. They believe that they have a large amount of knowledge, gained as a result of many years of professional experience. They are independent, motivated, committed to work, with great development potential. However, this does not correlate with the actual employment status of older people in companies.

Why are employers reluctant to hire workers aged 50+?

There are many reasons why employers have trouble hiring older people. On the one hand, to put it bluntly, it is easier to manage “homogeneous” teams. On the other hand, there is a deeply rooted belief among managers and entrepreneurs that consistency and unanimity are more valuable than diversity and “otherness”.

Current demographic conditions and especially future prospects will probably force employers to change their attitudes towards employing older workers (Wassel, 2011).

Despite the relatively high assessment of employees aged 50+, the professional situation of older and younger employees is not the same. The stereotype of an older employee that exists among employers translates into HR decisions and has an impact on the career and professional life of this group of people. Several regularities can be observed. Firstly, older employees are not invested in. Ł. Krzyżanowska notes that they are not trained for several reasons. It is assumed from the outset that they will retire soon anyway, so it is not profitable. There is a belief that older people gain less from training than younger ones. Secondly, older employees are not promoted and their career paths are not planned (Krzyżanowska, 2013).

Identifying the occurrence of discriminatory phenomena in the labor market, including age discrimination, is a difficult task. It seems unlikely that employers would directly admit that they are prone to discriminatory behavior. Research conducted in the social sciences shows that people avoid answering questions that may put them in a bad light not only in the eyes of others, but also in their own eyes. Based on the research conducted, it can be seen that discriminatory behavior does not always have to be conscious. This is also confirmed by research by the State Economic Institute, which shows that one can engage in discrimination, be a witness to it or be the subject of it and not even know about it (PIE, 2021). In such cases, simple questions about discrimination may not be enough to determine it. An additional factor changing the perception of discrimination is broadly understood culture, which can also modify behaviors, assessments and decisions leading (or not) to discrimination.

People may not be aware that they are being discriminated against because for many years certain social groups have been treated in a certain way and this has become a social norm (Macnicol, 2006). Institutional ageism (because that is what we are talking about) may be so widespread in some areas of social activity that it is treated as a norm.

An additional complexity is the fact that discrimination takes various forms and can therefore be defined in various ways. In order to standardize the understanding of this concept, it would be worth cataloging behaviors that indicate discrimination and including them in companies' codes of ethics.

Ageism does not always come from the outside. The level of internalization of negative stereotypes based on age by seniors themselves is also important. Auto-ageism is also a serious development barrier and influences the assessment of what is and what is not age-based discrimination. These are several factors that cause interpretation difficulties related to the study of the professional situation of seniors on the labor market. These factors also shaped the ambiguous picture of the situation of people 50+ in the workplace, which emerges from the data collected in the study.

On the one hand, the study indicates a clear tendency of employers to hire younger workers in their companies. On the other hand, a small percentage of respondents aged 50+ claim to have experienced (or witnessed) discriminatory behaviour in the workplace. This suggests that it is not a widespread phenomenon or is not perceived negatively. Similar results were obtained by PIE (Discrimination..., 2021), noting that most respondents were unable to cite examples of age discrimination in the workplace from their own experience.

Based on this information, it can be concluded that there is no age discrimination in the workplace. However, by comparing these seemingly contradictory data, it is possible to draw a different conclusion, namely that ageism is present in the workplace, but is not noticed or recognized as an irregularity. It does not have to be the result of conscious calculation, but rather more or less conscious stereotypical thinking and a lack of understanding of the advantages of older employees by employers. Questions about stereotypes reveal certain patterns of thinking about older people in the labor market. Although positive stereotypes are

widespread, negative ones are more strongly internalized by older age groups, which can lead to auto-ageism.

Despite declarations indicating a low level of discrimination, the answers to the question asked in the PIE study about the way in which employers treat seniors reveal significant differences between age groups. It was observed that working seventy-year-olds are treated the worst. In their case, every third declared that they were treated badly or very badly. In turn, only every twelfth forty-year-old admitted that they were treated badly on the labor market and every fifth 60-year-old. Therefore, there is a situation in which, in the declarative layer, respondents rarely indicate age discrimination as a problem on the labor market, but at the same time admit to sharing negative stereotypes related to age.

The attempt to assess is even more difficult when taking into account the answers to questions about the way of treatment and the significant increase in the percentage of people among older age groups who admit to being victims of improper conduct. This may mean that despite declarations of no discrimination, some form of unfair treatment is taking place, which is more often addressed to older employees. Perhaps – the degree of internalization of the functioning stereotypes is so high that some improper behaviors are not yet identified as examples of discrimination.

The truth of this assumption may be indicated by the distribution of choices that respondents made when choosing whom to hire. The PIE research shows that respondents – despite having an equally qualified candidate to choose from – choose 30-year-old men and women over their 60-year-old competitors. This is the case in almost all age groups.

On the other hand, available research shows that older employees often show understanding for the preference for younger people on the job market. They consider that choosing a younger person is rational and justified, and not necessarily unfair to their older competitors. This means that we are dealing with ambiguous attitudes towards age discrimination. People with long-term employment largely want to remain active on the job market, but they understand that their attractiveness will require effort and openness to change. However, they are not convinced that this effort will be appropriately used and rewarded. It is worth recalling that on average 80% of respondents claimed that their work requires continuous improvement of skills and acquisition of knowledge, but the percentage of people who took part in at least one training in the last five years decreases with age.

And here we come to a problem that seems to be more dominant than age discrimination – namely, the answers to the question about the role of seniors in the workplace show that – the older the respondents, the more willing they were to agree with the statement that people over 60 feel that their knowledge is not appreciated. It seems, therefore, that there is a consensus among the respondents regarding the lack of opportunities and failure to use the potential of older people. Documents of international organizations (WHO, OECD) draw attention to a similar phenomenon.

If the dominant view of the relationship between older and younger workers is that they function as separate social groups, and only one in five people on average indicates that they live together, and additionally, respondents from all groups agree that the potential of older people is not used to the appropriate extent, then the decline in professional activity among people entitled to a pension is no longer surprising.

It is to be expected that the perception of age and belonging to the group of older or younger people will change. With the actual aging of society, the average age will increase, but the age from which people will be considered older will also change (Naegele, 2006). This, in turn, may translate into the behavior of seniors on the labor market.

The obtained results cast doubt on the widespread opinions presenting people aged 50+ as those for whom professional work is of little importance and the only thing they want is to retire immediately after obtaining pension rights.

The high position of professional work in the hierarchy of values of older people justifies attaching great importance to reflection on factors that:

- firstly, they influence decisions about staying in the labour market or leaving it,
- secondly, they make it impossible to remain in the labour market.

Treating work as a source of satisfying many needs, while not being able to satisfy them in the current workplace, is a potential barrier to the professional activation of employees. It is therefore essential to create workplaces that are more friendly to older people.

Stagnation and routine at work and a lack of conviction regarding the possibility of changing the situation in the future can be indicated as a barrier to the professional activation of people aged 50+. This barrier limits thinking in terms of change.

The professional situation of seniors diagnosed in this study does not correspond to the assumptions adopted in active ageing programs for people over 50. They do not fully integrate with younger co-workers, cannot count on promotion or participation in training to develop their skills, and have the feeling that their professional experience is not fully utilized by the employer.

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