



Human resource practice strategies for managing ageing employees

-A case study of the COVID-19 pandemic effects

MD Shahidul Islam Fakir and Asma Khatoon

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Supervisor: Rebecka Arman, Associate Professor, Management section, Department of Business Administration, University of Gothenburg
Examiner: Stefan Tengblad, Professor in HRM, Department of Business Administration, University of Gothenburg

Abstract

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Keyword: Human resource (HR), practice strategies, managing ageing employees, COVID-19 pandemic effects, case study.

Purpose: The selected past studies give themes about how the COVID-19 pandemic has forced employees to work from home, but nothing about how organisational actors experience the pandemic effects and how they strategize to manage older workers. The present study explores how do different HR actors experience the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on older employees' work situation and how do they strategize to manage ageing employees who are supposed to adapt to the new way of working during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theory: This study utilizes the theoretical lens of 'strategy as practice'. The empirical data have been analysed within the perspectives of strategy practitioners, praxis and practices.

Method: This study is a qualitative research conducted in 13 organisations within Swedish higher education and research sector as a case (anonymous). The empirical data is collected through semi-structured interviews with eighteen HR actors. The purposive and/or snowball sampling technique was used to select participants. The interviews conducted were then coded in text-to-text format and then thematically analyzed.

Results: This study maps out the positive and negative effects of the COVID-19 on work situation for older employees. This study also identifies different human resource (HR) strategies as routine organisational *practices*: ensuring continuous flow of information, valuing older employees with no age discrimination, arranging short training on how to adjust to new technology and developing relevant technology to ensure simplicity of working. The upgrading of communication channels and collaboration between management and employees and between HR colleagues (*praxis*) would support several different actors (*practitioners*) to practice these types of HR strategies.

These HR practices are used to manage employees, mainly ageing employees who have been facing some adjustment problems with the new versions of digital technologies while working from home. These group of older employees have lack of technical skills and feel more mental stress than younger counterparts. Though the employees at all ages (no age discrimination) feel mental refreshment during pandemic since they can set their own working schedule, some younger and some older employees who live alone feel lack of social interactions, bored and depressed. Unfortunately, another point is that the managers, aged 50+, have to work under extra pressure during pandemic. So, to plan for future work design after the pandemic, the organisations have been planning for the integration of virtual home working with traditional office working.

Originality/Value: This study adds to previous literature of the conditions for age management by highlighting the importance of non-human actors, in this study the COVID-19 pandemic and new use of technology. This has illustrated the usefulness of the strategy-as-practice perspective in uncovering new knowledge that is useful for theoretical as well as practical development of the HR field.

Foreword

First of all, we would like to express our inner gratitudes to all interview participants who have HR work experiences for several years. Their daily practices and understanding the phenomena are most valuable to enrich our research results, which have been analyzed to formulate organisational HR strategies from practice perspective.

We would like to convey our special and deepest gratitudes towards our supervisor Rebecka Arman for her sincere guidance, direction and feedback. She has been investing her valuable time that helps us to keep the right track in all of the reporting. She continuously challenged us for different perspectives. Thus, it has been a very challenging but educative and learning-oriented approach with her engagement and strong support that makes us confident in the research work of our master's thesis followed by publishing a scientific article.

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1. Introduction

Background of the study

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on workers and workplaces across the world has been dramatic and there are emergent changes in work practices, for example, working from home and virtual teamwork (Kniffin et al, [2021](#)). As a solution to COVID-19 pandemic, the virtual workforce in the form of home working creates challenges of distance (Caligiuri et al, [2020](#)). In the last year, organisations all over the world have continuously been planning the way their employees work according to two different scenarios. The first is a situation in which lighter COVID-19 pandemic restrictions result in a gradual return to workplace-based activities. The second scenario considers a situation where almost all employees are asked to work from home digitally and remotely due to strict restrictions.

Based on this condition, organisations have been focusing on their preparedness for how the shape of future working from home will look. A recent study covers this phenomenon and summarises the knowledge base of benefits and limitations of working from home (WFH) prior to COVID-19. As a result, it speculates how the experiences of WFH during the pandemic are likely to shape the future of WFH for workers and organisations (Green et al, [2020](#)). During the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of people began working virtually to prevent the spread of disease and to maintain business continuity. Consequently, organizations must anticipate more digital transformation and even strategize what has been called ‘virtual human resource development (VHRD)’ to prepare for the future (Bennett and McWhorter, [2021](#)). So, managing HR practices for ageing issues has become an important topic for researchers (Arman et al., [2021](#); Taylor and Earl, [2016](#)).

Recently, there has been an increasing number of older people globally. A recent study of United Nations reported that the world continues to experience an unprecedented and sustained change in the age structure of the global population and the number of older persons is increasing rapidly. The share of the global population aged 65 years or over is expected to increase from 9.3 percent in 2020 to 16.0 percent by 2050 (United Nations, [2020](#)). Some selected past literature has primarily tried to discover the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment situations, specifically the job security context. One study mainly focuses on older individuals who lose their jobs due to the COVID-19 crisis are less likely to secure re-employment than younger workers (IFS, [2020](#)).

The age of an HR manager does not seem to play a particular role in the implementation of age management initiatives. However, as shown in an earlier study, there is a tendency to adopt early retirement schemes when the HR managers concerned are younger in respect of their employment tenure (Principi et al, [2015](#)). In another age-specific study of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on older workers, it is argued that older adults engage in various self-regulation strategies aimed at continuously maintaining or restoring person-environment fit (Kooij, [2020](#)). Thus, pandemic conditions would depend on formal rules and regulations imposed by governments and also on the different organisational HR as well as individual strategies.

In a recent non-COVID-related study Nylén et al ([2018](#)) explored how a managerial intervention can improve the work situation of employees and argued that job demands increased over time, whereas job control decreased. Nylén et al.’s ([2018](#)) study uses questionnaire data from three-hour workshops and gives the relationship between factors of work situation, but nothing about how an external non-human factor, such as a pandemic, affects *only* the older employees’ working life.

Overall, the selected previous research (as will be further explored in section 2) provides knowledge about how the COVID-19 pandemic has forced employees to work from home using virtual means; also about age discrimination issues and how organisational HR strategies and/or age management practices helpful to manage ageing employees, but nothing

about how HR managers and other HR actors strategize to manage older employees. Also, the use of qualitative in-depth interview data is rare. Moreover, ‘describing the daily work practice experiences of HR actors and how they strategize’ is theoretically less studied. Therefore, our study utilizes the theoretical lens of strategy as practice (Whittington, [2006](#); Jarzabkowski et al. [2007](#)), which focuses on the organisational strategy work through daily practices of organisational actors. Our study also utilizes the method of a qualitative case study to get context-sensitive data of everyday organisational practices collected from some selected organisations within the ‘Swedish higher education and research’ as a whole sector as a case. Due to the similar nature of activities of our case organisations and homogenous nature of HR roles of our participants, we select a whole sector as a case instead of one particular organisation.

In fact, the objectives of our study are twofold. Firstly, to explore, from a practice perspective, the organisational HR strategies for managing ageing employees who are supposed to adapt to the new way of working during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, to explore the effects (during and after) of the COVID-19 pandemic on older employees’ work situation and how different HR actors view these effects.

Research questions of the study

In line with the purpose of the study, our study specifically addresses the following research questions:

- 1: How do different HR actors experience the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on older employees’ work situation?
- 2: How do the organisational HR actors strategize to manage ageing employees who are supposed to adapt to the new way of working during and after the COVID-19 pandemic?

Disposition of the thesis

The thesis has been organized by dividing it into seven sections. The introduction comprising of the research problem and its context, purpose of the study and disposition of the thesis is explained in section I. To answer the research questions and aim, the study starts by presenting some selected previous studies (concerning pandemic effects, remote work, older age discrimination issues, HRM strategies and/or age management strategies to manage older worker) that elucidate the context of our study to make sense of the empirical results, which are explained in section II. The section is followed by a presentation of the theoretical approach of strategy as practice, in section III. In section IV, the qualitative case study methods used in this study are described. Then the empirical results that contain effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on work situation are presented in section V. An analysis from practice perspective (practitioners, praxis and practices), is presented in section VI. In section VII, empirical results and analyzed data are discussed using selected previous studies in order to present theoretical as well as practical development of the HR field. The rest of the discussion and conclusions, comprising of limitations of the study, recommendations for the future research and the concluding remarks, is also presented in section VII, which marks the end of this thesis.

2. Previous studies

In our literature review, we have found several relevant themes to our research aim, although we have been unable to find examples of so many studies within this new topic. The themes that we found are related to work situation, ageing employees and COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on workplace; work from home or remote work; age management practices and/or HR practices for managing older workers and older age inequality issues.

Work situation, older employees and COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on workplace

The concept of work situation covers a) employees' job demands such as workload, unnecessary tasks, unreasonable tasks; b) job resources such as feedback, control, goal clarity; and c) personal resources such as signalling and limit-setting strategies (Nylén et al, [2018](#)). Similar to the study of Ilmarinen ([2001](#)), our study focus on older employees, who are 55 years and above of age. In a very recent study of 'we don't talk about age' that contributes to the knowledge of organisational practices relating to older workers, i.e., 'age management', the authors argued that older workers have been perceived as either representative of productive ageing and a solution to Labour shortage problems, or as a barrier to recruiting younger employees (Arman et al, [2021](#)). In respect of understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic, WHO ([2021](#)) explains:

The World Health Organisation (WHO) announced "COVID-19" as a pandemic on 11 February 2020. Official names have been announced by WHO for the virus responsible for COVID-19 (previously known as "2019 novel coronavirus") and the disease it causes as stated: Disease: coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and Virus: severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).

Since people now live and work in globally and interdependently in the communities, infectious disease threats such as COVID-19 need to be recognized as part of the workspace, and to continue to reap the benefits from global cooperation, it will be necessary to find smarter and safer ways of working together (Kniffin et al, [2021](#)). There have been some effects of the COVID-19 public discourse on the lives of older adults, and the solidarity between generations and older employees (55+) might be more affected by the negative effects of COVID-19 pandemic globally compared to younger employees because older people are labelled as vulnerable in terms of Coronavirus (Ayalon et al, [2021](#)).

In the study of international HRM insights for navigating the COVID-19 pandemic challenges, Caligiuri et al ([2020](#)) suggested that three domains such as managing under uncertainty, facilitating international work and redefining organisational performance will be helpful for future IHRM research. Similarly, in a recent study of COVID-19 and ageism, Monahan et al. ([2020](#)) argued that positive responses can strengthen the value of older adults, improve older adults' mental and physical health, reduce ageism, and improve intergenerational relations, whereas negative responses can have the opposite effects. Their article also discusses policy changes to health care (triaging, elder abuse), employment (layoffs, retirement), and education about ageism.

Work from home or so-called remote work

In a recent study on Chinese employees working from home in the early days of the pandemic, Wang et al. ([2021](#)) identified key remote work challenges such as work-home interference, ineffective communication and loneliness as well as virtual work characteristics such as social support, job autonomy and workload. There are two other popular terms such as 'telecommuting' and 'remote work', which often used synonymously to describe work from home (Savić, [2020](#)).

Based on a comprehensive review of a wide range of telecommuting studies, Allen et al. ([2015](#)) interprets that telecommuting as a work practice that involves members of an organization replacing their working hours (part-time or full-time) to work away from office location, for example, work from home using technology to perform work activities. Therefore, two dimensions are in common in almost all definitions of telecommuting studies reviewed by Allen et al. ([2015](#)): firstly, work from a location away from workplace, i.e., from home or from locations close to home, such as coffee shops, libraries, or co-working spaces and secondly, technology usage to communicate while working (Allen et al., [2015](#)).

However, the term 'remote work', another type of work from home synonymous with telecommuting, denotes that the employees live outside the area of the organization's main

headquarters or office and work accordingly using technology. These employees are called remote workforce and often, for example, remote workers are freelancers and independent contractors who spend their time outside the traditional office settings (Savić, [2020](#)) and our study does not cover this type of remote work.

Age management practices and/or HR practices for managing older workers and older age inequality issues

A number of researchers worked on the analysis of age management practices and/or HR practices in the organizations. In a recent study of a theoretical framework of the capability of organizations to implement age management practices, Kadefors et al. ([2020](#)) developed a typology depending on organisational resources and preferences, organizations may be categorized as proactive, reactive, passive or chained. The authors argued that adequate resource allocation and a proactive approach to age management are crucial factors as determinants when building an organizational capability. Moreover, the authors argued that organisational measures should be considered in the age management plan considering organization's situational factors (Kadefors et al., [2020](#)).

In another study of how management of ageing human resources is worthwhile, Kołodziejczyk-Olczak et al. ([2015](#)) explain that older workers have different needs and expectations regarding working conditions, safety, health care etc. as well as social relationships, communication, career perspectives, professional training and development. The authors classify the age management value chain functions into two: primary functions such as recruitment, learning and development etc. and supporting functions such as flexible working hours, career development etc. Kadefors et al. ([2020](#)) develop a model of organizational capability to apply age management policies for managing delayed retirement age of older employees, whereas Kołodziejczyk-Olczak et al. ([2015](#)) focus on age management practices from HRM functions perspective that would help to fulfil the expectations of older employees. Actually, both groups of authors cover age management aspects from the organizational context.

Compared to Kołodziejczyk-Olczak et al, ([2015](#)), Taylor and Earl's ([2016](#)) study focuses on the concept of age management and its manifestations to argue that many standard HRM practices are firmly grounded in ageist assumptions concerning the capacities, potentiality and contributions of both younger and older workers. When Taylor and Earl's ([2016](#)) study focuses on both younger and older workers irrespective of age, Earl and Taylor's ([2015](#)) study covers only older women workers and they argue that the efficacy of line managers and their willingness to innovate is crucial in managing older women workers.

When it comes to the support for older employees, Riach and Kelly ([2015](#)) studied the workplace age inequality and ageing in organizational life. They argue that older age inequality within and across working life is the result of vampiric forms and structures constitutive of contemporary organizing. A vampiric lens for the study of age inequality presents a timely reflection on the current older worker 'problematic' by exploring how organizational dynamics surrounding (un)dying, regeneration and neophilia may contribute to the systematic marginalization of workers-older and younger-in the current workplace. Through the analysis of Riach and Kelly's ([2015](#)) study of need for fresh blood, it is argued that older workers are positioned as inevitable 'sacrificial objects'.

However, one reason for the organizations response to older workers can be found in a study by Brooke et al. ([2013](#)) who found that workforce ageing will place severe constraints responsible for cost containment. Similarly, in another study, it is found that negative age stereotypes displayed can undermine the perceived economic value of older workers (Fuertes et al, [2013](#)). Besides, the organisations are thinking about how they could manage any discrimination. Considering this, in the study of how and with what resources senior employees manage the discrimination they are subjected to, Grima ([2011](#)) suggests a typology, which is

an invitation to re-read and reduce the effects of discrimination by integrating the role of work and of the company in the development of the individual.

In summary, the selected previous research outlines several concepts relevant to our study for understanding: the work situation, how the COVID-19 pandemic affects aging people and their workplace, work from home, telecommuting or remote work, older age inequality issues within and across working life and some age management practices and/or HRM practices. Thus, this selection of previous research (pre-COVID and/or non-COVID and COVID-related studies) not only gives an understanding of pandemic effects and what older age discrimination issues are, but also explains how organisational HR strategies and/or age management strategies can be used to manage the work situation of older employees. The previous research thus clarifies the context of our study in order to make sense of the empirical results.

3. Theoretical approach

In this section we present the theory chosen as our analytical tools. It contains concepts of organisational strategy work through daily practices of strategic actors. In our study, we consider Strategy as Practice theory in the context of the HR strategizing process.

Strategy as Practice (S-as-P) theory

Strategy is not something that organisations have, but rather something that people or actors do in their everyday life (Whittington, [2006](#); Jarzabkowski, [2005](#)). The popular theory named S-as-P has emerged as a distinctive approach for studying strategic management, specifically strategic decision-making, strategizing, and strategy work since the early 2000s (Whittington [2006](#); Johnson et al. [2003](#); Jarzabkowski et al. [2007](#)). As an institutionalized context, strategy practices such as strategic planning, strategy workshops influence what organisational actors do and in turn how strategies develop in organisations (Johnson et al, [2007](#)). This theory is a part of the broader practice perspective in contemporary social theory and the management sciences over the 20 years; more recently, the practice turn has entered into the strategy field of knowledge, mainly on the actual work of strategists and strategizing (Jarzabkowski, [2005](#)). Therefore, we utilize S-as-P theory as a research approach for our study.

S-as-P research agenda is connected with strategy as a situated, socially completed activity that is shaped by the actions and interactions of various actors (Jarzabkowski, [2005](#)). This research agenda is a product of three elements that provide different angles from which to examine strategy as practice: strategy praxis, practices and practitioners (Whittington, [2006](#); Jarzabkowski et al, [2007](#)). Vaara and Whittington ([2012](#)) argued that strategy praxis and practices are mutually constitutive and they focus on important insights into the tools and methods of strategy-making (practices), how strategy work takes place (praxis) and the role and identity of the actors involved (practitioners). This theory is newly placed in qualitative studies, for example, a study argued that indispensable of S-as-P is the high interaction with human resource management and the focus of the S-as-P perspective is 'human' (Acar et al, [2015](#)). A conceptual framework for S-as-P analysis that comprises of strategizing that focuses on common real space of three interconnections among strategy praxis, practices and practitioners as addressed by Jarzabkowski et al ([2007](#)) shown in the following figure-3.1:

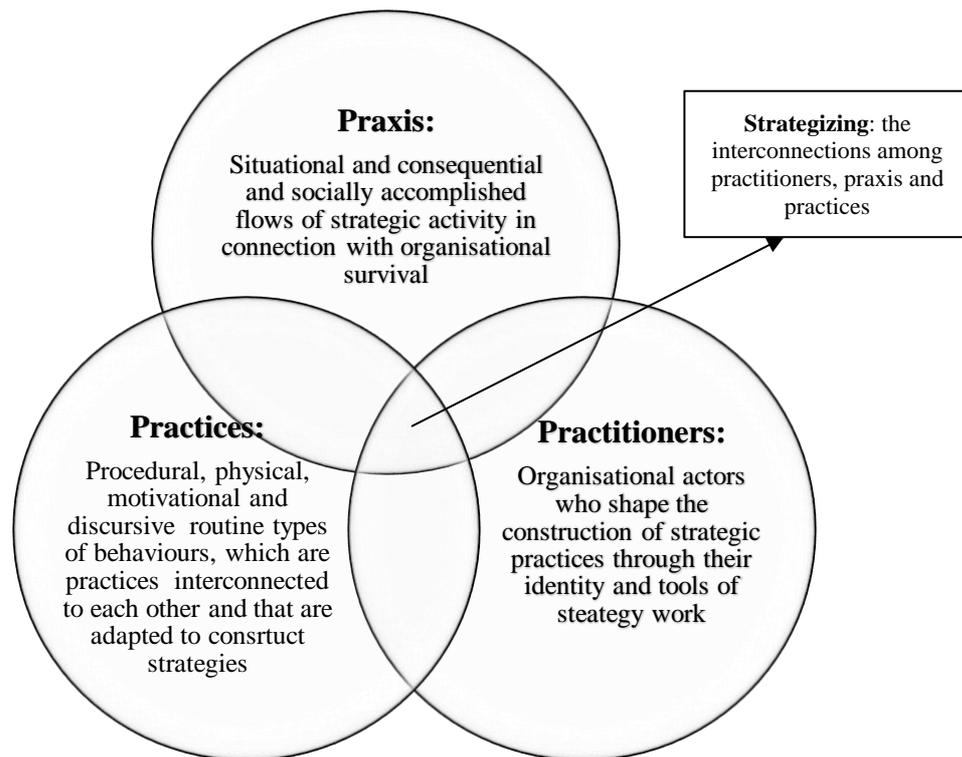


Figure-3.1: A Conceptual Framework for S-as-P Analysis, source: Jarzabkowski et al., [2007](#), p.11.

The first element, **strategy practitioners**, entails actors in the practice domain are those individuals who shape the construction of practices to act, practitioners are thus interrelated with practices and praxis. The second element, **strategy praxis**, refers to the interconnection between the actions of different individuals and groups and those socially, politically and economically embedded institutions within which individuals act and to which they contribute and also refers to situational context and socially accomplished flows of activity that are strategically consequential. Finally, the third element, **strategy practices**, involve daily activities or routine types of behaviours that consist of several elements, interconnected to one another and which are cognitive, procedural, discursive, motivational, and physical practices in nature (Jarzabkowski et al. [2007](#)).

In summary: When it comes to the question of how we use these three elements in our study, we use this conceptual framework as our data analysis tool. Our study identifies different HR strategies as routine organisational *practices* on the basis daily work practices of HR actors (*practitioners*) to manage ageing employees who have been facing adjustment problems while working from home using digital technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic. These two factors (the COVID-19 and digital technologies) have been described in previous literature as non-human actors. These actors are a condition (*praxis*) for the transformation to virtual home working integrated with traditional office working. Overall, our study covers the strategy work of HR actors. Thus, this is how the theoretical lens of the Strategy-as-Practice is relevant to our study.

4. Research methods and materials

Research design and context of the case

To respond to the research questions, we choose to interview eighteen HR actors to describe their daily work experiences, opinions and views on the topic to explore the phenomena. A qualitative sectoral case consisting of thirteen organisations was adopted. We use qualitative data analysis (Flick, [2014](#)) because it helps to discover and describe the issues in the field of

processes in routines and practices. However, the nature of our research questions may not be suited to any quantitative measures. The weakness of survey data is that it gives only some factors and their relationships to each other, whereas case studies (Flyvbjerg, 2006) have the great advantage of providing context-sensitive data of everyday organisational practices.

This study's case covers 12 universities and 1 research institute represented (n=13) purposively selected from the Swedish higher education and research sector. The organizations are anonymous. The main business function of selected universities was higher education and research that was more or less homogeneous in nature. The research institute, an innovation and research partner of the Swedish government, mainly worked with laboratory studies and pilot study research for clients. The organisational size ranged from below 1 000 to around 6 500 employees. In respect of gender mix, the employees of two-thirds of organisations were balanced. In respect of the age mix, in over two-thirds of organisations, the majority of the workforce was aged on average 40, i.e., age mix was balanced, but most of the researchers were aged over 55 years. In three of the organisations, the workforce was predominantly older and in two of the organisations, the workforce was predominantly younger.

Considering the homogenous nature of activities of HR actors and other employees, we selected the whole sector as a case instead of one or two individual organisations. Furthermore, why we chose mostly the universities, why not private firms, was because the past selected studies did not cover public-sector organisations, e.g., public universities. Moreover, through conducting two pilot interviews (one with a university and another with a private firm) we found that university researchers continued their research work for a longer time, even after traditional retirement age. Comparing the private-sector employees to that of the university and research institute employees, there were also more aged people who had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, we had better access concerning participant selection. The field access was facilitated by the interests suggested from our known HR colleagues working in a university.

Data collection strategy

Participant selection and basic characteristics of the interviewees

We used purposive sampling and/or snowball or chain sampling techniques (Bryman and Bell, 2011) to select participants. Therefore, we started the search for our potential participants by visiting websites of the case organisations. We then looked at the LinkedIn profile of people who came up, what organization they work for, what they work and how long. Word of mouth peer recommendations were used to encourage more participants.

We initially contacted around 200 potential participants via email with a formal invitation containing an information letter comprising of the purpose and overview of the study. Then we did follow-up emails, phone calls, follow-up calls, and finally, we got 18 responses, so the response rate is around 10%. Each of 13 interviewees from each of 13 organisations and for the rest 5 interviewees (18 minus 13), we got each from each of the 5 organisations. Among the participants, there were 12 women and 6 men.

Table 3-1 Age profile of participants

Age category	No. of participants
30-39	3
40-49	3
50-59	10
60-69	2

The participants were aged between 33 and 67. Full details of the range of ages are provided by Table 3-1 that shows that the majority of the interview participants was aged above 50 years.

Thus, we got empirical data from this aged group of participants regarding how older employees themselves experience the effects of pandemic on their work situation. This helps us interpret about attitudes towards ageing vs. younger employees and pandemic effects. We selected 18 HR actors comprising of eight HR managers, five HR specialists, three HR consultants and two HR officers. We selected them due to their outstanding career progress and excellent background in the HR field as stated below:

- The HR managers were interviewed because most of them have longer HR managerial work experiences for around 12 years, and in some cases, their total work experiences are up to 30 years in the HR field where they mainly deal with HR and work environment questions.
- The HR specialists and HR consultants were selected because most of them have specialised knowledge in HR strategy work, for example, one of them works as a work environment specialist for around seven years at the central HR division.

Thus, we reached a deeper understanding of how HR strategies have been applied in the organisations from a practice turn perspective and within the HR field.

Interview process

We use materials of qualitative interview transcripts as primary data. During February 2021, two pilot interviews had been conducted to get a good pre-understanding of the case and support researchers to further develop the research plan and interview guide. The final version of semi-structured interview guide mainly entails questions regarding how the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated government guidelines can affect the work situation or the way the employees work. In addition to introductory general and concluding reflection questions, the semi-structured questions also cover employers' attitudes towards older vs. younger employees and how organisations manage their older employees.

After finalizing the confirmation of each interview participant, we then completed the formalities of a consent to participate form, which granted us permission to record the interviews with video and to use the data in all the reporting. If the respondent agreed to participate, she or he chose the place for an interview. Considering the recent issue of the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were then taken place through a digital platform like Zoom meetings. The interviews lasted around 1 hour. We used a semi-structured interview guide that helps us to stay on track and ensure that all necessary areas are being covered. All the researchers attended every interview and none of us took up note-taking responsibility, because our Zoom video records would later make sure some specific details, for example non-verbal expressions of the respondents.

Data analysis

The qualitative interview data had been transcribed, coded, and analysed using thematic coding (Bryman and Bell, [2011](#); Flick, [2014](#); and Charmaz, [2014](#)). We, the authors, imported interview transcriptions from Zoom video recordings manually following some steps. Firstly, to hear the interview recordings and observe the non-verbal expressions of the respondents to understand the information. Secondly, to discuss the responses. Thirdly, to decide about which information is relevant to our study. In this way, we then write down the individual responses/quotes under each and every interview question in a secure Excel spreadsheet. Afterwards, we classify the responses covering our research questions in a separate secure MS word file. In order to get empirical results, we used code list and codebook under the hierarchical coding process that presents themes, focused codes and initial codes hierarchically. This procedure ensured the minimum biases in the way we interpret and analyse data. We used required number of codes and themes that are relevant to respond the research questions. Among many, one hierarchal tree as illustrated below:

Integration of virtual home working with traditional office working

Balancing home and office working

Digital platforms in home working

Quick development of technology during pandemic

Being good mixture of home & workplace working

Focusing on how to organise work during post-COVID-19

Being 2 days working from home and 3 days at workplace

Converting way of working into digital

Developing technology fast

Theme

Focused codes

Initial codes

In the results section, we interpreted data using individual quotes within the texts to highlight the main findings. We did comparison in the forms of intra-coder within a particular transcript and inter-coder between transcripts. When it comes to the question of variations of empirical data, we looked for variation in the answers/responses between the different case organisations and positions of the actors but did not find any variation. The context of the interviewees has a lot in common within the HR profession, even if they are in different organisations. The tasks they do and the conditions that they do them in are very similar.

Then in the analysis section, we analyzed the empirical data using the theoretical lens of three perspectives of strategy practitioners, praxis and practices (Whittington, [2006](#); Jarzabkowski et al. [2007](#)). In our study, the practitioners would shape the construction of strategic practices to be extracted through describing daily routine activities and experiences of HR managers and other actors (human actors) in connection with the contextual situation (praxis) influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and new versions of digital technologies (non-human actors).

Ethical considerations and trustworthiness

Ethical considerations concerning the voluntariness to participate, non-disclosure, anonymity and confidentiality (Bryman and Bell, [2011](#); Flick, [2014](#); and Charmaz, [2014](#)) have been ensured through using the information letter and the consent to participate form. The participation of interviewees was voluntary and could be withdrawn by one's own will. Materials such as interview recordings, interview transcriptions (sorted by unique number), coding (draft sheet) are kept locked away and are only available to authorized researchers and would be deleted after research finished. The participants' names and organisations were anonymous in order to protect the privacy and rights of participants. The study results would be carefully disclosed to protect sensitive information of the organisation.

To assure empirical relevance and the quality of our study, the interview guide had been developed based on the discussions among us two researchers and our supervisor. However, we avoid leading questions to make them open and to allow participants to elaborate more information. Furthermore, our research has been benefited from the argumentation of inter-coder reliability (Flick, [2014](#)) through our collaborative process of data interpretation and analysis. Moreover, all responses the participants provided are subjective. The analysis has been kept close to the empirical materials. No effects of HR actors have been assumed without explicit statements from the interview process. Because we have investigated the working life experiences of HR actors regarding effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent HR practices, these are subjective rather than objective.

5. Empirical results - Effects on work situation of the COVID-19 pandemic

In the results section, the empirical findings are extracted from eighteen interview transcripts using thematic coding. The results are presented using the quotes within the texts to highlight the main findings. The study summarizes results covering the research question through describing the work experiences of organisational HR actors. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the working life. In our study, we find different working conditions and effects for different time situations, for example, before pandemic, during and after pandemic effects.

Before the pandemic: Flexible workplace working conditions and employers' attitudes towards older employees

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, workplace working condition had been characterised by working hour flexibility. During the then period, the employees at all ages could enjoy their free time with family and friends after their office. Besides, they had the freedom to organise their working schedule. One respondent explained the freedom this offered: *"We give opportunity for leave of absence from workplace to adapt the working hour, employees have a high degree of freedom regarding how and when they perform their work that goes to all ages."* (HR officer-5). Thus, it is clear that flexible working was a benefit for all employees irrespective of age. It indicates that there was no age discrimination. So, employers' attitudes towards older employees were positive. There was a good workplace culture of respecting each other, which has been understood from one of the respondents expressed in the quote: *"Absolutely, but respect is a big thing, and we have to respect each other regardless of age, beliefs or anything."* (HR partner-11).

Almost all employees (both younger and older together) were free to enjoy modern facilities. Thus, their psychological work environment had been characterised by attractive work and workplace. Work environment specialist explained: *"Nothing special for senior employees, they enjoy work and all facilities, for example, a laboratory, office space, lunchrooms, and we all (seniors and juniors) share everything."* (Work environment-specialist-3). Furthermore, the working system was very systematic, because the older employees could collaborate each other with their fellows. If they needed special help in respect of their health issues, they got it from the authority. One participant expressed it this way: *"If they [senior employees] continue their work, they enjoy as usual facilities with other employees, but if they need help, they can get that help from the authority."* (HRD consultant-7).

When it comes to the question of how senior employees are productive and how employers view them, we find that when the senior people worked within their specialization area, they had been adding more experiences and competencies. The employers then viewed them as productive. One respondent replied in the quote: *"[...]because they contribute with their knowledge, they [senior employees] are absolutely good assets."* (HR specialist-4). Interestingly, if senior employees had more expertise, the employers definitely valued them. One participant said about importance of senior employees: *"If senior people work longer with specialization and expertise, they have more experiences and competences, of course they are valued[...]"* (HR manager-18).

During the pandemic

The pandemic restrictions (light or strict) have affected the way the employees work. The organisational HR actors experience the positive and negative pandemic effects for older employees and they also view on how these effects deviate from younger employees.

Why and how quick transformation of traditional office working into virtual home working

As soon as the COVID-19 pandemic started early in 2020, there have been huge changes in the work and the work environment compared to the situation before the pandemic. Almost all employees are asked to work from home virtually sitting behind the computer screen while previously they worked at the workplace. One respondent explained this change in the quote: *“We have figured out that more than 80% employees work from home. So, it (pandemic) has affected a lot of processes and how we teach and how we work, and the work environment.”* (HR manager-9). At the same time, employees have quickly been adopting the updated and advanced versions of technologies. For instance, zoom video conferencing, through which employees can easily adapt the new ways of distance working. One participant explained this trend in the following way: *“Yeah, pandemic gives us some effects such as distance work from home, distance when at work, distance education for students, planning for students and employees in smaller groups at work.”* (HR manager-14)

Due to the pressure from non-human actors (the COVID-19 pandemic and digital technologies) the organisations have established this new trend of virtual home working within a very short period of time. But before the pandemic it required longer time to establish. One respondent argued it in the quote: *“Due to the pressure of the pandemic, we have developed our necessary technology within the last one year that before the pandemic we normally need to complete it around 4 years on average.”* (HR head-17). On the other hand, the option of physical works still does not compromise COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. This has been viewed in the quote given by one of the respondents: *“[...]that is not possible via online and some physical works like cleaning. But in administration in general we are all recommended to work from home.”* (HR manager-10)

Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic, organisations are investing more money to develop a computerised system. For instance, database of employee details that could ensure the simplicity of work. One interview participant described this new trend of quick transformation:

And top management has also to put money on the development of technology, for example, at the salary department, now we have everything by computer digitally [...] In a project from March 2020, my boss and we realize to develop a technology where we are putting all personal papers in the archives that everyone gets and see the necessary information staying at home. (HR head-17)

During the pandemic: Employers' attitudes towards ageing vs. younger employees and pandemic effects

One recurring theme we found was neutral attitudes towards ageing vs. younger issues. However, there is a difference in the way that the HR actors talk about older employees. One manager said: *“We say in Sweden that the ages are only a number and, age is not everything.”* (HR manager-1). Most of the interview participants could not classify the employees in terms of age, but they mainly focus on what competence and skills the employees have. One HR actor explained ageing issue in the quote: *“We value and use all competence in the organization irrespective of age, senior or junior issues.”* (HR officer-15)

Due to the restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, employees are advised to work from home. Yet employers did not have any separate rules for older employees, according to stricter pandemic restrictions. Nevertheless, in respect of adaptation of new digital technologies, younger employees are described as smart and quick to adjust than older employees. Compared to older employees, younger employees normally become less bored while working behind the computer screen all day long. They do not need any short training lessons to learn how to be

used to virtual working. In contrast, some older employees were described as needing short training to learn how to be used to digital technologies for distance working. One of the respondents expressed this fact in the quote:

We have to re-skill or re-new the competence of some senior employees who are unable to adjust to the new way of working, whereas younger employees have already been used to with the social media and computer technologies, which sometimes have not been adopted by older counterparts. (HR manager-8)

Negative effects for older employees

Thus, compared to younger employees, older employees experience more mental stress while working from home sitting behind the computer screen all day long. It is because of lack of having prior experiences working with social media. Therefore, some older employees are not used to new versions of digital technologies of virtual working. Moreover, some younger and some older employees who do not have any children and spouses become quickly bored, feel depressed. Because they cannot meet more social people, colleagues during pandemic restrictions, although they need it. This fact has been supported in the following quote:

As time goes on, more people feel a lack of social interactions. The employees who are single and older and don't have any family and children are becoming bored because they always have to use digital means, for example, Zoom meetings and because of not seeing other people, not chatting with colleagues in the corridor, not having coffee together. (HR coordinator-6)

Managers, aged 50+ years, themselves have to handle everything regarding COVID-19 pandemic along with other regular duties and responsibilities. For example, managers have to inform all employees about COVID-19 state guidelines and organisational pandemic directions. Therefore, they have to perform extra workload rather than junior employees, which did not exist in the time of before the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant explained the job stress of managers in the quote:

It is more hard work now during the pandemic at our managerial positions, because we get a lot of meetings, meeting after meeting during a working day. We have work pressure rather than more working hours. You don't take popular Fika breaks or Coffee breaks during the day, just you are sitting behind your computer screen and having a coffee alone, and just working. (HR manager-16)

Positive effects for older employees

On the other hand, interestingly, older employees who are vulnerable to COVID-19 feel less mental stress as they have been complying with the government COVID-19 recommendations regarding health and safety hazards. Thus, the distance working approach helps minimize spread of COVID-19. One interviewee expressed this view: *“The state Corona regulations have reduced stress for older people as they have not to travel to the workplace and can take care of their health.”* (HRD consultant-7)

Moreover, there is minimal absence from work and minimum number of sick leaves due to pandemic and other diseases as senior employees are careful about their health issues. Among others, one participant expressed it this way in the quote:

Yes, we have been affected a lot by the pandemic rules, it's positive because people are aware of the situation and do not want to get ill themselves. I think most people including older ones understand the situation through the governmental COVID -19 guidelines. (HR coordinator-6)

Moreover, the traditional way of working has been disappearing from the work environment. As a result, due to the adoption of the unofficial mixture of home working and office working, employees, specifically older employees feel mental refreshment as they set their own working schedule. One respondent explained in the quote: *“[...]they [senior employees] have quite free*

working hours for being teachers and researchers, so that they can adjust themselves.” (HR consultant-12). They can ensure work-life balance and can save their productive time focusing on their own performance. This had sometimes not been possible during busy office hours at the workplace when it was before the COVID-19 pandemic:

Sometimes we could not notice the time that is going on, because now we don't have to travel more, so, we have so much free time and we work more from home. And it is due to not only the pandemic, but also the prevailing situation and family situation. (HR consultant-13)

One interview participant explained this work-life issue in the quote above.

Planning for after the pandemic

To plan for future work design, i.e., the way the employees work, organisational actors experience the lessons learned from the before and during pandemic effects.

Why and how integration of virtual home working with traditional office working

We have observed that during the pandemic, employees need to go to the workplace by rotation to perform some physical work. Among others one participant explained: *“But some working unit, they have remained at the physical location, there is no way Dentists could work via Zoom.”* (HR-specialist-2).

To ensure a good mixture of home and office working during post-COVID-19, it is important to forecast about the future working pattern that might be working from home halftime a week and the rest halftime at workplace. One participant clarified this good mixture: *“I think that this pandemic has take-home lessons and because of that we will have a possibility to work from home maybe half time every week even in the post-COVID-19 world.”* (HR manager-8). We found that some organisations have already started new research on how to organize the way the employees work. One of the most experienced HR specialists in work environment explained the forecasting this way:

We have a project regarding 'The future workplace' focusing on how we can organise the work, perhaps have a good mixture of working from home and working at the workplace physically. But in the future, we will have a good mixture of work-life balance of 2 days working from home and 3 days at the workplace. (Work environment-specialist-3)

Thus, it would be supportive to ensure proper work-life balance. During the pandemic, employees have learned about how to use all these different methods, digital technologies, which would help them to work after COVID-19. Considering this, organisations are going to change the way their employees work for post-COVID-19 world's working life.

In summary: We have interpreted the positive and negative pandemic effects for older employees emphasizing the employers' attitudes towards older vs. younger employees. We have presented different working conditions within the three distinctive time situations such as before, during and after the pandemic. Firstly, before the pandemic, the organisational work situation was characterized by the flexible workplace working conditions and employers' positive attitudes towards older employees with no age discrimination. Then, as soon as the pandemic started early in 2020, some organisations took initiatives to quickly transform the traditional office working into virtual home working, which has both advantages and disadvantages. Finally, to plan for future work design after the pandemic, the organisations have been planning for the integration of virtual home working with traditional office working. As a result, organisations need HR strategies to handle the associated pandemic effects and to manage older employees who are supposed to adapt to the new way of working.

6. Analysis from practice perspective

In line with the purpose of the study we analyse our empirical findings from ageing employees' context although interview participants treat all ages mainly equally. In this section, we use strategy as practice theory to analyse and interpret the daily work experiences, views, opinions and reflections of HR actors covering the research question about how the organisational HR actors strategize to manage ageing employees who are supposed to adapt to the new way of working during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the interconnections among strategy practices, praxis and practitioners (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007 and Vaara and Whittington, 2012) could help organisational HR actors to strategize from practice perspective. The analysis using the theoretical lens of strategy as practice is being summarized in the figure 6-1:

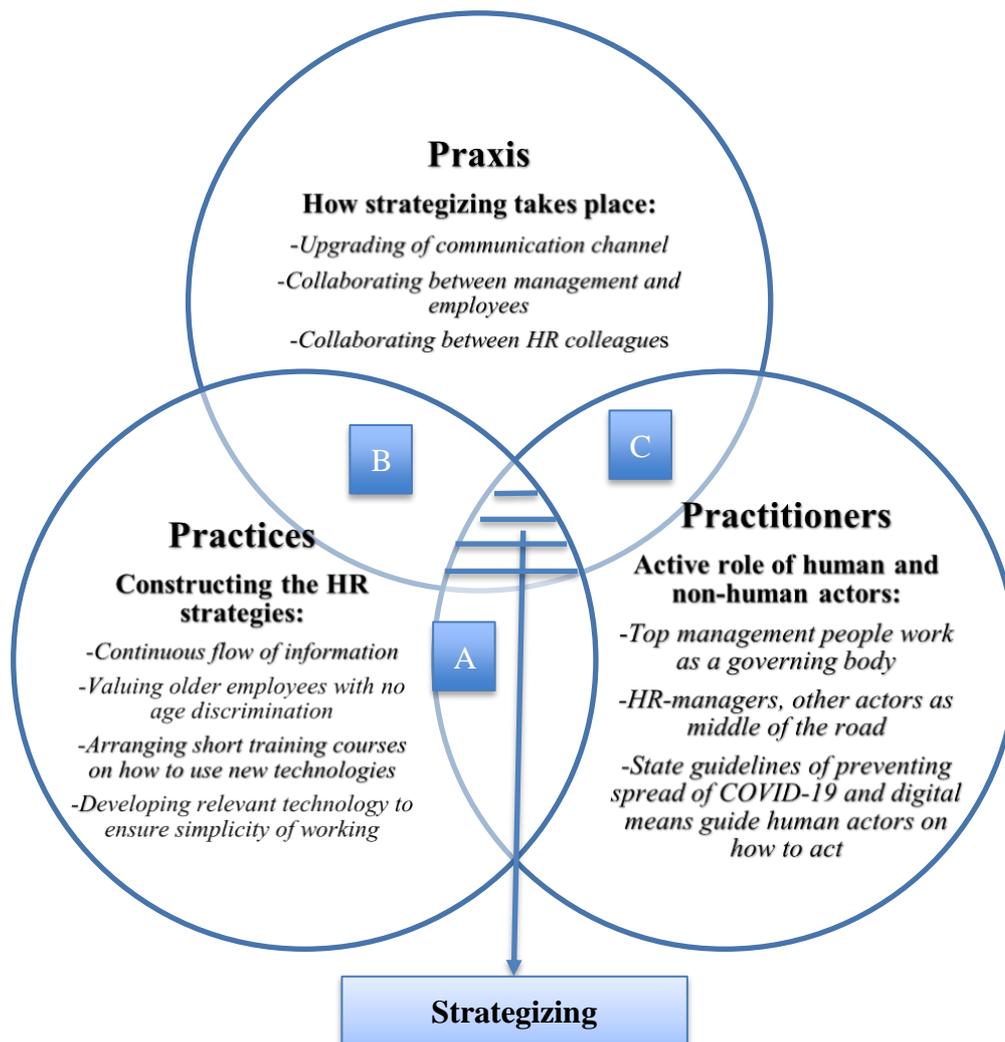


Figure-6.1: Theoretical lens of Strategy as Practice: strategizing to manage older employees
 Source: Developed by the authors of this study and theory originated and adapted from Jarzabkowski et al. (2007).

A: The interconnection between practices and practitioners focuses on how active roles of actors turn into strategies as practices.

B: The interconnection between praxis and practices entails how strategy work is benefited through collaboration and communication channels.

C: The interconnection between practitioners and praxis represents how human and non-

human actors influence the communication channels and collaboration.

Strategizing that takes place within the common space from the three interconnections (between A, B and C stated in the figure 6.1). The communication channels and collaboration between management and employees and between HR colleagues (praxis) could support the human and non-human actors (practitioners) to shape the construction of the organisational strategies (practices).

Practitioners' perspective: Active role of human and non-human actors

Various human and non-human actors act as practitioners who play active roles in handling COVID-19 pandemic issues. For example, the top management people (human actors) work as a governing body. The HR managers and other human actors act as middle of the road in the process. However, state guidelines of preventing spread of COVID-19 and digital technologies that act as non-human actors could implicitly direct all human actors concerning how to act. For this reason, the top management people need to form various different committee, task force, steering group in order to govern the whole system centrally. These groups of practitioners could influence the decision-making process to handle the challenges working with COVID-19 pandemic crisis. For instance, the HR managers have to have adequate possibilities to influence top management to make any good policy. In this respect, the state government and its Corona strategy of reducing spread of COVID-19, other organisations, union leaders etc. work as a source of timely information about how to handle pandemic with regards to working life. The organisations within the sector are in contact with each other. Thus, the human and non-human actors (practitioners) are capable to shape the construction of the organisational strategies to manage their employees, in our case the ageing employees.

Praxis perspective: How strategizing takes place

Praxis indicates how strategizing takes place. This strategizing process ensures strong interconnections among different organisational actors through the upgrading of communication channels and proper collaboration between management bodies and employees and between HR colleagues. The organisations have been installing advanced information technologies, for example, in our case, Zoom as a video conferencing tool. This new version of digital technology has been ensuring interconnectivity among actors and their functions, which support the simplicity and smartness of working. In this respect, the communication channels have been working well during the pandemic. The HR managers always need to inform all concerned regarding the update of government COVID-19 guidelines. This has been supported by the collaboration among them. Moreover, a website is a good medium of communication and collaboration. In recent times, most of the organisations have already launched a homepage on COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, there has been a revolution of communication technologies. This is because the COVID-19 pandemic has indirectly created a pressure to develop updated digital means to continue working from home in the form of remote working.

Practices perspective: Constructing the HR strategies

Strategies as routine organisational practices that support actors to manage ageing employees who are supposed to adapt to the new way of working during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The upgrading of communication channels and collaboration among management, employees and HR colleagues can support the construction of the organisational strategies as daily practices. This is done by ensuring continuous flow of information, valuing older

employees with no ageism discrimination, arranging short training on how to adjust to new technology, developing relevant technology to ensure simplicity of working. These practices that have been argued as HR strategies to manage ageing employees are elaborated below.

Continuous flow of information

In most of the organisations, the important strategy is to have better communication systems and uninterrupted flow of information throughout the organisation. The top management that has excellent, transparent and proactive systems can ensure transparent and regular flow of information through circulating the message via the organisation's website and other means of communication. The CEO, in our case the Vice-chancellor frequently spoke to all people about how the state Corona guidelines can assure safe working life. In this regard, almost all organisations have a special division as a COVID-19 taskforce. In the weekly meetings, HR managers and other actors have discussions with the top authority about how to handle the situation and how to find new ways of solving problems. It is because at the beginning of the pandemic, they did not know all the answers to the crisis questions. As a result, they have to conduct and participate in frequent meetings with all concerned. In the meetings, they have a lot of discussions regarding how to manage HR questions from a broader perspective, for example, how to manage ageing people who need support to adjust digital means of home working.

Valuing older employees with no age discrimination

Employers do not create any discrimination in respect of age and gender and they value competence, experiences and skills. This is done, for example, through involving competent employees in the decision-making process of handling any situation. They do not create any differences between senior and junior employees while allocating the opportunities. For instance, if anyone is in the category of higher in age and has required competence and skills, usually they are promoted to the management positions. In this way, management has valued senior employees. Moreover, employers give the opportunity for leave of absence to adapt the working hour. Employees at all ages have a high degree of freedom regarding how and when they perform their work. People enjoy every modern facility with collaboration with other colleagues, where age does not matter.

Arranging short training courses on how to use new technologies

Organisations arrange short training courses on how to adjust to new digital means for virtual home working, when older employees have special adjustment problems. Why do they do so, it is only because employers want older employees to keep same pace with younger counterparts. Moreover, in order to upgrade their skills for operating the new technologies, organisations have established support systems for their employees who are unable to handle the new technologies regarding how to conduct distance working and how to ensure virtual collaboration among colleagues.

Developing relevant technology to ensure simplicity of working

Some organisations have utilized more money to develop an employee database in order to ensure simplicity of working even staying at home. Some other organisations have been planning to take initiatives even for future work design. For example, development of technology at the salary department could ensure electronic organisational practices through which employees can perform their daily work smoothly. More specifically, in order to develop a technology where responsible authorities are putting all personal papers in the archives that everyone gets and see the necessary information staying and working from home. So, today it is easier to work from home than one year ago it was before the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the extra pressure of the pandemic, organisations have developed their necessary technology within a very short period of time compared to time required before the COVID-19 pandemic.

In summary: Since the issues in our case are within the HR sphere, the aforementioned strategies and practices can manage ageing employees who are specially supposed to adapt to the new way of working during and after the pandemic. Due to the proper communication channels and collaboration, the prevailing interconnectivity and discourse could help organisational HR actors to take these initiatives. This new approach to organisational HR practices is connected with the consequences of the non-human actors, in our case the COVID-19 pandemic and digital technologies.

7. Discussion and conclusions

Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to the HRM and age management research fields through new empirical results. In respect of mapping out effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on employees and their working life, our selected previous studies do not classify the employees by age. However, our study shows the pandemic effects from older vs. younger employees perspectives and argues that effects are the same for employees at all ages. Similar to the studies of Ilmarinen, (2001) and Ayalon et al (2021), while we use the term ‘older employees’ or ‘ageing employees’ or ‘senior employees’ throughout our reporting, we define them as ‘employees who aged 55 years and above’.

Compared to Kniffin et al.’s (2021) study, our study focuses on how the changes of working pattern impact on older employees during the pandemic. Nonetheless, unlike Kniffin et al. (2021) our study includes a post-pandemic focus. However, our findings are similar to the study of Green et al. (2020) who argued that experiences of working from home before and during the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to shape the future of way of working for workers, organisations and employees. In comparison to the Caligiuri et al.’s (2020) study, which suggested three important practices such as redefining organisational performance, facilitating international work and managing uncertainty for navigating the COVID-19 pandemic challenges, our study focuses on quick transformation of traditional office working into virtual home working as a solution to pandemic problem. Moreover, our study urges for the planning for post-COVID-19 world’s work structure, which is characterized by the integration virtual home working with typical office working.

Comparing our study results to that of Ayalon et al (2021), they found the lives of older employees (55+) might be more affected by the negative effects of the COVID-19 globally compared with younger employees. In contrast, our study results show the changes in the way the employees work are the same for all ages. However, in response to how could older employees adjust to the new way of working, our study urges for learning of the new technologies. Similarly, Kooij (2020) takes into consideration the various self-regulation strategies aimed at continuously maintaining or restoring person-environment fit. Comparing our study focus to that of the study of Earl and Taylor’s (2015), which covers only older women workers. In contrast, our study does not classify employees by gender and we focus older employees in general, but we also focus on younger vs. older issue. Similar to the study of Monahan et al. (2020), our study also argues for positive and negative pandemic effects for older employees. However, Monahan et al.’s (2020) article discusses policy changes to health care, employment (layoffs, retirement) and education about ageism, which is absent in our study.

In respect age discrimination issues, in the study of the need for fresh blood, Riach and Kelly (2015) argue that older age inequality within and across working life is the result of vampiric lens, whereas our study shows that there is no age discrimination in the work situation even during COVID-19 pandemic. Similar to Riach and Kelly (2015), Fuertes et al (2013) find that negative practices and attitudes towards older workers are observed, whereas our study

does not find any negative attitudes towards ageing employees. Moreover, our study argues that if senior employees have adequate competence, they are absolutely valued and all employees irrespective of age treated and facilitated equally by the management authority.

Similar to the study of Kołodziejczyk-Olczak et al. (2015), which concluded that the employees believe in that most of the solutions were very attractive for all age groups, our study concludes that effects of the pandemic and solutions are to be not only for older employees but also for other employees. Comparing our study's focus to that of the study of Arman et al. (2021), they argued that older workers have been perceived as either a representative of productive ageing or a barrier to recruiting younger employees. In contrast, our study results show that older employees' experiences and competence have been transferred to younger counterparts while they work together in a team and older employees have not been regarded as any barrier. However, similar to Arman et al. (2021), we also argue that age does not matter, the matter is competence.

In case of quick transformation to virtual home working during COVID-19 pandemic, Bennett and McWhorter (2021) focus on strategizing for 'virtual human resource development' reflecting on forecasting for future work design due to digital transformation during pandemic. Adding to this theme, in our study 'the integration of virtual home working with the traditional office working' is the result from strategizing, which is useful for future working life of all age groups. While comparing our study to that of Wang et al. (2021), they identified the remote work challenges and also identified virtual work characteristics to tackle challenges. In contrast, our study produces some HR strategies to tackle some adjustment problems of older employees. In the studies of Savić (2020) and Allen et al. (2015), they focus on understanding the approach to work from home or remote work or telecommuting. In contrast, our study focuses on how COVID-19 pandemic has forced employees at all ages to work from home and a plan for an integration of this new approach with traditional office working after the pandemic.

Finally, in respect of organisational HR strategies and/or age management strategies to manage older employees, for example, Kadefors et al.'s (2020) organisational measures should be considered in the age management plan. Kadefors et al (2020) take into consideration the organization's situational factors, in which organizations may be categorized as proactive, reactive, passive or chained. Adding to this previous model, in our study, the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions (light or strict) and computer technologies are situational factors that act as non-human actors in shaping the construction of the strategic practices to manage older employees. Similar to the qualitative study of Acar et al, (2015), our study finds that there is an interaction between the theoretical lens of strategy as practice and strategic HR practices. However, Acar et al.'s (2015) study reflects on human focus, whereas our study reflects on both human and non-human focus. Thus, according to the findings of our study, the focus of the strategy-as-practice perspective is both human and non-human, adding this insight to the selected previous literature.

Implications for practice

The specific strategies as practices that we have identified are achievable and measurable for organizations. Thus, in respect of knowledge transfer beyond the scientific community, HR practitioners would directly benefit from realizing the importance of strategizing to manage older employees. They can do this by supporting the adaptation of new ways of working, in the ways that our case study has described. Moreover, this study also gives directions for the international bodies, e.g., WHO, UN, who would directly benefit with the strategies concerning ageing people. It is because these organisations are dealing with sustainable development for people all over the world. For example, the UN's goal 3 of 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) is about achieving better health. Therefore, our study is related to the sustainable development of work life, in practice.

Limitations of the study

Our study suffers from less variety of interview participants because most of them are mainly HR actors within the organisations where homogenous nature of activities is prevailing. Though these categories of participants are those who are most competent in answering the research questions, an inclusion of top management people, line managers, union representatives and regular ageing employees would have given us a more holistic view. Another limitation of our study is our sample size. We aimed for a whole higher education and research sector as sample organisations (thirteen organisations) that we achieved. However, the number of interview participants (eighteen interviews) is comparatively low. This was the number of interviewees we were able to access within the master's thesis of around five months' duration.

Recommendations for future research

During the course of our study, we noticed that the ageing issue that organizations take into consideration as nothing but a number. The important matter is having competence and skills. Therefore, an interesting future research would be how competence of ageing employees affects the talent development of younger employees. As we noticed that senior employees could play active roles as mentors for younger counterparts and their competence development, it would be interesting to study what age management strategies that support older employees can contribute to improving talents for younger employees and how. Since our study results focus on quick transformation of traditional office working into virtual home working and its associated adjustment problems for older employees, another recommendation for future research would be regarding 'new technologies and ageing workforce'.

Concluding remarks

We mapped out the positive and negative pandemic effects for older employees highlighting the employers' attitudes towards ageing vs. younger employees. We presented different working conditions within the three distinctive time situations such as before, during and after the pandemic. When it was normal working life before the COVID-19 pandemic, the organisational work situation was characterized by the flexible workplace working conditions and employers valued older employees and viewed them as productive with no age discrimination. At the workplace, the employees at all ages could enjoy freedom to organise their working schedule.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the way the employees work. As soon as the pandemic started early in 2020, organisations are forced to adopt quick transformation of traditional office working into virtual home working. This new trend of way of working has both positive and negative sides. On the one hand, the employees at all ages feel mental refreshment since they can set their own working schedule and they are valued without age discrimination. On the other hand, older employees who face adjustment problems with new versions of technology have lack of technical skills and feel more mental stress than younger counterparts. Besides, the psychological work environment is disrupted among some younger and some older employees who live alone and do not have spouses and children. These group of employees feel lack of social interactions, bored and depressed while working from home. Nevertheless, these negative pandemic effects would be an inevitable part of isolated home working and would be greatly outweighed by the other advantages. Unfortunately, another point is that the managers, aged 50+, work under extra pressure during pandemic. So, to plan for future work design after the pandemic, the organisations have been planning for the integration of virtual home working with traditional office working.

Through analysing and interpreting the empirical results, we identified different human resource (HR) strategies as routine organisational *practices*: ensuring continuous flow of information, valuing older employees with no age discrimination, arranging short training on how to adjust to new technology and developing relevant technology to ensure simplicity of working. These practices are used to manage employees, mainly ageing employees. The upgrading of communication channels and collaboration between management and employees and also between HR colleagues could support several different actors (*practitioners*) to practice such types of HR strategies.

These findings contribute to previous studies by showing the specific daily practices, praxis and practitioners involved in shaping the strategizing process of treating all ages mainly equally. Our study adds to previous literature of the conditions for age management by highlighting the importance of non-human actors, in our case the COVID-19 pandemic and new use of technology. This has illustrated the usefulness of the strategy-as-practice perspective in uncovering new knowledge that is useful for theoretical as well as practical development of the HR field.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors have declared that they had no conflicts of interest with regards to their authorship or the publication of this thesis, which is based on a scientific article.

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