



Network for Studies on Pensions, Aging and Retirement

# Dutch Employers' Responses to an Aging Workforce

Evidence from Surveys, 2009–2017

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**Abstract**

Employers are central actors in shaping employment opportunities for older workers and facilitating longer working lives. In this article, we examine how employers have adapted their attitudes and organizational policies and practices to deal with an aging workforce. We do so by comparing data from two large surveys on the subject of workforce aging among employers in the Netherlands, held in 2009 and 2017. The situation in the Netherlands forms an interesting case study as the country is in the midst of transitioning from a society with high rates of early retirement to one with comparatively high employment participation rates of older workers and an increasing statutory retirement age. The results show that employers have strong concerns regarding the costs of employing an aging workforce and about the potentially negative effects of aging on organizational productivity. At the same time, however, employers have become much more active in offering human resource practices aimed at accommodating and training older workers, and employers are generally more supportive of work at higher ages. Overall, we identify a growing sense of urgency among employers to invest in longer working lives and to ensure the long-term work ability of older workers. However, there is still a strong desire among employers for policy changes that offer a lower statutory retirement age for workers in physically demanding jobs or a more attainable form of part-time retirement to ease the transition to longer working lives.

## **Nederlandse samenvatting**

Werkgevers spelen een centrale rol bij het faciliteren van mogelijkheden tot langer doorwerken voor oudere werknemers. In dit artikel onderzoeken we op welke manieren werkgevers hun houding en gedrag hebben aangepast in reactie op een vergrijzende arbeidsmarkt. Dit doen we door data van twee grootschalige enquêtes over een vergrijzende arbeidsmarkt onder Nederlandse werkgevers, uit 2009 en 2017, met elkaar te vergelijken. Dit is met name interessant omdat Nederland een transitie heeft doorgemaakt van een land waar vervroegde uittreding gangbaar was, naar een land met relatief hoge arbeidsparticipatie van oudere werknemers en een stijgende pensioenleeftijd. De resultaten laten zien dat werkgevers erg bezorgd zijn over de stijgende kosten en potentieel dalende productiviteit van oudere werknemers. Tegelijkertijd zijn werkgevers veel actiever geworden in het nemen van maatregelen die oudere werknemers ondersteunen in het langer doorwerken, en vinden zij werken tot op hogere leeftijd over het algemeen minder problematisch dan vroeger. Er is een groeiend besef van urgentie onder werkgevers om te investeren in oudere werknemers om langer doorwerken te faciliteren. Toch blijft er ook een wens bestaan voor beleid dat een lagere pensioenleeftijd voor werknemers in zware beroepen mogelijk maakt, of deeltijdpensioen beter toegankelijk maakt, om zo de transitie naar een langere carrière vloeiender te maken.

## 1. Introduction

Population aging is driving the need for longer working lives in developed countries across the globe (OECD, 2017). As the relative share of older individuals in both the workforce and the overall population increases, there are many initiatives to implement policy reforms to promote labor market participation and postpone the timing of retirement of older workers. It is clear that these reforms have substantial implications for the current generation of older workers. They have to work many more years than they had anticipated in order to collect their pension benefits. In many cases, older workers have had to postpone their retirement unexpectedly. This has sometimes led to resentment, disillusionment, and a drop in motivation (Van Solinge & Henkens, 2017).

As the participation of older workers increases, the implications for employers and organizations employing these older workers are likely to be substantial. Employers are confronted with greater numbers of older workers in their organizations, who are likely to stay employed for a longer time than both the older workers themselves and their employers had envisioned (Oude Mulders, 2016). However, how employers deal with these issues remains a largely unanswered question. While most research in this field has focused on the employee's perspective of working longer, research from the employer's perspective is relatively scarce. Understanding how employers view the aging workforce and how they adjust their human resource (HR) policies and practices in response to an aging workforce is crucial for a better understanding of the labor force dynamics of aging societies (Henkens et al., 2017). After all, employers are essential actors in shaping employment opportunities for older workers, and their attitudes and conduct may constrain the options that are available for older workers. In this paper, we therefore address these issues, focusing on the situation in the Netherlands, a country that was characterized by high rates of early retirement not long ago, but that has meanwhile transitioned to a society with comparatively high labor market participation rates of older workers and a higher age at which workers leave employment (Visser et al., 2016).

Our central research question is: *In what ways have employers adapted their attitudes and organizational policies and practices to deal with an aging workforce?* We study this question by comparing the results of two surveys about the effects of an aging workforce on attitudes and organizational policies and practices among Dutch employers. One of these surveys was conducted in 2009, the other one in 2017. In our comparison of employers' policies and practices from 2009 and 2017, we focus on what we consider to be five central issues that concern employers in an aging society. First,

we study how employers view the development of labor costs and labor productivity – main factors associated with the employment of older workers – in a continuously aging society. Second, we examine the extent to which employers use specific HR practices to manage an aging workforce, in particular policies directed at increasing the employability of older workers. Third, we focus on the development of employers' age-related workplace norms over time. We look at how norms about the appropriate moment of retirement have changed in tandem with the increase of the statutory retirement age and the actual age of labor force exit. Fourth, we study changes in employers' recruitment practices as earlier research has shown that many employers have age biases in their recruitment of new personnel, leading to high levels of old age unemployment. An important question in this regard is whether the position of older workers has improved in recent years. Fifth, we study employers' preferences for future public policy adjustments, aimed at a better functioning of the labor market in an aging society. Although this study is carried out in the Netherlands, we believe that our analyses provides useful insights for other countries that are developing retirement reforms to deal with an aging population.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. We will first discuss the demographic and policy context of the Netherlands, providing information about the extent of population aging and the policy changes that have led to increased labor market participation and increasingly longer working lives. Next, we briefly discuss the methods applied in the two surveys that we analyze, held in 2009 and 2017 among a representative sample of Dutch employers. Then we discuss the empirical findings, focusing on the topics described above. In our analyses we will focus on the changes in employers' responses over time. Sectoral differences are not especially focused on in this article, and we will mention sectoral differences only where they seem relevant. Finally, in the discussion section we analyze the main changes in employers' attitudes and conduct and discuss possible future developments.

## 2. Demographic and policy context in the Netherlands

The population of the Netherlands, like that of most other developed countries, is aging rapidly and will continue to age for several decades. This is mainly the result of two demographic developments that coincided in the post-World War II period: declining fertility rates and increasing life expectancy. First, fertility rates have declined sharply, especially in the period from 1950 and 1990. For example, Dutch women born in 1935 had on average 2.5 children, whereas women born in 1965 had on average 1.8 children, a rate which has since stabilized and is projected to remain at this level (Van Duin & Stoeldraijer, 2014). Second, life expectancy has increased substantially in the same period. For example, life expectancy at age 65 was on average 14 and 17 years for men and women, respectively, in 1960 but had increased to 20 and 22 years for men for women, respectively, in 2014. While the rate of increase in life expectancy has slowed down a little, the trend towards longer lives is projected to continue (Deeg et al., 2018; Van Duin & Stoeldraijer, 2014).

These demographic developments will give rise to changes in the relative shares of different age groups in the population. It is estimated that the relative share of older people (i.e., aged 65+) in the Netherlands will increase from approximately 18% now to about 26% in 2040, whereas the share of people in the traditional working age (i.e., aged 20–64) will decrease from approximately 59% now to 52% in 2040. Population aging is currently expected to stabilize around the year 2040, meaning that the relative shares of different age groups will remain roughly the same from that point onwards, and that there will be no return to a population age structure with larger representation of younger people (Van Duin & Stoeldraijer, 2014).

Like in other countries, these demographic developments have put the sustainability of social security and pension systems in the Netherlands under pressure. The Dutch government has therefore in recent years implemented numerous labor market and retirement-related policy reforms to alleviate some of the effects of population aging on government finances. The main focus of these reforms is to prevent and discourage early retirement from the labor market, a phenomenon that was very common until the early 2000s. In the Netherlands, collectively financed early retirement schemes were designed in the 1970s and 1980s to deal with the growing problem of high unemployment, declining industries, and growth stagnation. These schemes allowed older workers to retire several years before reaching the statutory retirement age of 65, with retirement benefits that were characterized by high replacement rates. In addition, there were generous and flexible 'alternative pathways' to early retirement, most prominently through collectively financed unemployment and disability

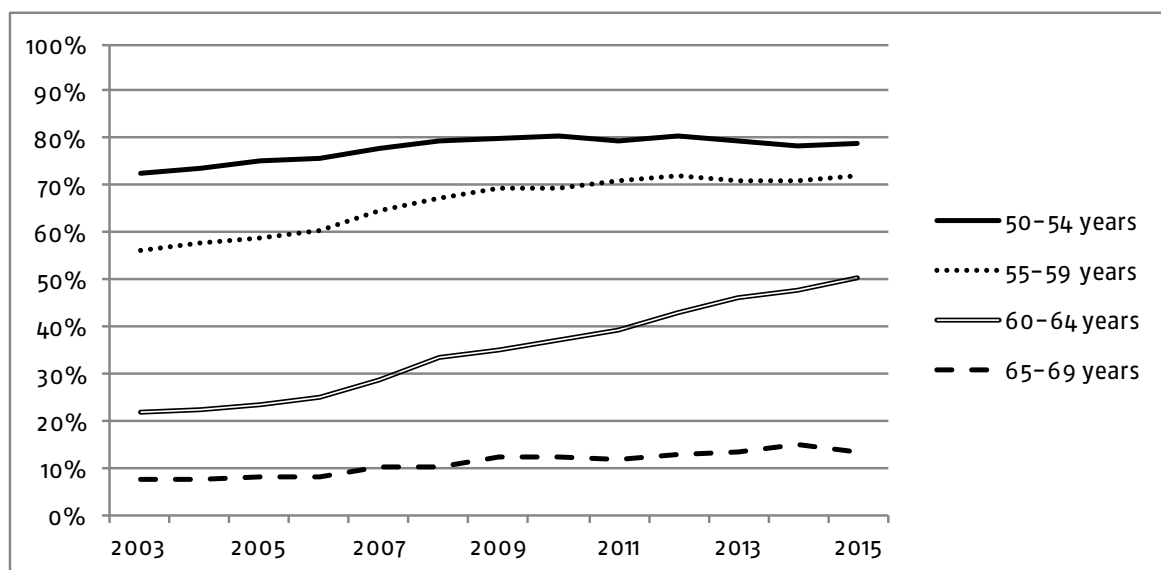


benefits (Kapteyn & De Vos, 1998). These generous early exit opportunities created an 'early retirement culture', in which early retirement was encouraged, and older workers were even expected to open up jobs this way for unemployed younger workers (Hofäcker & Unt, 2013). This resulted in very low employment rates for older workers. Around 1990, the employment rate of older workers reached its lowest point, with just over 50% of men and about 20% of women aged 50–65 in employment. While the employment rate of older women had always been low until that time, especially older men were much more often out of employment than prior to 1990.

Since the 1990s, however, governments with aging populations have been reforming their employment and retirement policies to stop the trend of early retirement and instead promote longer working lives. In the Netherlands, the collectively financed early retirement schemes were first converted to schemes with higher retirement ages and a larger component of individual savings. Later, in 2006, all tax support for early retirement schemes was discontinued, thereby effectively ending the government's support for such schemes. Of course, early retirement is still possible, but it is now financed and designed in an 'actuarially fair' manner: whoever wants to retire earlier than the official retirement age will have to incur pension income penalties, thereby making this route far less attractive than it was before (Euwals et al., 2010). In addition, the generosity and accessibility of unemployment and disability benefits has been greatly reduced by policy changes, which has also made early exit from the labor market difficult (Euwals et al., 2012). Finally, in 2012 the Dutch government passed a law that would increase the eligibility age for the flat-rate public pension gradually from 65 to 67 years by 2021, after which it would be tied to changes in average life expectancy at age 65. According to current projections, this will imply that the statutory retirement age will increase to about 71 years by 2060 (OECD, 2017).

These policy changes have strongly impacted the labor force participation of older workers in the Netherlands. This is illustrated in Figure 1, which shows the labor force participation rates of Dutch older workers between 2003 and 2015. We see there an increase in the labor force participation of older workers between ages 50 and 59, but the changes are most pronounced for the 60–64 age group, with participation in this group rising from 22% in 2003 to 51% in 2015. The increase in labor force participation of older workers aged over 65 is also visible, but that is still at a relatively low level. The trend towards later retirement is also evident from the average age at labor force exit, which increased from 61 years in 2006 to 64 years and 5 months in 2015 (Statistics Netherlands, 2016). The pathways of early exit from the labor market have thus been largely closed off, and there is a clear trend towards longer working lives. With the statutory retirement age gradually increasing and the continued adaptation of older

Figure 1: Labor force participation rates of older workers in the Netherlands, 2003–2015.



Source: Statistics Netherlands

workers to work to a higher age, the employment rates of older workers are expected to continue to increase in the coming years.

### 3. Methods

In this article, we analyze data from two large-scale surveys among Dutch employers on the subject of workforce aging and longer working lives, one held in 2009, the other held in 2017. The 2009 survey was part of a larger European project about employers' practices and policies regarding an aging workforce, which involved data collection among employers in eight European countries (for more details see Conen, 2013). Here, we only use data from Dutch employers. These data were collected through a hardcopy survey between February and May of 2009. In total, 1,077 organizations responded out of 4,700 organizations that were sampled, thus yielding a response rate of 23%. The sample was stratified according to size and sector to ensure sufficient responses from a diverse set of organizations. Sample weights were used in the analysis to correct for the sampling design.

The 2017 survey was similar in subject and design to the Dutch part of the 2009 survey. A similar sampling approach was chosen, with the sample being stratified according to size and sector, but with sample weights constructed to correct for the sampling design. The data were collected between December 2016 and March 2017, with 1,358 responses out of a sample of 6,000 organizations, for a response rate of 23%. The response rate was thus the same as in 2009 and is also comparable to other

*Table 1: Descriptive statistics of survey respondents' main characteristics.*

		2009	2017
<b>Number of respondents</b>		1,077	1,358
<b>Organizational characteristics</b>			
Sector	Industry and construction	33.17%	34.02%
	Services and trade	33.41%	29.31%
	Public sector	33.42%	36.67%
Size	Small (10–50 employees)	42.16%	33.21%
	Medium (51–250 employees)	33.31%	38.66%
	Large (>250 employees)	24.53%	28.13%
Percentage of older workers		24.14%	32.16%
<b>Respondent characteristics</b>			
Position of respondent	CEO / Director / Owner	29.09%	46.71%
	General manager	23.80%	6.50%
	HR manager	26.32%	26.89%
	HR employee	5.17%	11.78%
	Other	15.62%	8.12%
Age		45.8	51.0
Sex	Male	50.46%	62.66%
	Female	49.54%	37.34%

large-scale employer surveys in organizational research, both in the Netherlands and internationally (Conen et al., 2011; Baruch & Holtom, 2008). Surveys were mailed in hardcopy to the organizations, but this time an online response option was added. Half of the responses were in hardcopy, the other half were online. Table 1 contains unweighted descriptive statistics for the main characteristics of the organizations and respondents that participated in the surveys in 2009 and 2017. Results that are presented subsequently have been weighted to adjust for the sampling design outlined above.

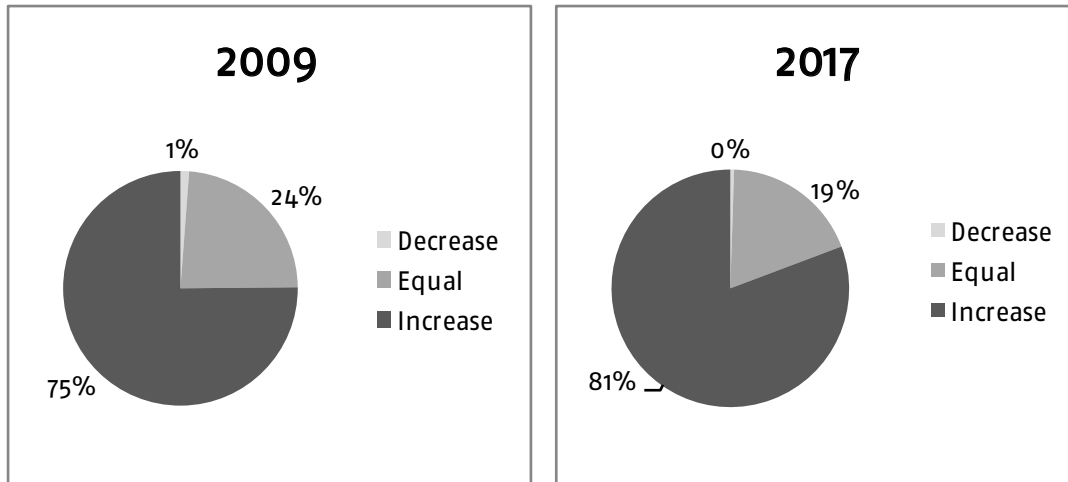
#### 4. Costs and productivity of an aging workforce

One of the key issues associated with the aging of the workforce is that of the actual and/or perceived rise in costs and declining productivity (Conen et al., 2012). In most organizations, wages increase in line with tenure, so that older workers are generally more costly for employers than younger workers. Wage increase with seniority fits within implicit contract theory and is meant to keep workers motivated throughout their entire career within the firm (Lazear, 1979). Although seniority wages are common in most jobs, the extent to which wages rise with tenure differs strongly between organizations, industries, and countries. Earlier research has shown that the presence of the seniority principle in wage setting is more pervasive in the Netherlands than elsewhere, meaning that organizational tenure is rewarded to a larger extent in the Netherlands than in other countries (Conen et al., 2012). This may be partly due to the strong tradition of collective bargaining between employers' and employees' representatives. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has identified the comparatively steep level of seniority-based wages in the Netherlands as a potential problem as population aging continues, and it has recommended a wage-setting mechanism that is based more on performance and less on tenure than the current mechanism (OECD, 2014).

A closely related issue is the development of workers' productivity as they grow older. It is generally acknowledged that workers of different ages have different qualities that may contribute to their productivity, mostly related to their physical and mental capacities and to the experience and knowledge they have built up over the years. For example, older workers are generally considered to possess more 'soft skills', such as better social skills and more commitment to the organization, whereas younger workers are generally considered to possess more 'hard skills', such as mental and physical capacities and the willingness to learn and apply new technologies to the work process (Van Dalen et al., 2010). Still, studies of the relationship between age and productivity have discovered no overall effect of age on general productivity, although links to more specific aspects of job performance have been found (Ng & Feldman, 2008). The extent to which productivity is affected by the aging of the workforce thus seems to depend especially on the type of job and the specific characteristics of the employees. However, negative stereotypes about older workers' productivity remain persistent and may influence the way in which employers respond to an aging workforce (Posthuma & Campion, 2009).

Figure 2 shows how employers think that labor costs within their organizations would develop in the case of continuing workforce aging. The results show a small

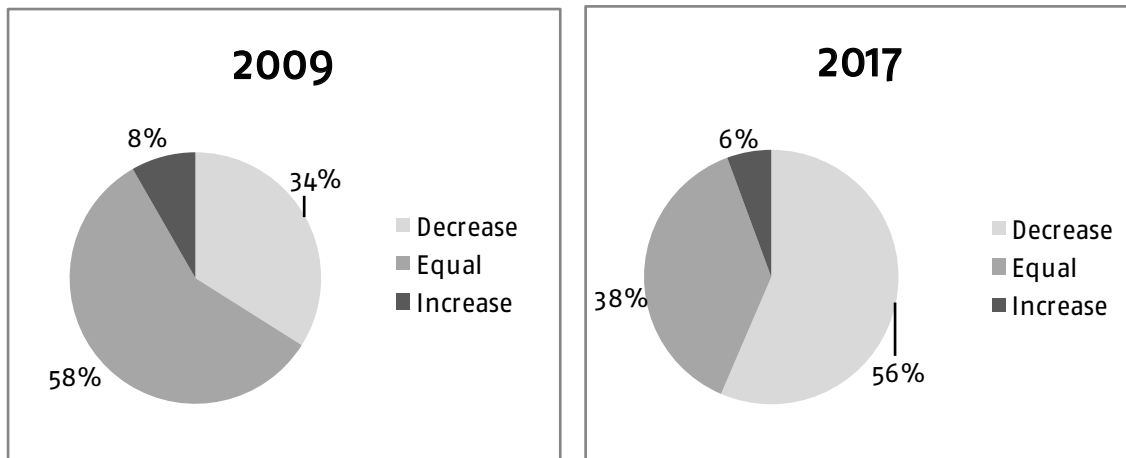
*Figure 2: Employers' expectation of labor costs in a continuously aging workforce*



Note: Based on the question "If the average age of your workforce were to increase by five years, what would be the effect on labor costs?"

Source: Employers' surveys 2009 & 2017

*Figure 3: Employers' expectation of labor productivity in a continuously aging workforce*



Note: Based on the question "If the average age of your workforce would increase by five years, what would be the effect on labor productivity?"

Source: Employers' surveys 2009 & 2017

increase in the proportion of employers that expect rising labor costs. In 2009, 75% of employers expected labor costs to increase as a result of aging staff, whereas in 2017 81% of employers thought so. Almost no one expected a decrease in labor costs: in 2009 only 1%; in 2017 none.

Figure 3 shows how employers' expectations of the development of labor productivity in the case of continuing population and workforce aging. Here, the differences between 2009 and 2017 are far more striking. In 2009, 34% of employers expected

a decrease in overall productivity, 58% expected productivity to remain roughly the same, and 8% expected an increase in productivity. In 2017, 56% of employers expected a decrease in overall productivity as a result of aging staff, 38% expected it to remain the same, and only 6% expected an increase. Overall, the results indicate that employers have become more pessimistic about the effects of workforce aging. The growing gap between labor costs and productivity in an aging society can have strong implications because, when wage costs increase while productivity stagnates or declines, profit margins will be under pressure and organizations may need to restructure or downsize.

These results are worrisome, because longer working lives are a new 'fact' that employers have to deal with. In particular, the concerns about productivity seem to reflect the decrease in the possibilities for employers since 2009 to provide an easy exit to less productive older workers before the statutory retirement age. Instead, the statutory retirement age has also been increased gradually and will continue to increase in the coming years, so that employers need to employ their older workers even longer in the future. Especially when it comes to heavy physical labor, employers may expect a decline in productivity as employees reach a higher age.

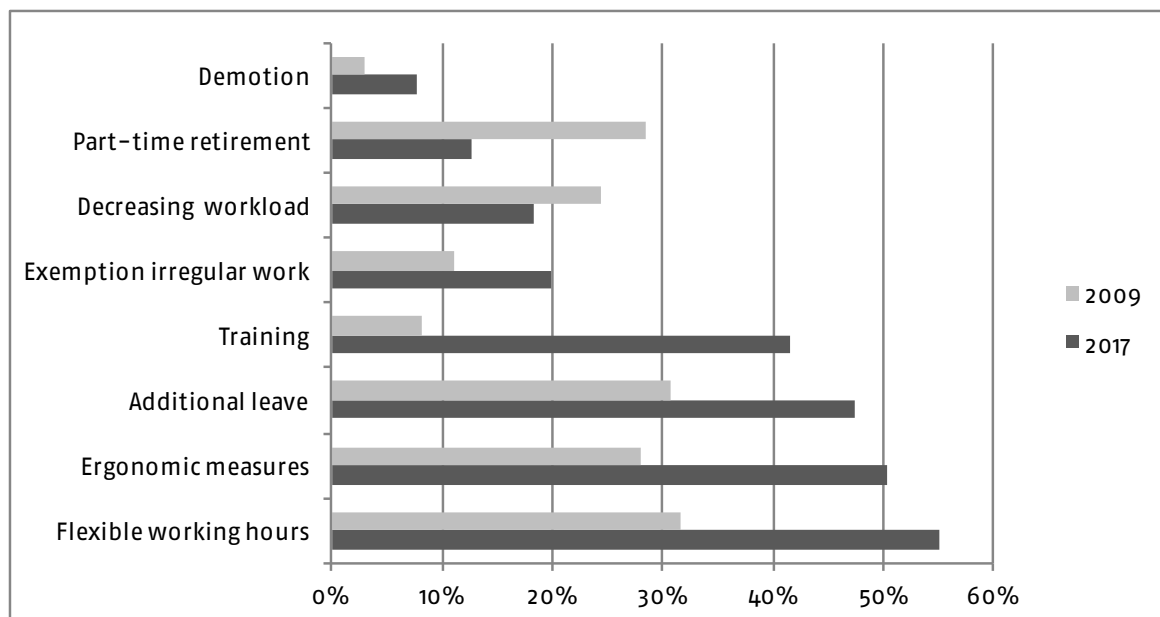
## 5. Investing in older workers' work ability

While employers' views about the costs and productivity of an aging workforce provide valuable information about why many of them view population aging as a challenge, they do not reveal which strategies or policies employers choose to deal with an aging workforce. This information might be extracted more directly from the HR practices that are specifically applied to stimulate the work ability of employees. The application of specific HR practices serves multiple functions, such as creating better working conditions for different sets of employees, creating opportunities for the personal development of employees, but also signaling an organization's strategic purposes and intentions towards current and prospective staff (Rau & Adams, 2013). HR practices aimed specifically at older workers are especially important for understanding how organizations deal with an aging workforce, since organizations may use their HR practices to, for example, encourage or discourage working until or even after the statutory retirement age (Oude Mulders et al., 2017). Van Dalen et al. (2015) offer a useful taxonomy of age-based HR practices, distinguishing three types: (1) accommodation practices to compensate for the possible decline in physical and cognitive capacities of older workers, (2) development practices to increase the productive capacity of older workers, and (3) exit practices that enable older workers to retire from the labor force, either fully or partially.

Figure 4 shows how often Dutch employers have applied HR practices that affect the working conditions and work ability of older workers. The results clearly show a moderate to strong increase in the application of most of the HR practices, mostly accommodation and development-related, but a decrease in exit practices. More than half of Dutch employers now offer one or more accommodation measures, aimed at compensating the potential age-related loss in physical and cognitive functioning. Offering flexible working hours and ergonomic measures are the most commonly applied accommodative HR practices, with over half of the employers offering such measures. The increase in offering additional leave for older workers is striking, given that this is a HR practice that typically raises the costs associated with employing older workers. Still, the increase in application of this measure shows that many employers believe that allowing older workers to take additional leave improves their work ability in the long run, possibly by reducing the risk of absence due to illness.

Demotion – lowering an employee's rank and salary – is often mentioned by managers and policy makers as a means of increasing the employability of older workers in an aging labor force. However, in practice, demotion is rarely applied (Bowlus & Robin, 2012; Josten & Schalk, 2010). Our results indicate that, although



*Figure 4: Employers' application of age-based HR policies*

Note: Based on the question "Which of the following HR policies are applied in your organization?"  
 Source: Employers' surveys 2009 & 2017

the percentage of organizations that use demotion for older workers as an HR policy instrument has more than doubled, it is still quite rare, making it the least applied policy instrument. Most likely this is due to the fear that demotion will demotivate other employees (Van Dalen & Henkens, 2016; Verheyen & Guerry, 2018).

Even though accommodation measures are clearly applied more overall, the biggest difference in employers' HR practices between 2009 and 2017 is the increase in development-related HR practices of offering training opportunities to older workers: only 8% of employers offered these in 2009, but 40% in 2017. It appears that Dutch employers are embracing the potential benefits of lifelong learning and realize that offering training opportunities to older workers can increase their long-term work potential, which is beneficial to the organization. Finally, there is a clear decline in exit-related HR practices. Offering part-time retirement arrangements to older workers, thereby allowing them to work fewer hours before their full retirement, has decreased considerably, with 29% of employers offering part-time retirement in 2009 and only 13% offering in 2017. This may partly be explained by the phasing out of part-time retirement arrangements that were still available in 2009 for employees born before 1950, but no longer in 2017.

The increase in accommodative and development age-based HR policies should be seen within the specific context of the Dutch labor market. Due to relatively high level of employment protection legislation, it is difficult and costly to dismiss older

workers. Given that the opportunities for early exit from the labor market have also strongly diminished, organizations have a vested interest to ensure the work ability of older workers until they reach their mandatory retirement age, which is tied to the statutory retirement age. This has most likely increased the need to invest in the long-term mental and physical fitness of older workers, driving the increase of development and accommodation HR practices. The decrease of exit opportunities should also be viewed in this context. While many older workers view part-time retirement before full retirement as an attractive option, employers and employees alike have been shown to be reluctant to implement this due to the high costs associated with (partial) early exit from the labor market (Bolhaar & Van Vuuren, 2018). Overall, the changes in age-based HR policies of employers signal a growing sense of urgency among employers to ensure the long-term work ability of older workers.

## 6. Retirement age norms

The normative context in which decisions regarding the employment of older workers are taken is another factor to consider. Individuals, including organizational actors such as CEOs and leading managers, have normative ideas about such factors as the appropriate timing of retirement, which may affect how they deal with the issue of workforce aging (Oude Mulders et al., 2017; Radl, 2012; Settersten & Hagestad, 1996). Such age-related workplace norms may stem, for example from personal values about the appropriateness of working at a higher age, individual experiences with older workers, and observed attitudes and behavior of others, but also from institutional factors such as a statutory retirement age that is coupled to a public pension and to mandatory retirement regulations.

The *retirement age norm* is a key normative concept that taps into a person's expectations about the appropriate timing of retirement, or at what age workers should retire. It may specify a single age at which one thinks a worker should retire, or it may specify lower and upper boundaries between which the retirement transition should occur. The retirement age norm adhered to by major organizational actors has proven to be a useful predictor of employers' behavior regarding older workers. For example, the retirement age norm influences decisions such as about the retention of older workers (Karpinska et al., 2013) and hiring of (early) retirees (Oude Mulders et al., 2014), but also more broadly organizational practices aimed at extending working lives (Oude Mulders et al., 2017).

*Table 2: Employers' age norms regarding the appropriate age of retirement, statutory retirement ages, and average age of labor market exit in 2009 and 2017*

	2009		2017	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
<i>Retirement age norm</i>				
Lower boundary	58.9	4.0	59.9	5.4
Upper boundary	66.4	4.8	67.6	5.0
Statutory retirement age	65		66*	
Average age of labor market exit	62.5		64.4**	

Note: Based on the questions "At which age do you generally consider a person too young to retire?" (lower boundary) and "At which age do you generally consider a person too old to work 20 hours a week or more?" (upper boundary)

\* The statutory retirement age was gradually increased throughout 2017; it was 66 at the end of 2017. \*\* Statistic from 2016, as this was the latest available data.

Source: Employers' surveys 2009 & 2017

Table 2 shows the lower and upper boundaries of the retirement age norm adhered to by Dutch employers in 2009 and 2017. The lower boundary indicates the age at which employers believe workers to be generally too young to retire, and the upper boundary indicates the age at which employers believe workers to be too old to work at least 20 hours a week. Additionally, Table 2 shows the statutory retirement age in those years, as well as the average age of actual labor market exit in the Netherlands. The table shows an overall increase in both the lower and upper boundaries of the retirement age norm between 2009 and 2017, with the lower boundary increasing from 58.9 to 59.9 years, and the upper boundary increasing from 66.4 to 67.6 years. The statutory retirement age increased from 65 years in 2009 (applicable until 2012) to 66 in 2017, and it will increase further to 67 in 2021. The average age of labor market exit increased from 62.5 to 64.4 years between 2009 and 2017.

While norms are relatively slow to change, it is interesting to note that the retirement age norm gradually seems to change in response to increases in the statutory retirement age and the average age at labor market exit in recent years. At the same time, the figures show increasing diversity among the age norms of employers. In 2017, 43% of employers reported an upper boundary retirement age norm that was lower than the statutory retirement age, whereas in 2009 only 17% did so. This suggests that employers – while adjusting to higher retirement ages – have concerns about the pace at which the retirement age goes up.

## 7. Older workers and shortages on the labor market

Longer working lives are not only reflected in continued employment of older workers, but also in unemployed older workers being hired and older workers switching jobs. Traditionally, labor shortages are regarded as the most effective stimulus for the position of older workers in the labor market. In this section we analyze which practices employers turn to when they are confronted with a shortage of suitable personnel. The results from both surveys are presented in Table 3, with the results being divided into subcategories, focusing on certain target groups (such as older workers, females, and migrants), practices aimed at current employees, and practices aimed at reducing labor demand.

The results show that, overall, employers applied a more diverse range of practices in 2017 than in 2009. Looking more closely, we can see that there is an increase in practices aimed at certain target groups, mainly on the employment of women, especially in male-dominated industries and for top positions in organizations. However, there is no change in focus on the hiring of older workers, as merely 10% of employers focus on hiring such workers in case of shortages. This contrasts with findings that showed an increased likelihood of older workers being hired in better economic conditions (Oude Mulders et al., 2018a). Employers also do not focus more

*Table 3: Employers' hiring and retention practices in the face of labor market shortages*

	2009	2017
<b>Practices aimed at target groups</b>		
Recruiting more women workers	19%	29%
Offering higher wages	16%	17%
Recruiting more older workers	10%	10%
Recruiting staff from abroad	8%	10%
Recruiting former staff who had taken (early) retirement	4%	4%
<b>Practices aimed at current employees</b>		
Encouraging workers to work until the statutory retirement age	17%	17%
Working more hours	7%	11%
Encouraging workers to work beyond the statutory retirement age	8%	6%
<b>Practices aimed at reducing labor</b>		
Outsourcing labor	4%	25%
Substituting technology for labor	15%	22%
Relocating production capacity abroad	4%	5%

Note: Based on the question "If you are or were to be confronted with a shortage of suitable personnel, which practices do you or would you consider?"

Source: Employers' surveys 2009 & 2017

on increasing the productivity of current employees. An equal proportion of employers (17%) in 2017 encourage their employees to work until the statutory retirement age as they did in 2009, whereas encouraging workers to work *beyond* the statutory retirement age decreased from 8% in 2009 to 6% in 2017. Of course, this is likely to relate to the increasing statutory retirement age (see Table 2 or the policy context above), which already led to older workers working longer than before. The biggest increase in employers' practices, however, comes from practices that are aimed at reducing labor demand. Especially outsourcing of labor has become far more popular, with an increase from 4% in 2009 to 25% in 2017. This is likely the result of changing economic conditions: in 2009 the Dutch economy was still feeling the effects of the global financial crisis of 2007–2008 and was experiencing a strong growth of unemployment, whereas in 2017 the Dutch economy had recovered from the economic crises of the previous decade and the labor market encountered shortages in many sectors.

## 8. Future policy reforms

Obviously not only employers and employees play an important role in the labor market. As mentioned earlier, also the government plays a key role in shaping the context for longer working lives, through its labor market and retirement-related public policies. In the public debate, much attention is given to longer working lives, with many commenters pointing to the growing inequality between lower and higher educated workers and solidarity between generations. Some argue that the current policy, which could lead to a statutory retirement age above age 70 by 2060, is unsustainable, especially for older workers with lower education and those in physically demanding jobs. This is also reflected in the considerable discontent among low educated workers about the public pension reforms that have been implemented (Van Solinge & Henkens, 2017). Many people are calling for additional policy reforms to alleviate the effects of workforce aging and to make longer working lives more attainable.

Table 4 presents a number of possible policy reforms to that end and the extent to which employers support those reforms. It is clear that the higher public pension age is considered to be the biggest issue, especially for physically demanding jobs: 79% of employers support a lower statutory retirement age for workers in such jobs. Almost two third of employers are also in favor of a more flexible labor market, which could be attained by relaxing the current employment protection legislation and making dismissal of employees easier and less costly. While this may reduce the problems associated with workforce aging for employers, it may also lead to increasing unemployment among older workers, especially considering employers' assessments of the costs and productivity of older workers (see Figures 2 and 3). Sixty-one per cent of employers are in favor of governmental stimulation of part-time retirement, as this may make the transition from full-time work to full-time retirement easier.

*Table 4: Employers' desired policy reforms*

	2017
Lower retirement age for heavy physical labor	79%
More flexible labor market	64%
Stimulating part-time retirement	61%
Stimulating demotion	57%
Decreasing seniority wages	45%

Note: Based on the question "Older workers need to work longer than before. In light of this, which public policies do you consider desirable?"

Source: Employers' survey 2017

Acceptance by workers of part-time retirement instead of full-time retirement may contribute to longer working lives, but it could also hamper the transition, if workers take part-time retirement instead of working full-time without postponing their full retirement. We did not ask how part-time retirement should be stimulated, but tax exemptions for workers taking part-time retirement, or allowing part-time retirees to be economically active, could lead to more part-time retirement. Over half of the employers also would like to see the government stimulating the possibility of demotion, most likely because this could decrease the costs associated with workforce aging and might bring the productivity of older workers in line with their wages. Finally, 45% of employers are supportive of decreasing the level of seniority wages in the Netherlands, as was suggested by the OECD (2014).



## 9. Discussion

After several decades during which workers and employers used the exit route of early retirement, current retirement reforms force both employers and employees to adjust to the idea of a longer working life (Beehr & Bennett, 2015). The development and implementation of pension reforms aimed at longer working lives are evident in most developed countries. While growing evidence shows how older workers extend their careers in response to these pension reforms, much less is known about the attitudes and behaviors of employers. In this article we have analyzed responses of Dutch employers to workforce aging over the past decade.

The results indicate that employers have become increasingly involved in managing their older employees. With respect to their HR policies and practices, we see a clear tendency to invest in the productivity of older workers. Employers are more inclined to provide training to their older workers than previously. Also, accommodative policies, such as flexible work schedules and ergonomic measures, have become more common. Policies aimed at an early exit route have decreased in number. In addition, workplace norms are increasingly addressing the appropriate retirement age and bringing this in line with the increasing retirement age. One might conclude as such that employers are highly responsive to the higher retirement ages enforced by recent public policy reforms. At the same time, however, the results indicate growing concerns among employers about the lack of flexibility that the pension system offers to employers and older workers to manage the retirement transition. Our findings show that expectations of employers have become far more pessimistic in the past decade about how an aging workforce will affect labor productivity. Furthermore, there is overwhelming support among employers for public policies to support earlier exit for those in physically demanding occupations and for stimulating part-time retirement.

In short, employers' responses to the aging workforce are a double-edged sword: employers are becoming more proactive in investing in the work ability of older workers and accommodating longer working lives, but they also express the need for an early retirement option for older workers whose capacity to work until an advanced age is limited. This may well become a stylized fact of the present and future organization, where employment of workers aged 60 years and older is no longer an exception but the rule.

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