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From early exit to retention

Employers and the reconfiguration of
active ageing policy

Konrad Turek, Kène Henkens

Academic paper



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Abstract

Active ageing policies have traditionally centred on state interventions and individual adaptation, leaving employers largely absent from policy discourse and scholarly analysis. In this chapter, we argue that employers have emerged as essential actors in the transition toward actively ageing societies. We conceptualise their expanding role through the lens of a new welfare mix, a reconfiguration in which responsibility for later-life employment outcomes is shared across governments, employers, and older workers. Drawing on political economy, human capital theory, and organisational research, we examine how the closure of early exit pathways, re-commodification of social policy, and tightening labour markets have repositioned employers from passive beneficiaries of state-sponsored early retirement to active co-producers of welfare outcomes. The chapter traces the empirical shift from the early-exit paradigm toward proactive age management and identifies structural (e.g., firm size and sector) and attitudinal (e.g., persistent age stereotypes) factors that shape the adoption of accommodative and developmental HR strategies. We also address the problem of uneven access to age management and the fairness risks of a system that depends heavily on employer initiative. We conclude that the proactive turn, while significant, is driven in large part by labour-market tightness and demographic pressures rather than by durable normative commitment. Employer strategies are necessary but not sufficient, and sustainable active ageing policies require public frameworks that support equitable and inclusive extended working lives.

Keywords

active ageing, welfare, employers, age management, extending working lives, older workers, social inequality

1. Introduction

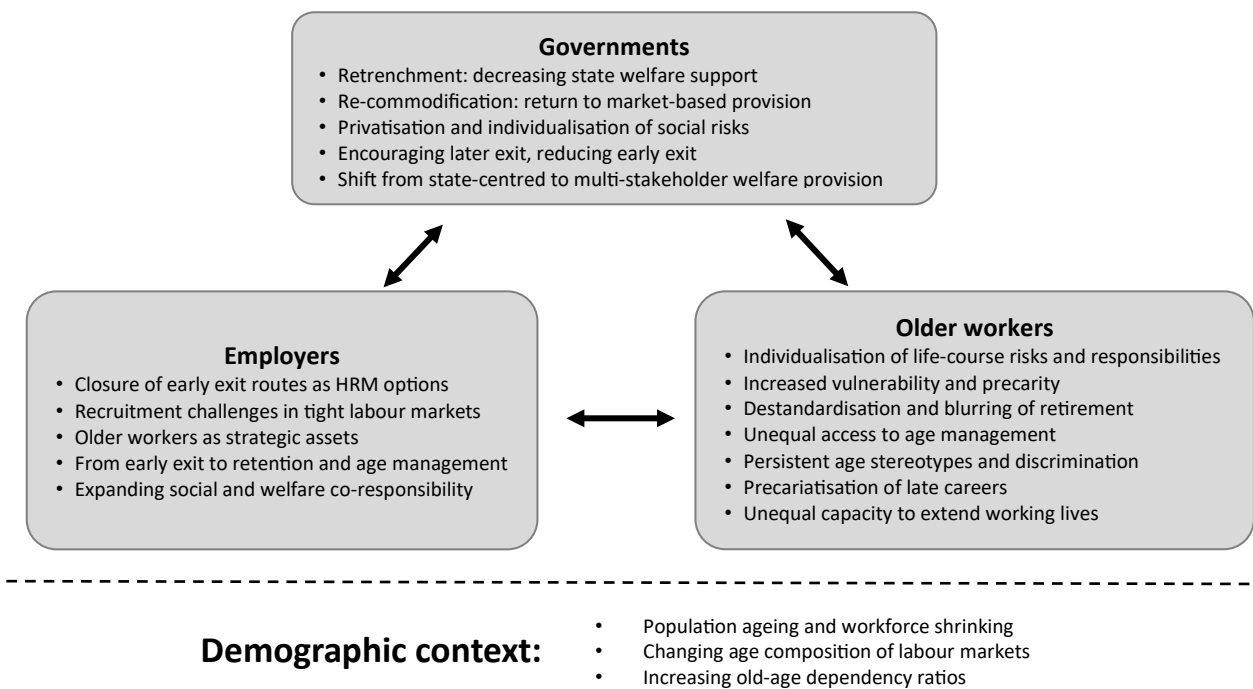
Public debates about rising retirement ages and pension reforms often frame the challenge as a dialogue between two key actors: welfare systems that must adapt to demographic transitions, and older individuals who must adjust by extending their working lives. However, this binary perspective overlooks a critical third actor whose influence significantly shapes the outcomes of active ageing policies: the employer. Population ageing, labour shortages, and the rising old-age dependency ratio have substantially altered the economic calculus surrounding older workers (Jensen 2024). Where employers once sought to externalise the costs of an ageing workforce through state-subsidised early exit pathways, the closure of these routes and the raising of

statutory retirement ages have progressively internalised those costs within organisations (Ebbinghaus 2015; Hofäcker & Unt 2013). Employers must adjust to this changing institutional context, and their responses carry growing consequences for the welfare outcomes of ageing populations.

In this chapter, we argue that employers have emerged as essential actors in the transition toward actively ageing societies and as a crucial element in what we conceptualise as a *new welfare mix*, understood as a broader reconfiguration of welfare arrangements that shapes later-life trajectories. We organise our argument around the welfare triangle depicted in Figure 1, which situates employers alongside governments and older workers as three interdependent actors within a shared demographic context.

On the government side, contemporary welfare arrangements are increasingly characterised by retrenchment and re-commodification. Since the 1990s, the dominant paradigm in ageing policies has evolved from an early-exit orientation toward promoting later retirement (Hofäcker & Unt 2013; Jensen 2024). This shift represents a reversal of the late twentieth century, when governments extensively used early retirement programs and generous pension benefits to manage labour markets and unemployment. Facing the challenges of population ageing and its fiscal implications, governments have begun to limit costly early exit pathways and reorient their policies toward active ageing and extended working lives.

Figure 1. *Active ageing policies and the welfare triangle*



This welfare restructuring affects how older workers manage their late careers and experience retirement transitions. The individualisation of life-course risks leads to increased vulnerability, as traditional buffers like early retirement schemes are dismantled (Brückner & Mayer 2005; Vickerstaff & Cox 2005). As state-centred protection weakens, older workers' economic security and social standing increasingly depend on their agency in managing later-life employment and transitions.

These developments also reshape the organisational environment in which longer working lives unfold, as well as the role of employers. The responsibility, and the risks, associated with longer working lives are now shared not only by individuals and policymakers, but also by the organisations in which older workers are embedded. While public policies establish the institutional framework for retirement and set broad expectations, the concrete conditions, motivations, and capabilities for extending working lives are largely defined within organisations. Employers' decisions extend well beyond organisational boundaries: they shape individuals' life chances by distributing opportunities and access to meaningful work and financial security (Amis et al. 2020; Riaz 2015; Rivera 2020). Rather than emerging solely as a by-product of welfare retrenchment, the expanding role of employers is actively encouraged and formalised through public policy. In many European welfare states, governments frame employers as co-responsible actors in achieving public policy goals related to extended working lives and healthy ageing. Dutch coalition agreements during the 2010s, for example, explicitly emphasised the shared responsibility of employers and employees to ensure that workers can reach retirement age in good health through sustainable employability policies (Dutch Government 2012). Such policy discourse reflects a deliberate institutionalisation of the welfare mix in which governments no longer merely withdraw but actively assign roles to employers. Employers are therefore not only affected by welfare reform but are actively enlisted in delivering outcomes related to employability, health, and retirement timing.

Understanding how this expanding role plays out in practice, and with what consequences, requires closer attention to what employers actually do. The central contribution of this chapter is a systematic account of employers' practices and non-practices regarding recruitment, retention, and the management of older workers. As we will argue, age management has moved from the margins of HR to a strategic priority for many organisations. This proactive shift should primarily be understood as employers' response to broader demographic transformations in labour markets and the accompanying modifications to welfare systems. The chapter proceeds as follows. Section 2 examines theoretical perspectives on the employer's role in managing older workers, drawing on human capital theory, organisational and management frameworks, and political economy approaches. Section 3 maps the expanding landscape of employer-based active

ageing policies, including new retirement patterns, age management strategies, and the institutional arrangements that support them. Section 4 discusses the challenges and inequalities that attend this growing employer role. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of the new welfare mix for social policy and future research.

2. Employers and the welfare mix

2.1. The active ageing paradigm and the absent employer

In response to the need to adjust to new demographic structures, public policies, welfare systems, and public debates oriented towards the ageing population have undergone a significant shift in recent decades. Until the 1990s, the public and policy interest in population ageing was dominated by alarmist portrayals of older people as a demographic burden, evoking fears of intergenerational conflict and fiscal collapse (Robertson 1997). From the late 1990s onward, public debate gradually gave way to more balanced perspectives emphasising social adaptability and institutional reform. For instance, Disney (1996) and Mullan (2000) argued that demographic ageing, though significant, need not cause a crisis if societies adjust through behavioural and policy adaptation. The EU and the OECD adopted the active *ageing paradigm*, replacing earlier notions of *productive ageing* and emphasising prolonged labour-market participation and lifelong engagement. The concept of productive ageing (Butler & Gleason 1985) was grounded in life-course perspectives that challenged the notion of old age as a stage of withdrawal, but it was criticised for its narrow focus on economic contributions (Hinterlong et al. 2001; Taylor 2019). Defined by the World Health Organisation as "the process of optimising opportunities for health, participation, and security to enhance quality of life as people age" (WHO 2002), the active ageing framework broadened the focus from economic contribution to overall well-being, autonomy, and social inclusion (Walker 2002).

Both productive and active ageing policy paradigms, however, framed ageing primarily as an individual and state concern. Employers were largely absent from these policy discourses and assumed to have little responsibility for ageing outcomes. Although the active ageing paradigm broadened the focus beyond older adults' productivity and economic contributions, it directed policy attention primarily toward state-level interventions and individual behaviour change. Organisations played a contextual role in the ageing process: the workplace was acknowledged as a site where active ageing succeeds or fails, yet policy mechanisms to substantively engage employers remained limited. For employers, ageing was primarily an organisational challenge rather than a societal concern (Remery et al. 2003). We argue that the situation has changed, and that understanding how and why employers have moved from the margins to the centre of active ageing governance is essential for grasping the logic of the new welfare mix.

2.2. Welfare restructuring and the repositioning of employers

The development of the active ageing paradigm has been accompanied by the evolution of welfare systems. The welfare state reforms introduced broadly since the late 1990s have created substantially stronger incentives to extend working lives through multiple mechanisms (Hofäcker & Unt 2013; Jensen 2024). Governments have raised statutory retirement ages, tightened eligibility criteria for disability and unemployment benefits that previously served as alternative exit routes, and introduced actuarial adjustments that financially penalise early retirement while rewarding delayed retirement. Simultaneously, many countries have implemented activation policies that emphasise lifelong learning, skills upgrading, and age management practices to enhance older workers' employability. These combined push-and-pull factors—reducing the attractiveness of early exit while enhancing opportunities and rewards for continued employment—have contributed to significantly higher labour force participation at older ages across most developed economies (Boissonneault et al. 2020; Ebbinghaus 2006).

The changing welfare context is part of a broader trend toward the re-commodification of social policy, reshaping the relationship between individuals and social risks (Greer 2015; Holden 2003; Pierson 2001). Whereas the post-war welfare state partially de-commodified labour by shielding citizens from market pressures through social insurance and income protection, contemporary reforms re-commodify it, making individual well-being dependent on labour market participation and success (Crystal et al. 2017; Hacker 2004). For older workers, this transformation means that traditional buffers against labour-market vulnerability (such as early retirement schemes, generous unemployment benefits, and disability pathways) have been substantially weakened (Ebbinghaus 2015; Sonnet et al. 2014). Employment and income levels directly determine pension benefits under contribution-based systems, and many countries have introduced adjustments that reward delayed retirement with higher benefits. In this context, the ability and opportunity to work later in life become increasingly consequential for economic security in old age (Riekhoff 2016). The result is a major shift in the welfare balance, placing greater pressure on older workers to maintain their market value.

Welfare restructuring has not only changed the incentives facing older workers but also altered employers' position within the wider welfare mix. As states reduce welfare generosity, employers find themselves exposed to demographic and labour-market pressures that were previously buffered by public programmes. The closure of publicly financed exit routes, combined with tightening labour markets, means that decisions once externalised to the welfare state (e.g., when and how older workers leave, and on what terms they remain) are often internalised within organisations (Ebbinghaus 2015; Hofäcker & Unt 2013). What had previously been a predominantly state-centred welfare arrangement is replaced by a mixed governance model in

which employers assume a growing share of responsibility for labour-market attachment, employability, and later-life well-being.

This repositioning does not unfold in a vacuum. Political economy and institutionalism in industrial relations emphasise that institutional contexts profoundly shape employer strategies and organisational practices (Paauwe & Farndale 2017). National employment systems, labour regulations, and negotiations with social partners establish distinct logics that define the typical and feasible set of management practices available to employers. The literature evidences significant country differences in age management approaches (Conen et al. 2012; Flynn & Schröder 2018; Muller-Camen et al. 2011; Van Dalen et al. 2009). For example, Berg et al. (2022) contrast the stronger institutional incentives and regulatory protections supporting older workers in coordinated economies such as Germany with the weaker and more voluntaristic employer responses typical of liberal market economies such as the United States. As Henkens (2022) notes, policies related to ageing and retirement are formulated at the societal level but implemented within organisations. Employers actively mediate in this process, filtering policy goals through organisational priorities, workplace cultures, and managerial decisions. Responses to identical pension reforms can thus vary considerably: some employers implement supportive measures that enable longer, healthier careers, while others make minimal adjustments or reinforce age norms that shorten working lives (Turek et al. 2020; Van Dalen et al. 2010a). The resulting outcomes often reflect complex processes of negotiation, adaptation, and constraint, producing substantial variation in age management strategies across organisations.

Employers' traditional approach to workforce ageing (i.e., through a lens of cost management and exit facilitation) was institutionally enabled. The widespread use of early retirement schemes throughout the 1980s and 1990s exemplified this orientation. During this period, a particular welfare mix emerged in which governments actively supported employers in facilitating older workers' exit from the labour market. The gradual dismantling of that arrangement has removed the institutional framework and placed the active management of an ageing workforce more firmly inside the organisation.

3. Employers and the management of an ageing workforce

3.1. From early exit to proactive age management

The change in employer approaches towards older workers is visible in empirical studies. Until at least the mid-2000s, age management was not a priority for companies. Early-exit policy has long been the most common, accepted, and easiest solution for employers in dealing with the ageing workforce (Armstrong-Stassen 2008; Conen et al. 2011; Frerichs et al. 2012; Remery et al.

2003; van Dalen et al. 2015). Often, exit policies served as forced routes, aimed at pushing older workers out of employment, and were supported by early exit cultures (Radl 2012).

The closure of early exit pathways, compounded by shrinking labour markets and skills shortages, has altered the cost-benefit ratio in employers' decision-making and modified the repertoire of typical and preferred management strategies. Older workers have become assets to be retained rather than a cost to be managed. As Moen et al. (2017, p. 847) state: "developing new organizational logics and practices valuing, investing in, and retaining older workers is key 21st century business challenge". More recent evidence from the 2010s onwards indicates a shift to a more proactive approach, aiming to adjust work and individual resources to stimulate retention and work at older ages (Lössbroek et al. 2017; Riekhoff et al. 2023). For example, in a study tracing Dutch employers between 2009 and 2017, Turek et al. (2020) found a strong decrease in early exit policies (21% to 6%) and passive approaches offering no age management at all (from 47% to 30%), contrasted with a sharp increase in active approaches comprising accommodative and developmental measures (19% to 52%).

The debate over pension reforms and the rising statutory retirement ages led employers to realise that extending working lives was unavoidable, extending the expected return-on-investment period for human capital and increasing incentives for training and development (Conen et al. 2014; Montizaan et al. 2010; van Dalen et al. 2019). Alongside the demographic pressures, the rapidly changing economic and technological context further underscores the need to invest in continuous development and adaptation. In this environment, the retention and development of experienced employees have become strategic priorities (Armstrong-Stassen & Ursel 2009; Barabasch et al. 2012; Henkens et al. 2018). At the same time, employers' role extends beyond shaping productivity outcomes and increasingly affects employability, health, and retirement opportunities across the life course.

3.2. Age management strategies and practices

Understanding employer approaches to older workers has been informed by several theoretical perspectives. Human capital theory is perhaps the most influential economic framework linking employers' management practices to the situations of older workers. The theory predicts that educational investments decline with age due to the proximity of retirement and diminishing returns from the investment (Becker 1964; Hutchens 1988; Lazear 1979). From this perspective, organisations facing perceived wage-productivity gaps must choose between reducing costs through workforce exits or investing in human capital development. A related concern is that seniority-based pay systems can widen this gap over the course of a career: workers may initially earn less than their productivity, while later earnings exceed it, making prolonged employment

more costly for employers (Lazear 1979; Thurow 1975). Mandatory retirement rules and early retirement schemes historically functioned as institutional mechanisms that helped employers contain these costs (Riekhoff 2024). Because human capital theory emphasised diminishing returns and often assumed age-related declines in productivity and trainability (Hutchens 1988), employer responses historically focused more on cost reduction and workforce exit than on continued investment in older workers.

Advances in HRM and organisational psychology have helped shift the emphasis to actions that enable older people to remain in employment as productive and engaged workers, offering an alternative solution to the potential wage-productivity gap. First of all, the uniform age-related decline in productivity has been rejected as an oversimplification of the more complex reality of various job types and sectors (Sturman 2003; Warr 1994). Declines in some abilities are often either insignificant or counterbalanced by experience, and organisational practices and work design can significantly enhance older workers' performance across most occupations. The classic human capital model has also been criticised for overestimating the predictability of retirement and for underestimating extended employment as a realistic option. Moreover, considering that younger workers often have higher turnover rates than older employees approaching retirement, investments in older workers may be more secure than the model suggests (Gielen & Van Ours 2005).

These insights paved the way for modern age management, revealing that employers can actively leverage the diverse capabilities of an ageing workforce. Age management is an approach in human resources management in which the age, ageing, and life-cycle of individuals are considered to create a working environment that supports work at different stages of life, with particular attention to older workers (Walker 2005; Warr 1994). In organisational psychology and employee-oriented human resource studies, the same idea of managing workers across different ages and career stages is often framed as successful ageing at work (Kooij et al. 2020; Scheibe & Kooij 2024). Both perspectives adopt a life-course approach, aiming to adjust work to current functioning levels and available resources, and to compensate for potential losses due to lifespan developments in health and cognition. The major areas of intervention include recruitment and exit, training and development, flexible working practices, ergonomics and job design, attitudes toward ageing workers, and health-related practices (Walker 1998).

In practice, these strategies can be broadly classified into accommodative and developmental approaches (Bal et al. 2013; Van Dalen et al. 2010a; Veth et al. 2015). Developmental HR focuses on enhancing capabilities through training and skill development, recognised as crucial both for longer working lives (Picchio & van Ours 2013) and organisational competitiveness (Barabasch et al. 2012). Developmental approaches have been shown to sustain work motivation and

engagement at older ages, as they signal ongoing organisational investment in workers' growth rather than merely managing decline (Bal et al. 2013; Kooij et al. 2014). Accommodative measures address age-related capacity changes through flexible working arrangements and ergonomic adaptations that modify physical environments to compensate for changes in strength, mobility, and sensory capabilities (Conen et al. 2011; Kooij et al. 2014; Truxillo et al. 2012). Research suggests these accommodations can enhance both individual performance and organisational productivity while supporting worker well-being (de Menezes & Kelliher 2011; Kelly & Moen 2007).

Apart from formal age-management programmes, organisations shape the conditions for extending working lives through the broader employment environment they create. Employers control access to critical resources that sustain employability across the life course: training, skills development, and health-supportive work environments (Amis et al. 2020; Rauvola & Rudolph 2020; Rivera 2020). They also shape the motivational climates that influence whether older employees wish to continue working. Research consistently shows that job satisfaction and the motivation to extend one's career depend strongly on organisational culture, work climate, and prevailing social norms around age and retirement (Pak et al. 2019; Radl 2012; Van Solinge & Henkens 2014; Zacher & Yang 2016). Furthermore, the departure of experienced workers can result in significant loss of tacit knowledge and organisational know-how, making retention and intergenerational knowledge transfer strategic priorities in their own right (Burmeister & Deller 2016; Joe et al. 2013).

Age management strategies vary considerably across organisations due to structural features that shape employer capacity and willingness to act. For example, larger firms are more likely to implement formal age-management programmes, partly because they have greater HR capacity and face stronger regulatory and reputational pressures (Conen et al. 2011; Fleischmann et al. 2015; Lossbroek & Hulsege 2024). Sector matters as well: knowledge-intensive industries and the public sector tend to adopt more developmental approaches, while physically demanding or low-wage sectors more often rely on accommodative measures or offer no age-specific policies at all (Turek et al. 2020). One of the critical stimuli for a more active approach to age management is also the experience of recruitment difficulties and workforce supply problems. When candidates are scarce, retention of the ageing staff becomes even more important, prompting employers to invest in accommodative arrangements, training opportunities, and flexible work options that keep older workers engaged (Lössbroek et al. 2017; Taylor et al. 2012).

Beyond these structural conditions, the role of individual managers and HR professionals is decisive. Their attitudes toward older workers (shaped by stereotypes, personal experience, and organisational culture) translate institutional conditions into concrete workplace practices.

Where managers hold negative views, even formally adopted age-management policies may remain poorly implemented or benefit only a select group of employees. A critical factor shaping the effectiveness of age management, however, is the persistence of age stereotypes. Research consistently documents that employers hold ambivalent views of older workers. They tend to value their reliability, work ethic, and experience, but question their adaptability, technological competence, productivity and learning capacity (Harris et al. 2018; Perry & Finkelstein 1999; Posthuma & Campion 2009; Van Dalen et al. 2010b). These stereotypes translate into discriminatory practices, with older applicants facing lower callback rates in hiring and fewer opportunities for training within organisations (Henkens 2005; Neumark 2021; Turek & Henkens 2019). They can also trigger more subtle forms of *soft discrimination*, such as ageist language or disrespect based on age, and stimulate *self-discrimination* by constraining individual agency, potential, and ambitions (Turek et al. 2022). Importantly, awareness of workforce ageing and the recognition of proactive age management as a valid strategy may not fully eliminate these biases. Research has documented a common gap between stated support for extended working lives and actual organisational practice, with employers endorsing active ageing as a societal goal while remaining reluctant to retain or hire older workers within their own organisations (Conen et al. 2012).

4. Inequalities, ethics, and an employer's social responsibility

4.1. Job quality, inequality, and the limits of "just working longer"

Extending working lives is not simply a matter of keeping people in employment. Employers and managers also decide on the quality of that employment (Riaz 2015). As Taylor (2019, p. 102) states, although "unemployment may be worse than retirement", having a job, per se, is not "an automatic guarantee of a successful transition to old age". He joins Phillipson (2018), Grenier et al. (2020) and others in highlighting the importance of job quality and security as fundamental for successful policies that encourage longer working lives. Precarious, low-quality employment does not facilitate successful ageing at work – it may instead reinforce existing disadvantage and exacerbate health and financial vulnerabilities in later life. By designing inclusive and age-conscious policies, employers determine the extent to which workers can pursue healthy, productive, and dignified careers into their sixties and seventies.

Ghilarducci (2024) criticises the "Working Longer Consensus" as a false doctrine, driven by the assumption that the retirement crisis can be solved cheaply by having individuals simply work a few more years. This consensus rests on flawed premises: that everyone is living longer, that jobs are becoming easier, and that workers can freely choose to extend their careers. In practice, this approach shifts responsibility entirely onto individuals while ignoring that most older workers

face substantial barriers to working longer, especially those in lower-wage, physically demanding occupations. The Working Longer Consensus thus serves as a convenient rationale for policy inaction while masking the need for structural reforms to retirement systems and workplaces.

These inequalities are not accidental byproducts of labour markets but are actively shaped by organisations. Social inequality and stratification research increasingly positions organisations as the primary sites where resources are accumulated and distributed, and thus where inequalities are shaped and reshaped (Amis et al. 2020; Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt 2019). Applied specifically to older workers, this perspective highlights how access to training and flexible work arrangements – the very building blocks of age management – is unequally distributed within organisations. Organisational decisions about hiring, promotion, compensation, and access to development opportunities directly contribute to employees' socioeconomic stratification (Castilla 2011; Rivera 2020). Within their bounded rationality, employers often grant individualised advantages to already privileged employees, such as those with specialised skills, bargaining power, or tenure (Berg et al. 2022).

For older workers, these dynamics frequently reinforce existing disadvantages. People in physically demanding jobs, lower-skilled positions, or precarious contracts are systematically less likely to receive the accommodations, training, or retention opportunities that would enable them to extend their careers. The population of older workers is diverse, ranging from highly skilled professionals with considerable autonomy and pension security to workers in precarious, poorly compensated positions with inadequate retirement provision. Inequalities in access to employer-based active ageing programmes are structured along multiple axes (Grenier et al. 2020; Turek & Henkens 2023). Gender, education, migration status, and type of employment contract all shape differential access to organisational support. Workers in non-standard employment arrangements, including platform work, often fall outside the reach of employer-based initiatives. A precarious working life may well lead to a precarious retirement (Taylor 2019). Small and medium-sized enterprises often lack the capacity to implement comprehensive age-management strategies, leaving their older employees at a disadvantage compared to those in large organisations (Lossbroek & Hulsegge 2024). These inequalities risk widening in the future: divergent healthy life expectancies across educational groups mean that one-size-fits-all policies to extend working lives may impose disproportionate burdens on those least capable of working longer. Active ageing policies that rely heavily on employer initiative may thus exacerbate rather than reduce existing social stratification.

If the capacity to work longer is so unevenly distributed, the question arises whether uniform retirement ages remain defensible. Recent research suggests that public support for differentiated retirement ages is strongly tied to perceptions of occupational strain and

cumulative disadvantage across the life course. In a vignette study examining retirement-age norms across occupations, Van Dalen and Henkens (2025) found that people consistently supported earlier retirement ages for workers in physically demanding occupations, while expecting those in less demanding jobs to work longer. These findings suggest that differentiated retirement ages may function as a corrective mechanism, that addresses the occupational and health-related limits of the "working longer" paradigm.

4.2. Toward co-responsibility: ethical perspectives and implications

The emphasis on individual successful ageing at work risks placing responsibility on older workers while overlooking systemic barriers and unequal access to resources that enable longer working (Calasanti & King 2021; Rowe & Kahn 2015; Taylor 2019). The ongoing individualisation of risk in contemporary societies and the increasing destandardisation of life-courses give individuals greater responsibility for their life and work trajectories (Vickerstaff & Cox 2005). Retirement itself has become more blurred, encompassing a diverse range of trajectories (including phased retirement and bridge employment), greater variability of retirement timing, and popularisation of delayed labour market exit (Cahill et al. 2006; Turek & Henkens 2023). Consequently, retirement has become far more a matter of individual choices, preferences, and opportunities than it once was, rather than a process directed by standardised institutional arrangements (Han & Moen 1999; Shultz & Olson 2012). For example, in a comparative study of the United Kingdom and Hong Kong, Flynn and Schröder (2018) show that both countries converge in their responses to population ageing challenges by shifting responsibility for extended longevity from the state and employers to individual workers. However, while working longer can be soundly rationalised as public policy, it may not benefit all older people. Policies that set uniform expectations despite differences in ability, motivation, and opportunity risk being unjust by ignoring structural disadvantages. The shift of responsibility to older workers also obscures the organisational co-responsibility for the outcomes of active ageing policies, which has become more salient as employers take on expanded roles within the new welfare mix.

This concern aligns with relational egalitarianism, which examines organisational relations through the lens of social fairness and democratic equality (Anderson 1999; Lippert-Rasmussen 2018). Organisations, from this perspective, are potential sites of injustice where managerial authority shapes inequalities in pay, promotion, and access to resources (Anderson 2017; Berkey 2023). For example, unequal access to training constitutes a justice concern, because organisations' selective training investments create dependencies that undermine workers' equal standing (Cholbi 2023). When older workers are excluded from development opportunities (e.g., due to stereotypes or proximity to retirement), organisations actively reproduce relational hierarchies that erode workplace equality.

The HRM literature increasingly addresses these ethical concerns through frameworks of socially responsible and sustainable management. Taylor and Earl (2023) advocate applying the Common Good HRM framework (Aust et al. 2020) to age management. This approach emphasises socially oriented values, job quality, and organisational responsibility for sustainability challenges. Unlike traditional top-down managerial models, Common Good HRM prioritises employee dignity, information sharing, and participatory decision-making (Bal & de Jong 2017). The framework's outward-oriented perspective recognises that equal and fair employment relationships are essential for both organisational success and for addressing grand challenges such as in-work poverty, job insecurity, and the absence of workplace democracy.

What emerges from these considerations is a picture of co-responsibility, where the challenge of extending working lives cannot be met by individuals, employers, or governments acting alone. Fair public policies must recognise the unequal starting positions of older workers and abandon one-size-fits-all approaches. Employers, in turn, share responsibility for creating conditions that enable longer, dignified careers, including equitable access to training, flexible work arrangements, and protection against age-based discrimination. Whether this co-responsibility will be enacted in practice remains, as this chapter has argued, deeply contingent on the labour-market and welfare contexts in which organisations operate.

5. Conclusions: Active ageing policies and the welfare triangle

In this chapter, we have argued that employers have emerged as essential yet under-examined actors in active ageing societies. In response to the challenges of ageing and shrinking labour markets, employer approaches have changed substantially over the past three decades. Recruitment challenges have made older workers more valuable, and the closure of early-exit routes has removed what was once a convenient human resources management option for regulating labour costs. This has prompted a broader strategic reorientation toward retention and development, with older workers being recognised more commonly as strategic assets whose experience and knowledge cannot be easily substituted.

The role of employers in active ageing policies is growing, positioning them as co-producers of well-being and security in later life. Rather than treating organisations as a context in which retirement processes unfold, we argue that employers should be recognised as constitutive actors in the active ageing project. Their decisions and practices shape the conditions under which extended working lives are possible, unavailable, or precarious. The boundaries between public and private responsibility for active ageing have become more blurred, with employers acting as key intermediaries that translate policy objectives into workplace realities through their retention and age-management practices (Taylor & Earl 2023). This shift carries profound

consequences: when organisations fail to provide employment and supportive work environments, the costs fall on older workers themselves, particularly in systems with weakened social safety nets.

However, the employer-centred logic of the new welfare mix is based on uncertain foundations. Older workers' experience, organisational knowledge, and established networks are increasingly recognised as valuable strategic assets that cannot be easily substituted (Moen et al. 2017). Yet this recognition alone does not guarantee that employers will sustain their commitment to longer employment. The proactive turn documented in the recent literature is driven in large part by labour-market tightness and demographic pressures rather than by lasting normative commitment. If economic conditions change (whether through recession, automation-driven displacement, or an increase in the supply of younger labour), the incentive structure that currently supports employer engagement with older workers may weaken, risking a return to exclusionary practices. The transition of the past two decades should therefore not be taken for granted, nor should it be treated as a substitute for durable public policy. A welfare mix in which the outcomes of state retrenchment depend on employer goodwill leaves the most vulnerable older workers most exposed.

The constitutive weight of employer action becomes most visible when it fails. In contexts where welfare protection is limited, such as Korea or Japan, the lack of supportive employment at older ages sharply increases the risk of poverty and social exclusion (Kalleberg et al. 2022; Kim 2017). More broadly, precarious employment does not facilitate successful ageing at work. On the contrary, job quality and security have emerged as prerequisites for policies encouraging longer working lives (Ghilarducci 2024; Phillipson 2018; Taylor 2019). However, access to proactive age management is unevenly distributed (e.g., regarding company size, sector, gender, and education), raising critical questions about inequality. While large organisations may implement sophisticated developmental HR strategies, smaller firms or those in precarious sectors frequently lack the capacity or will to do so, leaving many older workers without adequate support, particularly those with weakened safety nets and limited social security integration.

The welfare triangle we have outlined places employers at the centre of an ongoing reconfiguration. The success of ageing policies in the 21st century largely depends on organisations' effective and inclusive age-management strategies, but these must be embedded in public frameworks that reduce recruitment barriers, promote employability, and facilitate the retention of older workers. Questions remain about the emerging forms and stability of the new welfare mix. Cross-national variation in welfare regimes, industrial relations traditions, and labour market structures is likely to produce distinct configurations of state, employer, and worker responsibility. Future research should consider the comparative dimension of this

reconfiguration, examining how different institutional contexts shape the adoption and effectiveness of age management, and how employer practices interact with welfare state arrangements to produce varied outcomes for older workers. Equally important is closer empirical attention to the internal dynamics of organisations, including specific practices, decision processes, and managerial attitudes through which the new welfare mix is enacted. Only by bringing employers into view, as actors with their own logics and constraints, can we adequately understand how contemporary societies will meet the challenges posed by ageing populations.

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