



Over 50s at Work: Findings from Case Studies

Abstract In this chapter we present the findings from individual and group interviews. We have tried to adhere as much as possible to their descriptions, examples and terms in the following. The data comes largely from interviews, and most of the data was collected using individual face-to-face interviews, group interviews and plenary discussions at larger more formal gatherings of employees. In these interviews and discussions participants were asked to reflect on their own competence and how they perceive the long career competence of older workers in their specific workplaces.

Keywords Interviews · Reflections · Examples

In this chapter, we present the findings from our case studies, illustrating how the interviewees describe the advantages of long work careers, and age in the workplace.

Engaging older workers and encouraging them to talk about their competence and how they view their own contribution to the workplace, has allowed us to capture and define a wide range of competences.

The empirical material is generated largely through the questions “In what ways have you found your age and the length of your career to be an advantage in the performing of your job?” and “In what ways are older employees with long careers more proficient at their jobs than their

younger colleagues?’ In the presentation of findings, we have therefore chosen to present the findings in terms of long careers and high age, in addition to some everyday terms used by the interviewees.

5.1 LONG CAREERS

Long careers are more than simply elapsed time and we would expect to find that older workers have been using theoretical knowledge from their professional education, whether as a nurse, a medical doctor, an engineer, an inspector, a cleaner or many other professions represented in these case studies. In addition they have acquired experience through many years of practice. The theoretical knowledge is important, but not sufficient. As one said:

... the theoretical knowledge can be always acquired. Without getting hands-on experience, you are pretty helpless really, the time you stand there and have to do something that you have never done before, but only have read about.

Several described what they had learned through long careers as their way from being “fresh” in a field to having internalised knowledge to the point of being almost unconscious of knowing it. They talk about having performed job operations so many times that they do not have consciously to think about how to do it. Several people mentioned the ability to know-how, to carry out work operations without referring to the text book, whereas less experienced colleagues needed to follow the step-by-step instructions learned at school. Experience is not only about doing your own job, but also the ability to see the connection between your contribution and the contributions of others in the workplace. An older nurse explained:

The “fresh ones” mostly see their own job. The patient doesn’t come in for general anesthesia. The experienced see the connection [between different elements of the treatment], the team [needed to treat the patient].

This kind of expertise can help in performance of your job:

But when you ask what’s the difference between someone with 10 years of experience and one with 30 years of experience, I think one difference is that (...) with 30 years or 40 years of experience, you don’t need so much time to

prepare for things. I'm not saying there are no drawbacks to that, but there are some advantages to being able to go into different situations, and quite complex situations and, without requiring all the world's preparation because we have some experience to rely on. (...) So we have some such well-used tools that we know work and that we can at least use to buy ourselves time to figure out what to do next. And it's one of those skills that might be a little "silent", or it's hard to describe. Pretty hard to develop, but it comes with age, with age and experience.

The Expert (as defined by Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986) has moved beyond proficiency and developed learning at a level where it has become part of their body, their being. They intuitively know-how to perform an operation, and can do so without thinking about why and how they do it this or that way.

As one older worker described it:

Those things that are buried deep down in the memory, and so when being asked a question, it just pops up. Then you have an answer to just that question.

This description reminds us of what Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) calls intuition and define as the result of deep situational involvement in similar situations. Intuition is expressed through an understanding that “performs effortlessly in seeing similarities to earlier experiences” (Dreyfus & Dreyfus in Hammarén, 2006: 210). When our informant talks about “things that are buried deep in the back of their heads” and being actualised or reactivated when in a similar situation, this is precisely the experience-based, internalised competence that “comes to life”, is recalled and used. As someone described it:

It is difficult, because such knowledge has been so integrated in who you are, so it's difficult to identify it and talk about it.

Long careers, based on many years of work experience, enable employees to develop an ability to recognise situations and know-how to act upon them. Nurses talked about the “*clinical eye*”, the ability to recognise minor symptoms as indicators of an underlying condition. Long experience lets them recognise connections between seemingly unrelated factors and know-how to act on this knowledge.

Inspectors from the Inspectorate also talked about the ability to recognise small details that might indicate bigger problems worth pursuing during the inspection. As one said: “Disorder in the reception area might indicate disorder in more important areas”. Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) is about systematic work to eliminate safety hazards, and if safety is breached in one area it might be in others. One talked about noticing electric plugs, plugged into other plugs, laying in heaps on the floor in the reception area. This was an indicator that made her be extra observant about safety procedures and practice in other, more important areas of the enterprise.

They also talked about relational factors, and one mentioned the importance of how management and union representatives talked during meetings with inspectors. Did the union representative listen attentively to what the managers said or did they look down? Who did most of the talking? Such things could indicate areas worth pursuing in separate talks afterwards.

Long work experience includes having been through a lot of different situations, which can be an advantage:

And one thing that I'm thinking about, it's that it takes a great deal more to surprise me. I mean, we've been in quite a few different situations and constellations... It takes a lot more before we get taken by surprise or something that comes as a surprise.

Long careers can also be useful in more specific situations. For example, one older surgeon talked about types of medical operations that had gone out of practice, but might still be needed in rare situations. As younger doctors were unfamiliar with these operations, the “old skills” of older doctors became valuable and important again.

Same with, for example, having split the main artery, such as aortic aneurysm. Before then, they had open surgery. Then these stents came in, which radiologists insert via the groin and which expand and keep the arteries open (...). And that leads to the fact that there is no one who operates aortic aneurysm anymore. (...) Those who operate, they get so little training because everything is done by the radiologists, so when someone comes in whom radiologists can't treat, the expertise for surgical treatment of aortic aneurysm is perhaps worse now than it was 10-15 years ago, when everyone was operated. There is something about the profession that makes it valuable sometimes to

have a historical understanding and have been involved and done things for many years.

We also found examples where older employees mastered multiple forms of carrying the same surgical operations. Their “old skills” provided them with an alternative to the method learned by younger colleagues. This made it possible for the older employees to choose the best method in certain situations came back into use, something which they regarded as an advantage.

In the orthopedics, for the past 10 years there has been a trend of using tendons from the back of the thigh, hamstring tendons to make a new cruciate ligament, and operate that way. We used to take a piece of bone here, then we took a bit of the tendon that goes here between the kneecap and the calf also we took a bone bit where we also made a new cruciate ligament of it. It also turned out that taking tendons from behind the thigh is just fine, but for active people - and these are often active young people - then it stretches over time and then it becomes slacker again and there is a chance that it will go again. Whereas if you take the patellar tendon, and you need to make some special arrangements to attach it to the bone. While this one is stronger and holds better for... for active young people. But now there are few surgeons in Norway and none in Sweden who can actually do this patellar tendon type of operation. So they have to start training again, because they can only operate using the hamstring tendons.

Long careers are not only useful in the two organisations we mainly draw on in this analysis. We have asked similar questions in another public organisation, and found similar examples. One interviewee had worked for many years leading projects. Many of these projects were related to ICT systems used by the Norwegian state, but although they all had ICT in common they had different aims, different participating partners and vastly different budgets and timeframes. When thinking about what he had learned throughout his career, he said that there were lots of small details that he picked up from the different projects, like how to write good contracts, how to resolve conflicts between participants in a diplomatic way. The most valuable projects for his own learning had been the one which were most controversial and for which he had received most criticism. Although the project was a success, in the end, many of the incidents in the project were reported in the media and criticised. The

interviewee still thinks about how he dealt with this particular project every time he plans a new project or helps a younger colleague to plan.

Apart from dealing with conflicts and with the media, another thing he learned gradually, was to expect and not be afraid of the enormous complexity of most of the projects. "When I read a project proposal, I know that it is like an iceberg, the person writing the proposal is probably only aware of 10% of what needs to be done and what can go wrong in the project". "I know that we have to go deeper into the material, the aims, the questions, the expectations before we can make a realistic plan". He told us he did not have a list or some kind of recipe for success in the early stages of planning and approving new projects, he described what he knew as "gut feeling, but a gut feeling you develop over time, you just know when to dive in and investigate more and when to let it go". He also mentioned the importance of seeing the project proposal from multiple viewpoints, the societal benefits as well as the financial outlay and risk. He also described how he considered the motives of the different people involved in writing initial proposals and whether they were political, organisational, social, etc., and how important this could be later especially if something unexpected happened. The interviewee also mentioned that some colleagues saw him as a bit of a nuisance because he always wanted more information, wanted to analyse more risks, but he was encouraged to see that some younger colleagues were beginning to copy his critical questioning before they accepted project proposals.

The theme of multiple viewpoints mentioned in the last example was echoed by another interviewee who talked about how his understanding of subtleties had developed over time. An important part of his job was communication and he described how one never really learns enough about the different ways what one says and does can be interpreted and understood by different recipients. He explained that he was highly educated and had attended many courses on communication and felt he was fairly up to date with regard to both theory and techniques, however he described examples of how he could help a manager to make a project implementation a success or failure by adjusting their word, their voice, attitude and body language. Often he could not explain it to the manager, he had to show them, so that the managers could copy him.

I don't know if I have gained any insight into this, I think it is more like a good hypothesis which I take with me that some solutions are better than others.

An interviewee took up a theme popular with management, standardisation of routines and support systems. He described how managers had announced that their department was going to implement “best practice” in all their administrative routines.

Best practice is all very well and there are lots of advantages, but once the train is rolling people stop considering the consequences. It just becomes an exercise where you cross off how many routines are now standardised. I know that our department can benefit from standardising some routines, but not everything. There are some tasks that we carry out, which are particular to us and the routines have developed gradually over time. I would say that we already have best practice for us on these routines. If we standardise and do these tasks in the same way as all other state departments, we will be reducing the quality of our work.

The example the employee was unhappy with, was related to new routines for archiving documents and use of standard document templates. After considering this for a while he decided to take issue with the new routines and make a case for some exceptions in his department. He said he knew that his boss would need good arguments to gain approval so he and some colleagues spent some of their spare time building a case. The employee concluded that he would never have dared to contest a management decision in this way if he had not had the respect of colleagues and management, which he maintained had been developed slowly over the years.

5.1.1 *Long Careers and Age Diversity*

Experience-based knowledge often needs to be “unpacked”, explicated. By working with younger colleagues the older workers are being asked questions that force them to articulate this expert knowledge and reflect on their own internalised practice. Also several people, both in the hospital and the Inspectorate, talked about the advantages younger workers bring, to set off the experience-based knowledge of the older workers.

Mostly they pointed to the digital competence of younger workers. Several of the older workers talked about a digital divide between younger colleagues and themselves. Younger colleagues who had “grown up” with

digital technology were perceived as much more comfortable and competent using digital tools. Some said that this was an advantage of age diversity, because then they could help each other. Some talked about the net generation, echoing Tapscott (1998, 2009) who makes a divide between those growing up with digital technology and those being introduced to it as adults. Even if not all younger workers were familiar with the digital tools, they were seen as much more comfortable using it and happy to try out new functions and find new ways of using it in their local context.

Younger colleagues were also described as more eager in other fields, as in their energy and willingness to learn new things.

He has all the energy, the willingness to dig down and find out things.

The presence of age diversity provides the potential for sharing of knowledge and experiences and may prompt the older workers to explicate their tacit knowledge. Some interviewees told us that when younger colleagues asked questions and wanted explanations, the older employees needed to reflect on why they act in certain way, in order to be able to explain it to others. The experienced older workers can also serve as help and security for less experienced colleagues. One informant talked about when she was younger and new in her job at the hospital, how much more secure she felt when she worked with colleagues with long experience. She worked as a bioengineer, taking samples from patients and analysing them. Wrong results could be fatal, and she worked in shifts where they were only two people at the same time. Being with someone who was experienced in the job added to her feeling of security, so when she needed to consult she appreciated the older, more experienced colleague. A working environment consisting of both older and younger employees has the potential to develop complementarity, where both older and younger employees benefit from each other's knowledge, as her example demonstrates.

Mentoring or shoulder-to-shoulder learning are ways to combine mentors with long experience with younger colleagues, eager to learn. Both the hospital and Inspectorate had such systems although the practice was somewhat influenced by practical and economic constraints. One suggestion to remedy these constraints was put forward by one informant. The workplace could recruit replacements for older workers about to retire 6 months before actual retirement. This way the experienced

worker could spend that time training the replacement and ensuring the transfer of some experience. This would be an ideal solution, but a more common situation was where “he got some speeches and flowers and then he was gone”. It was pointed out that this suggestion came with a price, but could both cut costs of training new recruits and serve to value the competence of the older workers. Several of the older workers we talked to were concerned about who was to replace them and their knowledge when they retired. They also talked about the paradox of feeling valued while they were employed, but seeing the same knowledge, which made them valuable, was not being transferred and therefore lost as soon as they retired. As someone said:

If what I know is so valuable, why am I not given opportunities to share that knowledge while I am still here?

Many older workers work flat out till the day they retire and the transfer is up to the individuals involved. Initiatives and measures to promote active ageing at the workplace level, could be aimed at remedying this situation.

5.1.2 Long Careers in the Same Job—Seniority in the Workplace

Some interviewees viewed seniority, or length of service in the same organisation, as an advantage, as they know-how things have developed into today’s practice. Several of our informants also mentioned the usefulness of knowing people in different parts of the organisation. Who to go to if you have a problem or question even if it is not in your department.

There were several examples of how long service or seniority could be an advantage. You know-who to talk to, because you have been there a long time. You know there have been cases like the recent ones you are facing, so you know where to look for documentation of how it was handled last time. Someone talked about rare cases, being rare because they happened rarely, and “Norway being a small country so some cases only come along every few years”.

Knowing how the workplace has developed was considered an advantage, as one knows why things are the way they are now and what kind of process has gone before to make it so. Older inspectors talked about the advantage of knowing how today’s practice has developed and what kind of political and practical processes lie behind it. Both legislation and

practice has changed over the years. Knowing why these changes have come about and what arguments are behind the changes, makes it easier to both understand and communicate the meaning of the law and today's regulatory practice.

Some of the experienced older inspectors in the Inspectorate also pointed to the value of still having saved physical reports from previous campaigns that had not been digitalized due to expired laws or regulations. Some of those who had worked in the Inspectorate for many years often had their own paper archives and pointed to still relevant (and useful) descriptions of physical and chemical risk factors although the legislation might have changed.

Some forms of practical knowledge can only be developed after many years at the same workplace. A janitor at a health institution told us he had been asked to work beyond retirement age. The buildings were undergoing reconstruction and it turned they lacked plans of underground pipes and cables. The janitor had been there for many years and knew where they could safely dig based on previous experience. One can only hope they drew up plans while he was still around to assist!

5.1.3 *Long Careers in Different Jobs*

Long worklife experience may not only be in the same place to be of value. In the Inspectorate long careers in different jobs were also described as an advantage, as it gives a comprehensive knowledge about working life that is useful for inspectors in their supervision of a wide range of Norwegian enterprises. Norway has several national Inspectorates supervising different fields from safety in the oil sector to the agricultural sector. One older worker talked about her previous experience from one of these different fields:

I know what it is to be out on supervision. To be able to find the balance between control and guidance.

The informants at the hospital also recounted examples demonstrating the value of having worked in other places in the past. As the people we talked to were mainly health personnel, they talked about jobs in other parts of the health sector, as in doctors' surgeries, nursing homes or similar. Knowing how the health sector in Norway is organised, what the relationships between state owned or municipal services are, turned out

to be very useful when meeting patients who were referred from or to other parts of the health services. What they have experienced of services before being admitted to hospital and what can they expect after being released? Knowledge of such questions could be used to reassure patients. We were told of being asked questions about home care, about who will do the follow up after a hospital treatment, about what is important to consider when back at home again, as examples where it helped to know-how home care was organised and what to expect from it. Although not directly related to the disease or injury for which the patient was hospitalised, remembering to ask questions about nutrition and physical activity was also one example mentioned. "Old, frail and living alone" can often be an indicator of under-stimulation and even malnutrition. Experienced nurses talked to their patients about such things and asked about how they had been living before the hospitalisation and about how they could seek help in such areas when returning home again.

Examples from the state department stress the same points. One interviewee was working on a temporary project, which was not within her area of expertise. The interviewee was educated in languages and had studied and worked abroad before taking up a position in a government service organisation. As her career developed she moved from a health-related part of the public sector, to agriculture, history and culture, then on to a more administrative department. She had been a manager with responsibility for large budgets and many employees, before she was asked to lead a project which would be very visible and have high public interest. She was originally asked to work on the project for 3 years, but at the time of interview, she had been working on it for 9 years. Although the project was considered very successful, she actually wanted to do something else with her last few years before retirement, but she was generally considered irreplaceable. What made her so irreplaceable, we asked? She began to describe how she used what she had learned about manoeuvring through the state system in different situations. She had used her network which crossed many organisational boundaries and had always managed to get help and support from previous colleagues.

Like another government employee who mentioned the nuances of communication, she also mentioned this and how long it took to understand. She explained how she had helped lawyers to rewrite information in such a way that it could be understood by the public. She described how she had learned to discuss with experts from different fields while she worked with history and culture.

... when you are out there at a site talking to an expert, you just have to try different ways of talking and find out what works. Experts are experts, whatever their field. You have to talk to them in the right way. You have to trust them and respect their knowledge, but you have to be brave and ask them to explain things in a simple way. I think I learned this a long time ago, but I've never put it into words until now. It's really important to know this and I would never be able to do my job without this skill, or maybe it's knowledge, I'm not sure. I think it's just a way of doing things.

As well as communication, this interviewee mentioned how she had become reflective in recent years.

I used to rush at things before, I thought everyone was watching me, but now I reflect over the task in-hand. I think a lot about the different places I worked, here we did this and here we did that, here we followed these rules. Then I think what do we do now, what does the department need, what does the public need. Then I go and get the people and resources I need. I try to motivate and inspire the people I need and make sure all the formalities are in place.

This interviewee had quite a lot of freedom in her job and because of her varied past, she often received invitations to conferences in different fields of expertise. She said how she sometimes chose to attend conferences in different fields because it might give her a new understanding or a different perspective. She was of the opinion that her varied career had helped her and made her the perfect match, or the irreplaceable employee, for her current position.

5.2 AGE

Beyond the many models of competence, old age might play a separate role in their ability to perform in their jobs. Several examples of age as authority was mentioned. A nurse working with small children with severe eczema talked about meeting a crying child and a nervous, young mother and being able to calm them down. The nurse saying "Relax, we'll manage this" was believed because she had the authority of age, of having seen the same situation many, many times before.

Age as authority can be an advantage when dealing with patients. Some patients can be demanding or difficult, and an older nurse can be better at handling such situations. As one described it:

You don't get intimidated by difficult patients.

Not only patients can be difficult. Also colleagues at higher levels in the organisation can be a challenge:

You become more confident in yourself, you know what you stand for and it has not always been easy being a cleaner in this place. Because there's a hierarchy here. And we're regrettably at the bottom, which I haven't quite... I don't accept that and I'll let them know when they're stomping all over me.

An older nurse described age and long experience as an advantage when facing arrogant behavior from doctors:

I was here when you were only an intern.

Age can give you both “charisma and clout”. Older workers can give the impression that they know what they are doing because of long experience, and are listened to where a younger worker might be mistrusted or come across as less convincing.

My job consists very much of representing the manager in organisational processes where we are going to plan or we are going to change. (...) And they are strong people, strong people, who are leaders, (...). The fact that they are strong also means that there are very strong wills (...), so there have been fights and you feel that it helps to have experience with that type of processes. A mixture of being listening, but also knowing when you need to put your foot down; now we have to decide something. So it's experience. Now, there aren't very many young people in this job, but someone who comes with less experience, they get challenged and are in for a hard time.

Similarly, in the Inspectorate case, the older inspectors talked about the authority of age as an advantage when confronting managers and enterprises that did not comply with laws and regulations. In one example they described how they closed down a work site, and how this was made easier because they looked so obviously experienced, and their authority was respected and they were listened to.

I realise that when I tell them I've been in this job for 24-25 years, and I have been doing this and that, people straighten their backs a little bit, they

listen more. (...) Age is obviously authority. But of course you have to behave and know what you're talking about whatever age.

Age as authority was also mentioned in the state department interviews. When asked if age was an advantage at work, one interviewee described how she found it easier to make herself heard and how it felt easier to speak directly and put career ambitions and personal aims aside. As she said:

I don't think I could talk in capital letters when I was younger. Now I can say it as it is. I feel more comfortable and safe saying what I really think is right. I know it is based on what I have done before and I know that people look at me and see someone who knows what she is talking about. By nature I am really quite a shy and careful person, but now it is easier to demand things, to insist on things which I know are important. I think it is much easier to make my voice heard now, that it was 30 years ago. That is the way I feel and I don't have to think about my career anymore and I don't have any personal motives anymore, I just think about doing the best I can.

A colleague was more daring and said how she did not actually follow the standard ways of working when she knew they would just cause problems in the future.

They will find out eventually that some of the new routines were wrong, but I can't wait for that. They can hang me as a rebel if they want, I don't care.

Daring to speak, was something which came up in several interviews and was considered quite important by most interviewees. The examples given were often related to policy or policy aims or to directives from government ministries. It was considered important that civil servants should be able to stand up or speak out when necessary and not be nervous or intimidated by the political standing or the authority of others. Several stated that they had not been aware of this when they were younger, or that they had not been willing to speak out about risks or alternative ways of doing things.

Another employee was less certain about the benefits of age, but described some of the differences. She described how annoyed she was at a new ICT system which had been implemented, but she did not want to be viewed as "a grumpy old woman who doesn't like technology, or who doesn't want to learn anything new". However, this interviewee did find a

way of working with the new system. She discussed it with colleagues and via a process of sharing their experiences of trial and error, they agreed on a way of working which suited them and fitted in with the ICT system.

One interviewee described the difference as being a change in loyalties, he reflected that when he was younger his loyalties lay with his department or perhaps at times with himself as he tried to carve out a career. Now he maintained that his loyalties were to his field of expertise, or to his profession and he thought this made him a much better employee than he had been when he was younger.

5.2.1 *Age and Life Phase*

We can also view age as an indicator of where you are in life. Different life phases have different focus and challenges.

When you are older, you have more space in your life, not so many demands on your time. I can watch football training or watch my grandchildren playing, but it's not my responsibility to get them ready, so life is different when you don't have care for your own young children.

Not having the double burden of full job and small children at home allowed them more time to commit to their careers. They also talked about having more time for restitution after a busy day at work, if needed. Some talked about having more time to keep fit, as they didn't have to hurry home from work to look after their children.

At the same time, there were some who pointed out that caring for children is starting to be replaced by caring for older parents. With increased life expectancy, the employed 60-year-old today may still have parents in their 80s or 90s, so the burden of care can return in a new form. Ennals and Hilsen (2011) describe older workers as “the jam in the intergenerational sandwich”, combining responsibility for grown children with care for elderly and infirm relations. In addition to informal care of elderly relatives, “middle-aged carers, on the other hand, might simultaneously be shouldering the responsibility to care for their own (grand)-children” (Hoffmann & Rodrigues, 2010: 10). This defines them as the sandwich generation or the pivot generation (Mooney et al., 2002), or “the jam in the intergenerational sandwich” (Ennals & Hilsen, 2011: 245). In this way some of the older workers may never really leave care obligations towards family members. Still caring for older relations is different and

less demanding than caring for small children, as the Norwegian welfare state has (fairly) good access to professional care. Although caring for older relations might be felt as stressful, as some of the hospital workers reported, Norwegian studies (Gautun & Hagen, 2010; Midtsundstad, 2009) have found that caring obligations have little effect on retirement patterns, and therefore we can assume that many older workers are still working and might be in this situation.

More time to themselves or changed demands on their time can be a result of the phase of life they are in. There are also other effects of age and life phase. For example, many of the older workers talked about how the experience in earlier phases made them more tolerant of younger colleagues who were struggling. They talked about having been through tough times before and one said: "I'm more tolerant as a grandmother than I was as a mother". Mature older workers can be a great support for their younger colleagues, but also for the people they encounter as part of their jobs.

5.2.2 *Age and the Body*

Age also changes our physical perceptions of ourselves as well as other people's perceptions of us. This can have down-sides, but as one older worker pointed out, it may also be liberating:

And at work, well, I think maybe most of us are fighting the battle that we know we lose, about physical appearance. Isn't that right? We know it's always a process, a process of grief, right? But then there's something in it that's kind of a relief and that, relax, it's not that important now. A lot of people say they think they're better off after they don't have to think of themselves as potential sex objects.

If this self-acceptance and relief from sexual roles make interacting with colleagues or patients easier and less stressful, age can have advantages in everyday life. Most Norwegian hospital workers are female, so this might be a gendered experience. One woman who worked with counselling talked about age as changing her relationship to men she counselled. When she was younger, her relationship with young male patients had been more difficult. They "needed to show off their masculinity", as she described it. As she grew older, her role changed from competitor to nurturer, which made the relationship easier:

And the young men, - I've no chance there. I'll be a mom to them. I think they think that's all right.

The relationships between men and women are gendered, and age seems to change the role of women at the workplace. Older women have access to other, “safer” roles, such as mother (or grandmother) towards their colleagues, patients and others.

5.2.3 *Age and Generation*

Age is also about being of a certain age in relation to others. Being of the same age as the people one interacts with at work can mean having been through the same period of time, sharing cultural, historical and political references. Matching age with the patients might make the relationship easier, whether it is about sharing musical references, knowing the same stories or having watched the same historical events.

Older workers at the hospital told stories about working with patients with dementia and being able to engage them by referring to events from their youth. Until 1991 Norway only had one TV channel (except areas close to the Swedish border that could also watch Swedish television), and older patients had grown up with one choice of TV programmes only. One nurse told a story of a patient with dementia making references to a children’s programme on TV, and because she also had grown up with those programmes she could recognise the reference and actually managed to engage the patient in a discussion about that programme. “Same-age references” can be useful when interacting with others.

Also inspectors in the Inspectorate talked about having been having a better understanding of the challenges faced by enterprises because they had been through the same things. One inspector talked about digital competence (or lack thereof) when meeting companies that struggled to use online information and services. Where younger colleagues would take digital competence for granted, the older inspectors could easily understand and sympathise with struggling managers.

Same-age references and experiences are an aspect of age, but it is also something quite specific. We may call it generational knowledge or same-age knowledge. As such it is not restricted to older workers, but encompasses all same-age groups. Still, our older workers used this same-age knowledge to their benefit when working with people of the same age. In this way it can also be seen as part of late career competence.

5.3 WILLINGNESS AND OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN

The interviews provided many examples where interviewees, unprompted, described their learning experiences. Highly qualified workers were taking master's degrees in management at the age of 55 and over, while others were learning new languages in their free time. There was a high level of awareness of the value of knowledge and the importance of continually developing it. As one interviewee said:

You cannot just lean back and assume that what you know today will be just as valuable and useful tomorrow.

Most of the employees were positive to learning new things and some even seemed surprised that anyone should think otherwise. Willingness to learn new things and reflect on existing practices was very much present in the material. If learning is to happen, we must assume a willingness to learn, to expose oneself to situations outside the familiar, but also the presence of opportunities to learn new things. From the interviews it seems like these opportunities were often present in their everyday work.

I learn something new every day.

There are always new challenges which I can learn from.

New learning is not only connected to their everyday work, but also from working with others:

I look forward to working with my colleagues every day, they are so experienced and I can learn so much from them.

Such answers may be a result of the types of work our informants have. Both hospital workers and inspectors meet new people and new challenges on a fairly regular basis.

The job is so varied, you never know what new issues will arise, but I learn from all of them.

Many jobs may be more static and with more monotonous tasks, where the opportunity for new learning is smaller. In our cases many of the jobs described offered opportunities to learn new things.

It is not only the desire and ability to identify opportunities for learning which was obvious in our cases, but also their willingness to share their knowledge with others.

I look forward to contributing to change and developing new ways of working.

Several mentioned that they viewed it as an important responsibility, while another recounted an example where a younger colleague had asked her how to do something, the interviewee could not explain and offered to take notes the next time she did the task herself and explain to the junior afterwards. The latter is of course an example of tacit knowledge, which is notoriously difficult to identify and to share. In this example the willingness of the senior to spend time on cooperating with the junior made this possible.

These are of course only examples, but they paint a picture of workers who accept novelty and change and for whom learning is viewed as continuous activity integrated with their everyday work.

5.4 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

We asked the older workers about what they considered the advantages or usefulness of long work careers and high age. In their own words they talked about situations where long experience allowed them to act quickly and correctly, where their experience-based expertise helped them perform their job tasks well and where this competence was also an advantage for their less experienced colleagues and for the workplace. They talked about knowing *why* they did what they did in the ways they did it. They also mentioned the advantage to them of having been around long enough to know *who* to ask if they needed help.

They gave us examples of situations where long experience, both in worklife and in the same workplace was useful. Long worklife careers are related to age, and they talked about the advantages of having lived long and been through life's ups and downs. Age gave the authority and made them feel secure in performance of their work. Being older also allowed them references and experiences they could share with same-age users of their services. As older they also found themselves in a life phase with less care obligations for small children, and some talked about getting older as entering different roles with different expectations than when

they were younger. In our discussion of their experiences and stories we basically sorted the material according to the broad categories from the interview guide (experience and age) and used broad everyday terms as they introduced them.

In the next chapter we will move away from the terms used by the interviewees themselves and discuss the data from different analytical perspectives, where we will draw on theory to better explore and understand late career competence in the workplace.

REFERENCE

Dreyfus, H. L., & Dreyfus, S. E. (1986). *Mind over machine: The power of human intuition and expertise in the era of the computer*. Free Press: University of Michigan.

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