

**Responding to the Policy Shift Towards Extended Work Life:
Swedish Government Agencies' Employer (Non-)Attractiveness
vis-à-vis Older Jobseekers¹**

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Abstract

The reform of Sweden's pension system with the introduction of a flexible (increase in) retirement age, and the adding of age as a ground for discrimination into the Discrimination Act, raise questions on how this is reflected on the job market. This study aims at exploring in what ways government agencies respond to these changes in their recruitment practices, focusing on how they portray themselves as attractive employers to older jobseekers. The study intends to contribute to an understanding of how a policy shift related to age norms manifests itself in public sector recruitment practices. Through the collection of pictures of people and posted texts on employment websites from over 100 government agencies in Sweden, a mixed method analysis was employed with the use of image analysis of persons portrayed and content analysis of written texts. The result shows that the agencies rather emphasise youthfulness and energetic appearances, often associated with younger adults, in pictures of persons posted on their employment websites. When describing the advantages of the agency as a workplace, references to benefits or other aspects of interest to older jobseekers, such as the right to longer vacation, part-time retirement possibilities, anti-discrimination work on age are less frequent. Thus, government agencies still appear to be influenced by age norms in their recruitment practices where older jobseekers remain in the margins. This implies a need to further investigate age norm change in relation to the enhancement of diversity in recruitment practices by the public sector regarding older jobseekers.

Note! Work in progress. Do not quote without permission of author. Comments welcome!

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1. Introduction

Since the abolishment of the fixed retirement age in the 1990s, at the time 65 years², Sweden has undertaken various measures to reform its retirement system to reflect the increase in life expectancy. More recently, the Swedish Parliament in 2019 voted to increase the minimum age for early retirement from 61 to 62 years, i.e., when a person can receive income-based public retirement benefits. As of 2023, this is raised to 63 years for those born 1961 and later. The new provisions were passed on the heels of another Parliament vote the same year to raise the age in the Employment Protection Act for the right to remain at work from 67 to 68 years (as of 2020) and to 69 years (as of 2023).³ This means that although there is no fixed retirement age in Sweden, employees 69 years and older do not have priority over other employees based on length of service and can be dismissed at the employer's discretion. These changes are introduced with some resistance; a de facto 65-year retirement norm seem to remain as observed with concern in a government official report (Pensionsåldersutredningen, 2013).⁴

Furthermore, the reform measures are accompanied with positive campaigning, i.e., statements to create positive attitudes towards extended work life and cheerful encouragements to the general public to continue working. The term "Sustainable Pensions" has been introduced in government communications and adopted by other actors involved. Headlines like "One in four 70-75-year-olds regrets early retirement", "More young people believe in work after 65" and "Few knows how profitable it is to work after 65" appear in press releases and Facebook posts from the Swedish Pension Agency together with pictures of happy, energetic working older adults (Pensionsmyndigheten 2020a, 2020b and 2021). In addition, other measures and incentives are adopted to support an extended work life, such as introducing age as a ground for discrimination in the Discrimination Act (as of 2009) and the lowering of income tax for employees older than 65 years.

At the same time, claims occur of the existence of ageism in the labour market. One of the trade unions for academics, Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations, points to a shift in that older academics have gone from having the lowest unemployment rates to now having the highest rates (SACO, 2021). Several years of experience is no longer a competitive advantage for older job applicants. The trade union for business professionals Civilekonomerna (2019) refers to a survey among its members over 45 years, where about 30 % claim to have been exposed to ageism at work. A press release from the Swedish Public

² There was already some flexibility involved as early and delayed withdrawals were permitted, 63 years and 70 years respectively.

³ The right to remain at work was previously 65 years for workplaces with collective agreements (written agreement between trade unions and employer organizations regulating wages and terms of employment). In 2002, the right to remain at work was extended to 67 years.

⁴ In 1994 the Parliament adopted a reform of the pension system, among other things, replacing the general fixed retirement age of 65 years with flexible retirement ages.

Employment Services Agency (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2021) with the headline “Valuable skills in older adults are rejected” seconds this view. The press release states that long-term unemployment rates for persons between 55-64 years increases the most, with a call for employers to consider competence and not age in their recruitments. A report from the government-appointed Delegation for Senior Labour Force (active 2016-2020) stated after a review of research and complaints submitted to the Equality Ombudsman, that age-based discrimination in working life is a reality (Svensson, 2019). However, the report also concluded that the perception of age-based discrimination by those submitting complaints and the letter of the law in the Discrimination Act on age do not seem to match. A gap is detected between the precise, formal definition of age-based discrimination in working life, and the general experience of ageism in society, where the latter is difficult to capture in legislation.

Thus, there seems to be a tension between policy and practice, where different norms are at odds. The claims that we live longer and are healthier, at least most of us, are of course facts that affect demography and other aspects of society, e.g., challenges for the financing of the pension system. From this follows that we need to work longer, but not necessarily that we all would like to keep working (hence the positive campaigning) nor that employers now are interested in older adults in their recruitments.

The current study explores the effect of this policy shift in retirement age on government agencies’ recruitments. It is here assumed that government agencies should take the lead in the issue-area of extended work life. Through an analysis of how the agencies portray themselves in recruitment contexts relating to age and in particular older adults, i.e., their employer attractiveness, the study aims at bringing insight into the tension found in policy versus practice. What employer image does government agencies present through their recruitment practices in view of extended work life and changed policy on retirement age to potential job seekers? What is the employer attractiveness in relation to older adults as jobseekers?

2. Review of Studies on Employer Attractiveness and Diversity Aspects

Research on “employer attractiveness” is a fairly broad field that involves both a multitude of concepts and of aspects, including employer branding, employer image, recruitment signals, person-organisation fit, talent acquisition and similar. Employer attractiveness can relate to employers’ perspectives, as well as to that of current employees’, job seekers’, as well as former employees’ perspectives. This tentative review, however, addresses employer attractiveness from an employer perspective as it relates to diversity in order to attempt to capture the dimension of age in this context.

The topic of gender is at focus in some of the studies reviewed so far. Schäpers et al (2023) discuss the effect of inclusion of women in top management together with gender quotas on job applicants views on employer attractiveness. They argue that a gender diverse board of directors is of importance for job seekers, but that whether or not gender quotas was involved in its achievement is not relevant. In a study by Iseke and Pull (2019) it was concluded that gender diversity in top management roles needed to be manifested in non-stereotypical positions, i.e., not only with positions in human resources traditionally occupied by women. If not, this could have an adverse effect on attractiveness. Somewhat in the same line Windsheid et al (2016) studied organisations’ explicit diversity statements and gender, concluding that diversity mixed messages (saying one thing and doing another) when it came to gender composition of company boards was a problem in attractiveness perception.

Other diversity dimensions were also studied. Effects on current and former employees of diversity in gender, age and disability in the workplace was analysed by Satzger and Vogel (2023) across different sectors (public, private and civil society). These diversity aspects proved to be more important for employees in the public and civil society sectors, but less so in the private. Furthermore, diversity in the form of mixed nationalities of company board members was an aspect that not only effected workplace diversity, i.e., contributed to an increase, but also attracted foreign job seekers (Dauth, 2023). Board member diversity thus proved to have a multiple effect on diversity in general.

Some studies (Mostafa, 2022; Ngoc Thang et al, 2023; Elmenawy and Saleh, 2023) also point to that different perceptions of employer attractiveness might be present depending on the age of the job seekers. Elmenawy and Saleh (2023) found that although workplace diversity may be important for employer attractiveness for younger applicants, the dimensions they really favoured was the possibility of development and personal growth.

From this brief (and preliminary) review of research, it seems that diversity in terms of age has not been much studied in relation to employer attractiveness and therefore merits attention. The similar can be said about the public sector.

3. Methods

Data was collected from a sample of 112 government agencies, following a selection made for a prior study on age of new staff recruitments and anti-discriminatory work relating to age within government agencies (Segerlund, 2023, manuscript submitted for publication).⁵ Selection criteria included agencies under the Government with a minimum of 50 employees that do not demand a certain level of physical or medical status of its employees. Furthermore, the organisation and special procedures for employing academic/faculty staff excluded universities from the selection, the similar applied for government agency enterprises with their closeness to the private sector. The threshold of 50 employees was set to assure that the agencies would have conducted enough recruitments (relevant to the previous study) and had the capacity to participate in the study. Obviously, agencies that demand a certain level of physical or medical condition for employment, e.g., eyesight, affect the age of recruited and therefore excluded. The selected agencies are mandatory members of the Swedish Agency for Government Employers, an employer organisation for government agencies that at the time of selection had 244 member agencies (Arbetsgivarverket, 2020).⁶

The collected data consists of written information and pictures of persons downloaded from the agencies' websites under the heading "Work with Us" or similar. Subheadings such as We Offer, Employee Benefits, etc. were included. A total of 650 website pages and 301 pictures were collected in 2021⁷ as part of a larger study, where partial results were completed and submitted for publication.

3.1 Written Information

The analysis of the websites was delimited to whether the agencies mention age related benefits, with a focus on vacation days, parttime retirement for staff 61 years or older and other aspects specifically mentioning age that could be of interest for middle-aged and in particular older adults. Government employees' have a right to an increase in vacation days depending on age, i.e., the older you are the more vacation days you are entitled to (at most 35 days at the age of 40). Although this is mandatory, agencies can choose to mention this benefit in their recruitment and presumably attract older applicants.

In addition, the mentioning of parttime retirement is here seen as an indication of the agencies' interest in attending to the interests of older adults and willingness to welcome this

⁵ The original sample consisted of 120 agencies, but 8 of the agencies either declined to participate in the study nor did not respond to the initial survey.

⁶ Main areas of activity of government agencies are general public administration; housing and community development; recreation, culture and religion; defence; health care; environmental protection; enterprise; civil protection and administration of justice (or public order); social protection; and education. (Statskontoret, undated; Statsförvaltningen i korthet, 2020).

⁷ In one case data was collected in 2023 due to an initial omission.

age group into their staff. Parttime retirement, in contrast to vacation days, is offered at the discretion of the individual agency and does carry with it additional costs. This can be compared to the mentioning of benefits in relation to parental leave, where agencies mandatorily offer additional salary compensations to employees on parental leave on top of the compensation offered by the Swedish social insurance system. This mostly attends to younger adults (at least as far as women are concerned). Although a mandatory additional compensation, it is of interest to compare agencies' choices to also offer benefits for older adults.

Furthermore, other references by agencies with relevance to older adults such as attention given to diversity or anti-discrimination values explicitly mentioning age, mentions of high competence (would imply older age) or similar was included. They were seen as relevant aspects that could be identified in the presentations made by different agencies.

3.2 Analysis of pictures

There is no established categorization of age groups and although there is a lot of debate on "older workers" the concept is quite fluid. McCarthy et al (2014, p. 376) reviewing discussions of and definitions used of older worker conclude that they can vary between as low as 40 years old up to 68 years. In this study the age assessments of pictures collected from the agencies' websites aimed at establishing if there was a prevalence of certain ages among the persons portrayed. For this purpose, three age categories were created with associated age ranges as a frame of reference for the age assessments. They were:

- "younger adult" defined as around 30-year-old, i.e. under the age of 38 years
- "middle-aged adult" defined as around 45-year-old, i.e., between 38-52 years and
- "older adult" defined as around "60-year-old", i.e., over the age of 52 years.

In view of the fact that the government agencies in the study have an average age of 46 years (median age of 46,2 years)⁸, it is here considered that the middle-aged adults are in the midst of their career having worked about 20+ years as well as having another 20+ ahead of them. That the agencies have an average age of around 45 years is thus not here seen as having high average age, rather that it is quite "normal" or perhaps could be seen as somewhat on the lower side due to the expertise knowledge and services the agencies presumably are offering. Expertise knowledge demands years of education, training, and experience and with that follows a higher age of staff.

Reference pictures were selected from Swedish parliament members presented on the Swedish Parliament website with their age stated (see Appendix). The reference pictures

⁸ The lowest average age of a single agency was 36 years, and the highest average age was 51,5 years.

were used both in the age assessment by the author and uploaded to a data application (app) for a digital age assessment for a reference value (see below). Two different apps were eventually used, one downloaded from Google Play (“How old am I? Face age scanner”) and another online app (“How old do I look”) found on <https://howolddoyoulook.com/>. Unfortunately, the first app stopped working half-way through the assessments and therefore a second app was brought in.

A test of the age assessment apps was initially made of the reference pictures to see how accurate the age estimations were. The result is presented here:

Table 1: Results from age assessment apps of reference pictures

Picture	Result from app 1	Result from app 2
Woman 30-year-old	28 years	29 years
Man 30-year-old	34 years	32 years
Woman 45-year-old	48 years	49 years
Man 45-year-old	48 years	40 years
Woman 60-year-old	60 years	60 years
Man 60-year-old	57 years	59 years

As can be seen, the two age estimation apps produced fairly similar results compared with each other and the results were also close to actual ages in the different pictures. At most the deviation was 5 years, i.e., within the age ranges set for the three age categories used.

The pictures downloaded from the agencies’ websites were analysed in two steps. Firstly, an age assessment was made by the author and, secondly, the data app for age assessment was used.

3.4 Analytical Approach

The analytical approach takes its point of departure in the notion of ageism. The study engages in the potential change in age norms relating to the labour market and recruitment in view of the policy shift towards extended work life. Set within a context of social norms, a particular interest in this study is in how government agencies in the role as employers can be analysed from a perspective of employer attractiveness vis-à-vis older adults as jobseekers.

According to Bicchieri (2017) conditional preferences and social expectations are key for the existence of a social norm.⁹ When we consider social norms, the patterns of collective

⁹ Bicchieri distinguishes social norms from customs (collective behaviour as the result of independent individual preference of conformity due to individual needs) and from descriptive norm. The latter refers to

behaviour involved are interdependent. This means that the expression of collective preferences is *conditioned* upon what relevant other people in a persons' reference network do or think, or what Bicchieri calls *social expectations*. Social expectations are further composed of empirical expectations, beliefs about what we expect that others *will* do, and normative expectations, beliefs about what we expect others think that others (we) *should* do. Through empirical observation (or reliance on a trusted source) we gain understanding of how people behave and expect this to persist in the future. Combined with the normative expectation, i.e., our understanding of that relevant others' approval and disapproval of certain behaviours in the past will be repeated, these two expectations form our social expectations.

From this follows that change entails change in the social expectations, i.e., in both empirical and normative expectations (Bicchieri, 2017). A prerequisite for change is shared reasons, where the personal factual or normative beliefs of individuals are affected by new factual information or changing attitudes that influence the patterns of collective behaviour. Key elements for this change to happen are attention to awareness (evaluation of our factual and normative personal beliefs), coherence (insights into inconsistency between our factual beliefs, normative beliefs, and actions) and attention to information biases. Tools for this purpose can be legislation, education, media, and collective discussions/deliberation.

However, this is not sufficient by itself, there needs to be a *collective* change of social expectations since deviating from a social norm comes at a cost. Here Bicchieri introduces the concepts of schemata and scripts, the example of social norms on child marriage can illustrate what is meant. The child marriage schema involves knowledge about "gender, sexuality, patriarchy, family values, the role of women in society" among other things. Whereas the specific events or scripts within this schema could concern an actual marriage event where the "script may signal that the bride should be a young, modest, virgin woman with (in some cases) a dowry that is proportional to her age". These schemata and scripts consequently feed in to our empirical and normative or social expectations. (Bicchieri, 2017, p. 134)

Changes in schemata/scripts can occur by gradual or sudden schema-discrepant information and instances that lead to a revision of the schema (Bicchieri, 2017, p. 137). Schema change can also occur where the change does not alter the basic function of the schema, but where the discrepant information is treated as exceptions to the rule. When women break the traditional role of a housewife by working out-side the home, but still keep doing all the household work, is an example of this. Two aspects in the encountering of schema-discrepant information affect how easy a norm might change, i.e., logical and non-logical deniability (Bicchieri, 2017, p. 140). Logical deniability means that you can easily disconfirm the validity of a schema by observation. A more complex schema is composed of several elements

interdependent collective behaviours that are determined by empirical expectations alone, as in the case of following (imitating) a fashion or driving on the right-hand side of the road (coordinated behaviour).

difficult to observe, where one schema-discrepant information/instance can be overlooked in view of that others are still manifest (non-logical deniability).

The arguments presented above pose questions on what schemata/scripts are involved in the recruitment practices of government agencies manifested in how they portray of themselves externally. They furthermore help us reflect on whether the social expectations that make up our social norms on older adults on the job market and in recruitments are affected by the policy shift towards extended working life.

4. Findings

The agencies' manifestation of employer attractiveness in view of older adults was analysed through the information posted on their websites "Work with Us" in the form of written text and pictures of persons. The aim is to explore the extent to which agencies are attentive to aspects that relate to older adults as jobseekers, whether in the form of benefits offered, age of persons portrayed in the pictures that appear when the agencies present the workplace and their employees, or other aspects of relevance for older adults (e.g., mentioning of anti-discrimination relating to age or other). A tentative result of the data is presented.

4.1 Written Text Posted on Agencies' Websites

The findings reveal that 101 of the 112 agencies presented written information on their websites under headlines "Work with Us" or similar (11 agencies only listed vacancies). The extent of the written information varied from 1 page to 23 pages, although a majority presented around a handful of pages.

A total of 650 pages were analysed regarding the mentions of vacation days (number increases with age), parttime retirement option and other aspects mentioned as relevant to age. In the table below the result is presented.

Table 2: Agencies' mentions of vacation days, parttime retirement and other aspects

	No. agencies mentioning the aspect
Vacation days (only)	48
Parttime retirement (only)	3
Both vacation days and parttime retirement	11
Other (only)	6
Other and vacation days	9
Other and parttime retirement	0
Other, vacation days and parttime retirement	0

Vacation days was mentioned by about half of the 101 agencies, either alone (48 agencies) or along with parttime retirement (11 agencies) or along with other aspects (9 agencies). No agency simultaneously covered all three aspects in their written information.

The parttime retirement option occurred less often, only 14 agencies mention this benefit and do this either alone (3 agencies) or together with vacation days (11 agencies) and never along with other aspects.

Mentions of other aspects apart from vacation days and parttime retirement occurred by 15 agencies. The most common references were made to anti-discrimination and diversity aspects with a specific mentioning of age, 9 out of 15 agencies mentions these aspects. An example is Agency 75 that stated under their recruitment websites that “No one shall be discriminated against or treated differently regardless of gender, background, functional variation, age or sexual orientation” (authors’ translation).

Other aspects mentioned are high competence or long experience, i.e., when the agencies describe their work, the workplace and staff. As an example, Agency 46 stated that “Our responsibility is broad, which requires both generalists and specialists with high competence and a commitment to important social issues.”. However, one agency also stated that the workplace has an even gender distribution and a *low average age* among its employees when describing the workplace (Agency 13), seemingly as an attractive aspect. Another agency states that they do not have an upper age limit for applicants, but states that the average age of applicants is 31 years for their trainee programme (demanding the passing of physical test).

One agency mentions that employees may be offered the Award for Zeal and Integrity in the Kingdom’s Service, an award granted to employees with 30 years or more of government employment. Although perhaps no longer a prestigious award, it targets the age category of mainly older adults.

Whereas the agencies commonly address benefits relating to parenthood or simplifications made to combine family and work life (such as flexible working hours), aspects that address efforts facilitating older adults extended work life (such as parttime retirement) are thus much less frequent.

4.2 Pictures of Persons on Agencies’ Websites

The data consist of 301 pictures of persons collected from 53 agencies, which means that of the 101 agencies that did present written information under “Work with Us” a little more than half of them also presented pictures. At times pictures portrayed more than one person and therefore a total of 366 person were identified in the collected pictures. However, 12 of the 366 persons were not included in the final sample due to quality issues, such as blurred faces, showing only profiles (making age assessment difficult), etc. In addition to the 12 persons left out from the author age assessment, the age assessment through the data apps could not provide assessments for a further 30 persons due to not being able to read the uploaded pictures. This means that there are 354 author age assessments and 324 app assessments of persons in the pictures.

The 30 cases where the app could not provide age assessments occurred more often for pictures that were author assessed as younger (11 failed app assessments) or middle-aged

adults (12 failed app assessments). Representing 6 % and 9 % respectively. The author assessed pictures of older adults had 6 failed app assessments (15 %). In average, a concurring second assessment by the app is lacking for about 8 % of the assessments (30 out of 354 assessments).

When looking at the assessments, we can see the following result.

Table 3: Result from age assessments of pictures

	Author assessments	App assessments	Failed app assessments in relation to author assessments
Younger adults	172	177	11
Middle-aged adults	140	97	12
Older adults	42	50	6
<i>Total</i>	<i>354</i>	<i>324</i>	<i>30</i>

In spite of the failed assessments, there is a surprisingly high degree of correspondence between the author assessments and that of the apps. Both assessments identify a much larger number of younger and middle-aged adults in the pictures compared with that of the older adult age group. As can be seen in the table above, 312 of the 354 persons in the author assessments (or close to 90 %) and 274 of the 324 persons in the age bot assessed (or about 85 %) are assessed as young or middle-aged adults. If we only look at younger adults, they make up 172 or about 50 % of the persons in the pictures in the author assessments and 177 or about 55 % in the app assessments, thus slightly higher for the app. The assessments of middle-aged adults, however, show a distinct discrepancy and where the author assessments are significantly larger than that of the app.

Taking a closer look at the discrepancies between the two, i.e., the author and app assessments, we can also see in what direction the app deviated in its assessments.

Table 4: Deviations of app assessments from author assessments

	No. of author assessments	No. of app assessments with upward deviations	No. of app assessments with downward deviations
Younger adult (<38 years)	172	21	
Middle-aged adult (between 38-52 years)	140	20	35
Older adult (>52 years)	42		6

The app assessments deviated to the same extent upwards as they did downwards compared to the author assessments, i.e., the app assessed persons in the pictures to be older than the author assessments in 41 cases and younger in also 41 cases. Assumptions of confirmation bias in author assessments, i.e., assessments rather leaning towards younger adults (confirmed by the app upward deviations), are thus in part offset. In close to the same number of cases (35 cases), the age bot actually deviated downward compared to author assessments of middle-aged adult persons. Thereby supporting the result that points to the tendency that younger adults appear more often in the pictures employers present on their websites.

5. Summary and Concluding Discussions

The study analysed information presented on about a hundred government agencies' recruitment websites, covering both written information and pictures of persons. The written information was analysed on three criteria: mention of vacation days in relation to age, parttime retirement option and other statements such as on anti-discrimination and diversity values specifically addressing age. The study showed that agencies' recruitment practices in terms of information on their websites targeting prospective jobseekers more often reflect or attend to aspects relevant to younger adults.

The agencies mention of parttime retirement option as a benefit is fairly low and even less frequent are statements on anti-discrimination and diversity values. Although the mentioning of benefit of increased vacation days with age appear more frequently, only around 50 % of the agencies still do this. This should be viewed against aspects on work life balance occurring more frequently in agencies' statements, which is of more interest to younger and early middle-aged adults. Agencies thus turn their attention to the needs and expectations of these age groups.

Similarly in the pictures of persons, the agencies more often portray younger than older adults when presenting their work, the workplace, and staff. The age assessments show that older adults appear in only about 10-15 % of the pictures. As government agencies exist to carry out the Government's policies and decision, thus providing expert knowledge and services to the society, they presumably need employees with high competence and experience. This is usually something one acquires over a long period of time and should therefore make these employees more likely to be older than younger adults.

In brief, it is possible to interpret this result in such a way that agencies' empirical expectation on jobseekers are that they will first and foremost be younger or middle-aged adults. This was also confirmed in the first part of the author's study on government agency recruitment, where employment of staff in the agencies studies mainly consisted of younger and middle-aged adults (Segerlund, 2023, manuscript submitted for publication). Agencies explained this to be an outcome of fewer job applications from older adults. In addition to this and based on this empirical fact, one could claim that there also is an expectation that older adults should not be active on the job market nor apply for vacancies. In a sense, the lack of written information on benefits that address older adults or pictures of older adults on agencies' recruitment websites provide an approval of this order of things. There seems then to be a schema and a script for the job market and recruitment in government agencies, where older adults remain absent despite Government policies on extended work life.

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Appendix: Reference pictures

Reference pictures of what the study defined as younger, middle-aged and older adults retrieved from the Swedish Parliament website in English, Members and Parties

<https://www.riksdagen.se/en/members-and-parties/>. Pictures downloaded in 2022.

“Younger Adult” 30-year-old	“Middle-Aged Adult” 45-year-old	“Older Adult” 60-year-old
		
		