

Empirical Article

Workplace Disclosure Decisions of Older Workers Wanting to Remain Employed: A Qualitative Study of Factors Considered When Contemplating Revealing or Concealing Support Needs

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Abstract

Many older workers want to work longer. However, we understand little about the different workplace support needs they may have and whether workers choose to share their needs with others. The objective of this research was to qualitatively examine workplace disclosure-support decisions among workers aged 50 years and older. Sixty-eight participants from diverse employment sectors and with a range of personal experiences and circumstances (e.g., health conditions, caregiving responsibilities, job experiences) participated in 1 of 10 focus groups within the greater Toronto area. Recruitment drew on an existing cohort of Canadians from a survey research firm. Participants were asked about their work experiences, age-related changes, and disclosure decisions and experiences. Focus group discussions were audio-taped and transcribed. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the data and identify emerging themes. There was variability in disclosure decisions with many participants being reluctant to share their needs at work. Four inter-related themes guided participants' communication decisions: the need to communicate information; the desire to maintain one's reputation; trust in others and perceived support; and perceived job insecurity. In discussing job insecurity, participants noted challenges in finding a new job, perceptions held by others of the cost-benefits of employing older workers, and labor market insecurity. The findings highlight challenges experienced by older adults in remaining employed and barriers to communicating their needs. Results underscore the importance of greater attention to ageism within organizations, the need for age-inclusive policies, and workplace flexibility to promote job sustainability across the life course.

Keywords: older workers, employment, disclosure, job insecurity, impression management

With the disappearance of mandatory retirement in many countries, workers aged 50 years and older are making decisions about how long they want, or will need, to remain employed (Beehr, 2014; Damman et al., 2013; Ekerdt, 2010; Gignac et al., 2019; Kooij et al., 2008; Nilsson, 2012; Oakman & Wells, 2013). Studies show that, increasingly, older adults are employed longer, including older workers living with diverse chronic health conditions (Adams & Rau, 2004; Boot et al., 2014; Carrière & Galarneau, 2011; de Wind, Scharn, et al., 2018; de Wind, van der Noordt, et al., 2018; Giandrea et al., 2009; Gignac et al., 2019; Kromer & Howard, 2013; Sewdas et al., 2017). Research examining working life decisions points to numerous factors that older adults consider in deciding whether to continue working or retire. These include personal health, finances, opportunities

for social inclusion and meaningful activity, and workplace factors like perceived support, organizational policies and practices, and flexibility in job demands and hours (Damman et al., 2013; De Preter et al., 2013; de Wind, Scharn, et al., 2018; Feldman & Beehr, 2011; Gignac et al., 2019; Kooij et al., 2008; Koolhaas et al., 2013; Nilsson, 2012, 2016; Oakman & Wells, 2013; Scharn et al., 2018; Sewdas et al., 2017; Wang & Shultz, 2010).

Older Workers' Support Needs and Disclosure Decisions

Less well understood is whether older workers who have personal needs that might impact their ability to remain

employed, and who might benefit from at-work support, disclose their needs to others to enhance their work sustainability, or whether they consider not sharing any personal needs as a strategy to best extend their working life. Organizational research highlights that communication across all levels of an organization is a key factor in healthy organizations and that improved communication is the single most important change workers would like to see with their employer (Lowe, 2012). Yet, research also finds concerns about older workers, noting beliefs by others that older workers are potentially reluctant to learn new skills, especially related to technology, that life course changes in roles and responsibilities may impact older workers' jobs (e.g., caregiving responsibilities), and that the physical and cognitive capacity of aging workers diminishes over time, making them less productive compared to their younger counterparts (Bal et al., 2011; Henkens, 2005; Ng & Feldman, 2013; Rabl, 2010; Van Dalen et al., 2010). The extent to which these are problematic is unclear. Some studies find that negative aging stereotypes are not supported by workplace data (Bal et al., 2011; Henkens, 2005; Ng & Feldman, 2013). However, perceived stereotypes or ageism may mean that older workers choose not to disclose personal information with others at work unless necessary.

Theories of Disclosure Decision Making

Theories of disclosure decision making emphasize three processes: the decision to disclose, disclosure message strategies, and the outcomes of disclosure (Greene, 2009). Theory on the decision to disclose focuses on aspects of preparation and the expectations of those disclosing (Affi & Guerra, 2000; Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010; Greene, 2009; Petronio, 2013). For example, communication privacy management theory emphasizes an individual's desire to control the flow of information in interactions with others and the potential stress and negative consequences when ownership of information is lost or misused (Petronio, 2013). The disclosure processes model (DPM) posits dual goals as driving decisions—approach and avoidance (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). Approach goals are those where rewarding or desired outcomes are pursued by an individual, including support or better relationships with others. Avoidance goals include efforts to prevent punishments or undesired outcomes like being overlooked for a promotion because of a health condition that might impact employment (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). Few studies have examined disclosure decision-making theories in employment contexts, although a study of 896 workers living with a chronic physical or mental health/cognitive condition drew on DPM theory and found that, regardless of the decision whether or not to disclose personal health information, approach goals were significantly associated with positive work outcomes (e.g., greater understanding, a focus on skills and abilities, less stress), whereas avoidance goals, especially to not disclose to avoid a problem, were associated with negative outcomes (e.g., greater stress, less support, perceived lost career opportunities) (Gignac, Jetha, et al., 2021).

Instead of disclosure theories, much of the existing research on disclosure decisions examines individual-level factors like the perceived need to share information (e.g., severity of a health condition) and concerns about stigma among workers living with chronic physical and mental health conditions

(Brohan et al., 2012; Brouwers et al., 2020; Garcia & Crocker, 2008; Gignac & Cao, 2009; Goldberg et al., 2005; Hielscher & Waghorn, 2015; Irvine, 2011; Jones & King, 2014; Munir et al., 2005; Roberts, 2005; Robinson et al., 2015; Toth & Dewa, 2014). Research also examines organizational-level factors, especially perceptions and availability of workplace support. Findings highlight that a need for workplace support and accommodations, which could be characterized as approach goals, are associated with disclosure. However, many studies emphasize that workers with chronic conditions have concerns about preventing stigma and being perceived as a less productive or poor worker, which is associated with being less willing to disclose personal health information. These could be characterized as avoidance goals (Brouwers et al., 2020; Clair et al., 2005; Dyck & Jongbloed, 2000; Garcia & Crocker, 2008; Gignac, Bowring, et al., 2021; Gignac, Jetha, et al., 2021; Jetha et al., 2019; Jones & King, 2014; Vickers, 1997; Westerman et al., 2017).

Older workers' support needs and the factors underpinning their disclosure decision processes are unclear. Older adults are more likely to live with chronic health conditions compared to younger workers, which can impact the ability to remain employed and may make disclosure necessary to sustain work (Boot et al., 2014; de Wind, Scharn, et al., 2018; Kromer & Howard, 2013). At the same time, older workers may be concerned about negative stereotypes and ageism, which may make them less likely to disclose support needs. Existing theories like the DPM highlight the importance of goals but don't illuminate the breadth of goals that may be important to older workers or identify the reasons underpinning different goals or contextual factors that may shape goal setting. Similarly, communication privacy management theory describes the importance of the control and ownership of information to individuals (Petronio, 2013; Smith & Brunner, 2017), but the types of information that older workers aim to control, the reasons that guide their decisions, and broader contextual information needs attention. Theories also emphasize the role of the individual in setting goals and in maintaining control over information. Little attention has been given to others and their perceived role in shaping or determining an individual's disclosure decisions.

Given that many older workers want to remain working longer, it is important to gain insight into their workplace needs and disclosure decisions strategies, including the role of personal and social contextual factors in guiding decisions. As noted, existing disclosure decision-making theories illuminate the importance of broad goals and concepts like control, but lack guidance and specificity related to employment needs and processes, including for individuals at different career stages. To better understand these processes, this research used qualitative content analysis. We focused on gaining insight into workplace disclosure decisions, support needs, and the experiences of older workers from their own perspectives, which can enhance existing disclosure decision-making theories and inform organizational policies and practices aimed at sustaining the contributions of older employees.

Methods

Study design

We used qualitative content analysis to guide the research (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). It draws on a naturalistic paradigm,

underscoring the importance of human experiences, context, and subjective perceptions to socially construct human reality (Nandy & Sarvela, 1997). Three types of qualitative content analyses are used by researchers, each with different aims. Conventional content analysis focuses on describing a phenomenon without preconceived theoretical categories or concepts. This differs from directed content analysis which aims to validate or conceptually extend a particular theoretical framework. A third approach, summative content analysis, identifies and quantifies specific words in text with the aim of understanding how the words are contextualized (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). We used conventional content analysis for this study. In doing so, we acknowledged existing disclosure decision-making theories and the general concepts they describe, but we developed an interview schedule and coding framework that emphasized an inductive approach without preconceived questions and coding categories (Collins & Stockton, 2018). Because existing disclosure decision-making theories largely have not been applied in employment research, we believed it was premature to validate the concepts contained within the theories without first exploring the disclosure decision experiences of older workers and their support needs using their own words and experiences as a guide.

Recruitment

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for focus groups. For inclusion in the research, we identified adults aged 50 years or older who were currently employed or had been employed within the previous 12 months for at least 20 hr per week. Working a minimum of 20 hr per week meant that participants were employed regularly and were more likely to need to make decisions related to disclosure if they faced support needs than individuals working fewer hours per week. No upper age limit for study participation was set to be inclusive of individuals working past a traditional retirement age, provided a participant met the inclusion criteria for employment. Sampling goals aimed to recruit women and men with a range of job types and from a range of job sectors to maximize the identification of diverse themes and capture contextual variations. Participants also were recruited to capture variability in their health with some participants reporting no ongoing health conditions and others reporting living with limitations from a chronic physical or mental health condition. By including participants with and without chronic health conditions, we could examine the support and disclosure themes emerging among participants with diverse health needs, which has been identified as an important consideration in previous work and aging research.

Initial recruitment to identify potential participants was carried out by a survey research firm that maintains a probability-based research panel of approximately 100,000 Canadians. The firm reached out to potential participants who lived in the greater Toronto area to provide them with information about the study and, if interested, to screen for study eligibility. Contact information of eligible participants was then provided to a study coordinator who confirmed eligibility, conducted additional screening, and arranged a time for individuals to participate in an in-person focus group. All participants were provided with a study information letter and written consent was obtained prior to participation. The study was approved by the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board (Protocol #34060). An honorarium of

\$75.00CAD was provided to all participants. Study methods and results reporting comply with the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) Checklist (Tong et al., 2018).

Procedure

Ten focus groups were conducted from April to June 2017. Focus groups provide a method where participants can share and compare their experiences with others (Krueger, 1994). This often generates a rich range of information and different perspectives on issues that results in considerable breadth and depth in the themes discussed. This can enhance the credibility, trustworthiness, and transferability of the data. Groups ranged from six to eight participants each. Focus groups were facilitated by M.A.M.G. with note taking and observation by J.B. Participants were told that the study aimed to better understand issues related to supporting workers to remain employed as they aged, given the disappearance of mandatory retirement in Canada. Participants were told there were no right or wrong answers to any question. A small number of general questions were asked of all focus groups and were probed for detail. The questions were broadly focused on work, support needs, and disclosure decisions and acted as a guide for discussions. The issues raised as relevant by each group formed the basis for additional questions. Probes were used to gain greater clarity and depth of topics. Questions asked participants: (1) about their current work experiences and perceptions of any changes to work related to aging; (2) whether perceived needs/changes were communicated with others and perceptions of privacy; (3) what went into deciding whether to communicate any needs to others at work; (4) the outcomes of communication decisions; and (5) beliefs and perceptions about workplaces, communication, and social norms about communication across age groups. Focus groups lasted ~90 min and were audio-recorded, transcribed, checked for accuracy, and entered in NVivo to support coding analyses (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2016). At the end of each focus group session, participants completed a short questionnaire to collect information on demographics (gender, age, marital status, health limitations, caregiving responsibilities, education, born in Canada) and their work context (employment status, job sector, permanent position, self-employment, years with organization, changed jobs, leave of absence, organization size). This information was collected to provide a description of the diversity in the sample.

Sample characteristics

Recruitment identified 86 individuals interested and eligible to participate in the focus groups. The coordinator was unable to reach one participant, eight participants declined to participate because of travel or time conflicts, and one participant did not attend the focus group for which they were scheduled. A further eight participants were not included in the study as the research team determined that additional perspectives of older workers living with health conditions were needed and the potential participants reported no chronic health needs. Ten focus groups were conducted. Five of the groups contained participants living with a chronic health condition, and five groups were mixed with participants who did not have any chronic health conditions, as well as some participants reporting a health condition. The final sample consisted of 68 participants who

Table 1. Sample characteristics ($n = 68$).

Variable	N (%)	Mean (SD)
Age		60.4 (6.1)
Gender (female)	37 (54.4)	
Marital status		
Married or living as married	36 (52.9)	
Divorced or separated	10 (14.7)	
Never married	20 (29.4)	
Health limitations	31 (45.6)	
Caregiving responsibilities	24 (35.3)	
Post-secondary education	52 (76.5)	
Employment status		
Employed full-time	51 (75.0)	
Employed part-time	12 (17.6)	
Retired, not working for other reasons	5 (7.4)	
Job sector		
Finance, insurance, business, government	22 (32.4)	
Education, health, sciences, arts, professional services	37 (54.4)	
Sales, retail	3 (4.4)	
Construction, manufacturing, utilities, agriculture	6 (8.8)	
Self-employed	7 (10.3)	
Contract work	13 (19.1)	
Years with current employer		16.2 (12.1)
Changed jobs in last year	13 (19.1)	
Leave of absence in past 2 years	16 (23.5)	
Organization size		
Fewer than 100 workers	10 (15.0)	
100–499 workers	7 (10.4)	
More than 500 workers	44 (65.7)	

were, on average, aged 60.4 years (Table 1). Just over half the sample was female (54.4%) and 52.9% were married or living as married. Thirty-one participants (45.6%) reported some limitations in activities related to their health. Over a third of participants reported caregiving responsibilities for a family member (35.3%). Three quarters of participants were employed full-time with 72.1% in a permanent position and 10.3% reporting being self-employed. Nearly one in five participants (19.1%) had changed jobs in the past year.

Analyses

Focus group transcripts were analyzed using conventional content analysis. A systematic coding process identified themes and patterns in the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Neuendorf, 2002). An initial coding scheme was developed by M.A.M.G., based on reading the content of the first four focus groups transcripts. This identified broad topic areas, key concepts, and potential emerging themes. The coding scheme also helped identify when saturation of themes was reached in focus groups. The coding scheme was enhanced, clarified and new codes added after all focus groups were

completed with additional input from team members trained in content analysis (J.B. and a research assistant) and who independently test-coded a focus group transcript. The two coders then independently conducted line-by-line coding of the transcripts. Coders met regularly and any discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion with M.A.M.G. Coding categories separated text into discussions of: (1) the nature of work and changes to work over time (e.g., general attitudes toward work, current job, future work plans); (2) plans and attitudes toward sharing personal information with others (willingness to share personal information, responses from others, discussions of personal health information, sharing family or other needs, decisions not to share information); (3) descriptions of self (e.g., personal circumstances, perceived personality, likes and dislikes); (4) age-related or health related changes that can impact work (e.g., perceived normative changes with age, cognitive, emotional, psychological changes, physical changes, no perceived changes); (5) other life changes (e.g., economic changes, loss of job, caregiving responsibilities); (6) self vs. other workers (e.g., comparisons to younger workers); and (7) how older workers are perceived by others (e.g., positive perceptions, negative stereotypes). Coding categories were divided into subthemes, the number of which depended on the type and amount of information discussed within a broad coding category. After the initial round of coding, a second reading and review of the coded material was undertaken. From the coded material, broad themes were identified, and thematically similar material was clustered into larger themes. Relationships among themes were identified. The themes were shared with members of the full research team. As a result, some theme labels were clarified and the relationships among the themes was further discussed. A figure was developed to organize the themes. To further establish credibility and transferability of the data, the themes and findings were shared in presentations with older workers and workplace stakeholders (e.g., HR, supervisors, disability managers) for their perspectives. A final step in the thematic analysis was a directed content analysis where themes emerging from the research were considered in relation to concepts from previously published research (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This was used to guide the material in the discussion.

Findings

Overview and introduction to the themes

Most participants reported that they wanted to remain working, often in the same job or in a similar type of work. There was considerable variability in willingness to communicate and in preferences for sharing information with others about one's personal circumstances, needs, and future employment planning. Participants commented that sharing personal information was often an important part of their good relationships with others in the workplace, and that it helped establish and foster connections, as well as address potential work-related issues and problems proactively. For example, one participant commented, "I tend to be far more open than I probably should be, but it's part of the dynamic. I'm older than my co-workers, probably more experienced in many ways ... I amuse them with the stories I tell ... That's part of how I establish a working rapport with them." (Male, 65 years, arts and media programmer). Another stated, "I've

always taken a ‘get-out-in-front-of-it’ approach. I have an emerging issue [describes]. I went right in and told my boss right away.” (Male, 60 years, research manager).

However, in general, there was a reluctance to share information or a recommendation to only share what information was needed. This was linked to concerns about age perceptions and age stereotypes held by others. Communication processes and comments highlighted four key, inter-related themes in older workers’ decisions whether to share personal information.

Theme 1. *Perceived need to communicate information.* “It’s a personal issue until it affects what you’re doing.” (Male, 66 years, security guard)

Theme 2. *Maintaining one’s reputation.* “It can be dangerous, it can be – you make yourself vulnerable if you give away too much...There’s certain information you don’t share.” (Male, 61 years, gardener)

Theme 3. *Trust in others and perceived support.* “I would always say, err on the side of privacy and discretion... You don’t know if you can trust everybody you speak to, to not spread things around that are private.” (Female, 63 years, teacher)

Theme 4. *Perceived job insecurity.* “You have to ask yourself, is it really worth antagonizing the person who controls your career? And the answer is, ‘No’.” (Male, 56 years, accountant)

The first two themes highlight individual-level factors and concepts with a focus on areas where an individual has

needs which may require support, and where they have a personal goal to maintain or protect their reputation. Theme 3, trust in others and perceived support, highlights the importance of the perceptions participants held of supervisors and co-workers, as well as broader organizational-level responses to support needs. The fourth theme, perceptions of job insecurity, was discussed in terms of individual-, organizational-, and societal-level factors that were highlighted in subthemes addressing the challenges in finding a new job, cost-benefits of older workers, and perceived labor market insecurity. The perceptions expressed in the fourth theme also shaped comments in the other themes, particularly related to maintaining one’s reputation. Figure 1 depicts the themes. The themes are inter-related insofar as they all focus on disclosure decision making. However, each theme captures unique aspects of participants’ decision processes.

Theme 1: *Perceived need for communication*

Participants varied in their personal circumstances, health, types of work, skills, and past job experiences. In discussing their desire to sustain employment and their communication of any personal needs as they aged, conversations centered on the extent to which living with a health condition, normative age-related health changes, caregiving responsibilities for family members, skills and training-related needs, and retirement planning created a need to share information with others at work (Table 2). Participants also noted a range of individuals who they considered in their communication-support deliberations, such as supervisors, colleagues, clients,

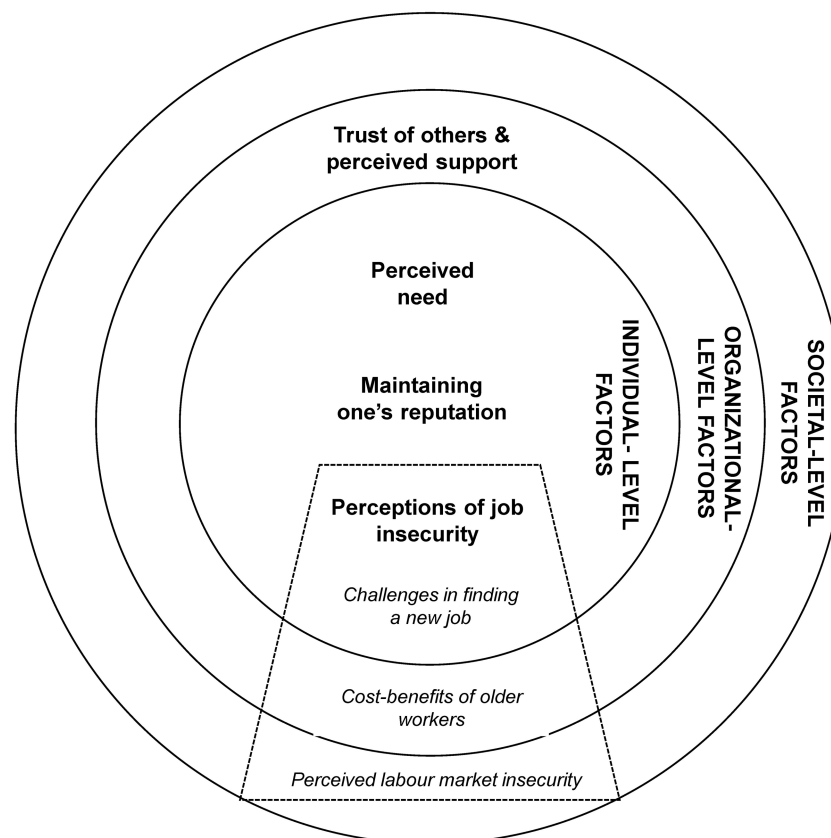


Figure 1. Communication decision themes.

Table 2. Illustrative quotes for the four themes arising from focus group discussions—perceived need for communication, maintaining one's reputation, trust in others and perceived support, and perceptions of job insecurity.

Theme 1: Perceived need for communication

Caregiving

"I've got 90-year-old parents. One of these days I'm just going to have to leave and go off. That's fine. That's fine. Somebody will cover for you. It's a very nurturing environment." (Female, 58 years, policy advisor, social services)

"When my mother was sick with [health condition], I would make up the time and leave early on Fridays to go see her.... I remember a comment from my boss saying, 'I thought she was supposed to die a long time ago.' ...I was shocked." (Female, 58 years, retail salesperson)

Health

"I think there's much more stigma to mental health. You know, you've got a bad hip, you've got diabetes, or whatever, you know—poor thing. [But if] he's depressed—can we count on him? I'm not so sure. If I would hide anything, I would hide mental health." (Male, 56 years, salesperson)

"I think it's different though. Everybody who's got kids knows that things happen. You've got to take time off work.... People say, yeah, okay, go look after your kids.... But if it's yourself ... it just doesn't resonate as much [when] you've got a health issue because you're getting old.... You get stigmatized." (Male, 56 years, environmental analyst)

Training and skills development

"If you are a lifelong learner, you're more likely to keep ... you're more likely to be employed ... you just keep on making yourself relevant and keeping relevant—that's a life philosophy." (Male, 58 years, executive director, educational facility)

"I think we do have to keep relevant. We have to show we're still interested in being modern, being contemporary. Every opportunity that is presented at my workplace for me to learn, I grab it. No way am I going to let somebody else show me how to do something. I learn and I want to be able to do it." (Female, 60 years, teacher)

"I don't want to feel old. I don't want to feel that I can't do it. If I can't do it, I'll tell you I can't do it. Otherwise, I want to be given the same opportunity to try." (Female, 54 years, retail salesperson)

"I do feel that I have to compete with the younger [workers] in a sense of demonstrating that I'm as completely up to date in technology, and all the latest learning strategies." (Female, 63 years, teacher)

Retirement

"I would never tell anybody that because the minute you lay that date on the table, they start taking things away from you and they're ready to retire you before you're ready to go." (Female, 61 years, financial program manager)

Theme 2: Maintaining one's reputation

"I'd be afraid to say anything, especially if the person that I would have to tell is a person that has hiring authority ... I'm always thinking about the consequences of my actions." (Male, 56 years, tax auditor)

"I don't think I would confide in someone at work. They do make, I think, assumptions. Oh well, if you're ill, are you going to be able to do this or that? I think there would be hesitation for sure." (Female, 51 years, software/technology manager)

Theme 3: Trust in others and perceived support

Organizational culture

"Everybody was like a family, and they supported me and offered time off and were very understanding [re: health problems and caregiving responsibilities]" (Female, 66 years, mechanical engineer)

"There's still a considerable amount of stigma around accommodation or requesting that. Folks are very private or they're afraid to come forward with that.... There's always this subtle whisper around the office around what's going on there or there's suspicion around it." (Male, 52 years, public sector employee)

Formal support: Making needs "official"

"You tell [HR] something, they're going to have to note it down, it goes in the record, and all that. If you can keep it informal, that's how I would want to go." (Male, 62 years, senior data analyst)

"Human resources—oh no, no, no. Just way too official. Way too likely to end up on a piece of paper somewhere." (Female, 63 years, teacher)

"We had a session not too long ago.... There was a lot of interesting information that they gave us, which was good because we haven't had any of that given to us. But I still felt that they are on management's side. It's not really for us." (Female, 54 years, tax analyst)

Trust

"We had the case of somebody who confided in a co-worker, who put it in an email and took it to her supervisor.... When you hear stuff like that, you really protect your back." (Female, 66 years, nurse)

"You can very easily identify the ones who are trustworthy ... you get to know. You wouldn't divulge things unless you had an established history, at least for a bit of time with someone, so that you could see if they could be discreet." (Female, 51 years, shipping/storage supervisor)

"I think it goes back to trust again.... I wouldn't want to give him [supervisor] anything.... His plan is not necessarily my plan." (Female, 61 years, financial program manager)

Attitudes of others toward older workers

"Because you're getting old and you're one of those guys who was there when you used typewriters instead of computers. You get stigmatized." (Male, 56 years, environmental analyst)

"Everybody thinks that being old is like being infirm, like it's a disease." (Male, 63 years, teacher)

"The older I get, the more I'm respected, I think." (Female, 54 years, clergy person)

Supervisor relationship

"Look out for your boss though.... You cannot trust them because their motivations are not the same as yours." (Male, 63 years, teacher)

"They don't know who I am. They have thousands of employees. But my immediate supervisor does. He cares." (Female, 54 years, teacher)

Table 2. Continued

“With this guy [new manager] I didn’t know, who is a businessman, that was a harder negotiation. But I had to ... let him know I might have to disappear. And he reacted totally not in a business sense, but in a personal sense, saying, of course you’re going to have to go, here’s my cell, just call me and let me know. It was a completely unexpected thing.” (Female, 61 years, HR/disability manager)

Theme 4: Perceptions of job insecurity

Challenges in finding a new job

“Try to find another job now [that] you’re 56 years old. I would ... do telephone interviews [and] oh, we would like to meet you in person.... You walk through the door ... you get about five questions and thank you very much. So, you know it’s your age and it’s obvious.” (Female, 64 years, childcare worker).

“Trying to find employment ... I had more success when I changed my resume taking off the bottom half of all where I worked.” (Male, 60 years, transportation logistics analyst)

“I actually had a recruiter say to me that the companies that are hiring him to look for employees, are looking for people who are younger.” (Female, 56 years, public sector, communications writer)

Costs-benefits of older workers

[re: would you share personal information] “Absolutely not. Both companies [I work for] are very draconian when it comes to their tolerance level with variance. If you’re too old, if you’re too sick, if you’re too this, if you’re too that.” (Male, 58 years, technology marketing consultant)

“I find it heartless, especially when you have a loyal employee who has worked there for two decades and they they’re like, okay, out to pasture because you’re too expensive.” (Female, 54 years, financial services)

Labour market insecurity

“This is a big paradigm shift. They don’t want to give you the hours, they don’t want to give you the permanent status with the bennies [benefits], but they expect you to be on 24/7 call.” (Male, 64 years, insurance broker)

“The bottom line is that there’s really no security.” (Male, 56 years, accountant)

“It’s not that the kids aren’t doing as good a job as they can and doing all their work. It’s that they are demoralized before they get a chance to get old.” (Male, 72 years, college professor)

and the public. Not all needs were perceived similarly in terms of disclosure decisions and comfort with sharing information.

Many participants expressed a willingness to share at least some information with others at work about their caregiving responsibilities for family members. Participants talked about caring for spouses, parents, and adult children. Group conversations focused on the reaction of co-workers and supervisors, which was largely supportive, and the outcome of sharing. One participant stated, “When my husband took sick and he had to be away, they were really, really good with me. They accommodated me, no problem.... Both times, I was granted the accommodation.” (Female, 54 years, retail salesperson). Positive responses were sometimes interpreted as due to caregiving being sporadic or crisis-based and of high need, and not necessarily a permanent intrusion on a person’s job. On occasion however, participants reported that supervisors and colleagues were less supportive, especially if caregiving was perceived as ongoing (Table 2).

Participants often desired to keep their own health and any age-related changes private and were reluctant to share this information with others. This was particularly true for mental health or stress-related issues. Mental health needs flagged concerns about ongoing stigma that would impact one’s future. Normative age-related changes also were perceived as generating stigma in the form of ageism. In general, acute physical health needs were seen as more “legitimate.”

I was lucky the last time I missed more than a few days. I had fallen off a ladder, so I had lots of nice comforting scars on my face and a wrapped-up wrist ... I’m glad what [was] wrong with me had left bloody marks rather than leaving me open to speculation. (Male, 57 years, public sector supervisor)

Discussions about the need for additional training and skills development were more nuanced. There was clear recognition

of the value and importance of ongoing skills development to sustaining employment in the future. One respondent commented, “What I would say to the younger me would be embrace change, adapt, or die.... It’s nice to have a plan, but adaptability is even better.” (Male, 56 years, salesperson). At the same time, there was recognition that others often had negative attitudes toward the ability of older workers to learn, which influenced participants’ decisions whether to share their skills development needs at work. Some older workers felt they were in competition with younger colleagues and were reluctant to share any needs in their workplace. Others sought out younger colleagues for assistance to build their skills, but they noted the importance of not letting their need for training become widely known. “There’s a [colleague] who is more savvy, and she’s [said], come here, and I’ll show you how to do that. But I would never let the administration know that I’m getting help from somebody.” (Female, 63 years, teacher).

Communicating about retirement was different from other topics discussed by the focus groups (Table 2). A few participants were very open about their retirement timelines and when they would leave their jobs, “I have a date on my wall, in my cubicle, when I’m departing for retirement. I keep no secrets about it.” (Female, 58 years, social services policy advisor). However, others believed communicating their retirement plans tainted their time at work and changed their working experiences and the perceptions others held of them. Many participants had decided not to discuss any retirement plans until their plans were finalized in their own minds and more imminent. The timing of discussions was critical for them. One participant summarized the views of many when he noted, “It’s dead man walking. As soon as they know you’re out the door, well, why would I bother talking to you? ... It’s like you’re invisible. I’ve seen it and it’s a shame, but it has happened” (Male, 56 years, environmental analyst).

Theme 2: Maintaining one's reputation

A second theme that arose in disclosure-support discussions highlighted the importance to participants of maintaining the reputation and impressions that others had of them currently or that they might have of them in the future. Reputational perceptions often influenced decisions to conceal information about needs that were expressed in Theme 1. Participants noted that they had spent considerable time and effort over the course of their working lives cultivating their reputation as a productive and skilled worker. Communicating needs for support at work had the potential to undermine their hard-won reputation and make them vulnerable to gossip, misperceptions about their job abilities, or even lost opportunities for promotion or keeping their job in the future. One participant noted, "With my manager, I wouldn't say I had any issue at all because it could impact the number of referrals I get and the amount of work I get." (Female, 61 years, HR/disability manager). Another participant stated, "I'm very careful about what I decide to share because I don't want to diminish myself in someone else's eyes." (Male, 56 years, tax auditor). A significant concern among respondents was that personal information, especially about one's health, could be misconstrued and used against them. That is, even relatively innocuous information might be misused and leave others making incorrect or inappropriate assumptions or taking information out of its intended context. One participant living with multiple sclerosis commented, "I didn't talk about it on purpose because I didn't want them to make any predictions about my ability to continue doing my work" (Female, 57 years, educational support worker).

Theme 3: Trust in others and perceived support

Focus group conversations about the workplace were extensive and multifaceted (Table 2). Whereas perceptions in Theme 2 focused on what participants believed others thought of them, discussions in Theme 3 highlighted what participants thought about their colleagues and their experiences at work. Participants described a wide range of positive and negative experiences and linked their communication decisions to the organizational culture at their workplace. Organizational culture discussions often touched on issues of the protection of privacy and gossip. For example, one participant noted, "One of the big challenges for me is the fact that privacy is kind of like a quaint notion of the 21st century. There's just no such thing anymore. I still rail against that." (Female, 54 years, retail salesperson). In contrast, another participant commented, "I think it's really important that we can feel in a work culture or work environment that we can share stories, personal stories." (Female, 51 years, shipping/storage supervisor).

Participants differentiated between formal and "official" communication versus more informal conversations to meet their support needs. Typically, there was a preference for informal approaches to gain support. For example, participants would share needs with colleagues and ask for help and, in turn, would offer support to others as needed. Support might include covering for someone who had an appointment, changing meeting times, and help with some job tasks. Informal support arrangements might also be made with a supervisor, especially but not exclusively, for short-term needs. For example, work at home arrangements might be instigated or changes to the nature and timing of job demands

to meet caregiving or health needs. Much of the conversation about formal communication centered around human resources, which was frequently viewed with misgivings, and as representing the interests of the organization not the worker. Participants stated:

It makes it more official. You tell them something, they're going to have to note it down, it goes into the record, and all that. If you can keep it informal, that's how I would want to go. (Male, 62 years, data analyst)

In my mind, HR is simply the buffer for the employer. (Male, 52 years, government employee)

At the same time, having a formal advocate was sometimes seen as necessary and important to meeting support needs. For example, some organizations mandated that support needs needed to be vetted by human resources. In other cases, workers expressed concerns about their relationship with their supervisor and preferred to share information more formally, especially if accommodations were needed. Other workers felt they had established relationships with HR that promoted sharing information. "I felt much more comfortable dealing with HR, even though HR is not really—they're for the company. But I still felt better working one-on-one with HR because I'd been with them for so long." (Female, 54 years, arts/media administrator).

Trust was mentioned repeatedly across focus group participants as a key consideration in all communication decisions. It was sometimes discussed in terms of behaviours or experiences with specific co-workers, "You really have to watch what you do. You know who you can trust. You know who you don't. And the ones that [you can't trust]—you just keep your mouth shut." (Female, 66 years, nurse). Other times experience with others was lacking, which influenced trust and shaped decisions not to communicate any needs unless necessary. "I had only worked for this person for a year ... and I did not feel comfortable telling her ... I literally did not want to tell my own manager. I didn't have that rapport with her..." (Female, 54 years, arts and media administrator). Where relationships were positive, especially with supervisors, participants were more likely to share information. "My experience with my supervisor, my current supervisor, is that I could share any detail and she's going to keep it to herself." (Female, 64 years, childcare worker). When relationships with a supervisor were negative, participants sometimes took a "grin and bear it" approach, not saying anything to disrupt their current or future employment arrangement. Other participants considered retiring earlier than planned from their job. Seeking a new job was not an option for many participants who spoke about the difficulty finding work as an older individual.

Among many participants, trust was diminished by perceptions of ageism in their workplaces, making people less willing to share personal needs. For example, participants in two different focus groups reported, "The vice-president there started calling me gramps." (Male, 63 years, adult education teacher) and "I'm 54 years old and I get called mama all the time. Me. Mama. I don't want to be called mama by a 30-year-old." (Female, 54 years, retail salesperson). Another stated, "There is a repository of knowledge, wisdom, whatever, in older workers. It's not so much that it's not respected, it's that

newer people in positions of authority have an active hostility to it.” (Male, 72 years, college professor). Although this was a common sentiment across groups, several participants reported increased respect by colleagues as they aged for their work skills, mentorship, and general wisdom. “I find that as I get older, I have more experience and people respect that more and more. People consult me.” (Male, 69 years, editor/writer).

Theme 4: Perceived job insecurity

A pervasive theme raised across all the focus groups highlighted perceptions of job insecurity. Specifically, participants discussed a perceived, ongoing risk to their future employment or employment uncertainty that they believed was related to aging. Greater perceived job insecurity was linked to being less willing to disclose personal support needs because sharing information was seen as something that could be used against an older worker and ultimately result in job loss. Perceptions of job insecurity also colored the assessments voiced in other themes. That is, participants with greater perceived job insecurity were less willing to disclose their needs, more protective and concerned about their reputations and the impressions others held of them, and they perceived less trust and support in their workplace. Conversations about job insecurity were animated and underscored the stress experienced by many participants in being able to sustain the quality of work participation they desired and remain employed in the future. Three distinct subthemes arose within this theme that touched on individual, organizational, and societal levels. At an individual level, participants discussed the challenges of finding a new job as a worker over aged 50 years and strategies to find work. At an organizational level, they commented on life as an older worker in their workplaces and the cost-benefit of keeping older workers with higher salaries and more benefits compared to maintaining a younger workforce. Finally, participants discussed perceived labor market insecurity at a societal level, especially more contract work, part-time work, and the absence of benefits available in some jobs.

Challenges in finding a new job.

Several participants reported having had to seek new jobs as workers more than 50 years of age (Table 2). In all cases, they reported considerable challenges related to age that led them to be unwilling to disclose personal needs either at the time of hiring or in the future. Most believed that workplaces had concerns about the potential increased health needs of older workers that made job recruiters dismiss older workers despite their skills. One participant noted, “The perception is that we’re older, we’re going to get sick, we’re not going to be able to perform and they just don’t want to give us the time and effort that it needs to get this job.” (Female, 54 years, financial analyst). To better compete for work, it was common for participants to alter their resumes to remove part of their job history to appear younger. In discussing this issue, two participants stated:

Participant 1: I’ve gone for interviews, and I have felt, yeah, you loved my resume and I had to leave 5, 10 years off of it just to get the interview.

Participant 2: Oh, you have to do that. And don’t put anything over 15 years old. (Female, 61 years, financial program manager; Male, 63 years, teacher)

Cost-benefits of older workers.

Many older workers in the study were aware that their longevity with an employer often meant that they were at or near the top of salary scales for their position and could be costly to their organization in terms of benefits. Other participants were in more precarious job situations working part-time or on contract with few, if any, benefits. Regardless of their work situation, all participants reported considerable job insecurity leading them to be unwilling to share personal needs and request support. A contract worker noted uncertainty for his future, saying:

I don’t have tenure and I don’t have a defined benefit plan, so I’m at risk anytime.... Employers have the right to let you go ... they can at any time say, do you know what? We’re done with you and here’s your package. (Male, 60 years, transportation operations analyst).

Yet, workers with stable jobs, good salaries and benefits also were uncertain and concerned whether their employer would want to continue to keep them in the future. “You could double the qualifications required for my job, cut the salary in half, and get 500 applications. Don’t tell my boss. [group laughs]” (Male, 60 years, research manager).

Perceived labor market insecurity.

Participants also discussed the changing nature of work and how it contributed to a rise in precarious working situations like contract and part-time work with no benefits (Table 2). They noted that much of the focus of this changing labor market had been on younger workers, but that it also impacted older workers. One participant commented, “There’s been a real focus on millennials being underemployed. But it’s not just millennials.... It’s me who’s working under contract for three and a half years. I don’t feel like I have any sort of job protection.” (Female, 54 years, financial services administrator). Another person said:

I’m working harder now than I ever have before.... We have over 75% part-time people, and what that means is that I’m working with a labour force—that’s colleagues—who are petrified that one wrong move is going to cause them to be terminated without cause, which can be done. (Male, 72 years, college professor).

In discussing labor market changes, participants often commented at length about younger workers, many of whom were in the age group of their adult children. While recognizing that employment was difficult for older workers and not wanting to draw attention to themselves by disclosing support needs, they noted that it was equally, if not more difficult, for workers starting out who had difficulty finding permanent jobs and often little prospect of benefits. One participant noted:

Three positions for [this job] opened up and there were six [candidates] on contract to apply for it ... somebody said ... she’s been on contract here for ten years. And she didn’t get it. All six were equally good and great people. I feel terrible for young people coming up. (Female, 57 years, educational support worker).

Another person commented, “The solution is that they will hire three kids.... And they’ll all have minimum benefits, minimum wages.” (Male, 64 years, insurance broker).

Discussion

With labor shortages and the aging of workforces in many developed countries, there is interest in gaining a better understanding of older workers' desires to extend their participation in employment, and their potential support needs to remain working. This research is among the first to examine whether workers over age 50 years disclosed their needs for support to others at work and the decision factors that guided their choices. The findings point to an overarching aim to protect privacy consistent with previous theory but added to theoretical work by pointing to the importance of differentiating the diverse needs experienced by older workers that require disclosure decisions. General goals related to seeking rewards and avoiding punishment also have been identified in theory and were relevant. Novel to this research were findings that maintaining and managing one's reputation was a key goal that drove decisions to not share information, while ongoing appraisals of trust in others provided contextual information that dictated with whom, if anyone, participants felt safe in sharing information. Pervasive throughout the discussions were perceptions of job insecurity and a heightened concern to avoid future job loss by not sharing information or disclosing needs. Job insecurity was noted not only by those in more precarious work situations, but also by workers with stable, well-paying jobs. The findings suggest that many older workers perceive workplace barriers to remaining employed as they age, which influences their decisions whether to share personal needs and support seeking. They highlight the need for more attention to older workers' needs and goals, as well as organizational culture, age-inclusive policies, and workplace flexibility to promote job sustainability across the life course.

Enhancing theories of disclosure decision making

Theories of disclosure decision making highlight the importance of privacy and control of information, and approach-avoidance goals (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010; Petronio, 2013). However, theories have largely not been applied to employment contexts and are vague in the types of information that individuals seek to keep private or are willing to share, specific goals driving decisions, and relevant contextual factors. As a result, it was important to take an inductive approach with this research to better understand the experiences of older workers in sustaining their employment. Using conventional content analysis, we identified four themes relevant to older workers, along with several subthemes that guided decision making.

Disclosure decisions, privacy, and need

Findings confirmed that maintaining a degree of privacy and control over information was important to participants as a general aim. However, the extent of privacy desired by participants varied by the type of need and personal preferences. Previous research has highlighted that the presence of chronic health conditions and caregiving responsibilities can impact the employment of older adults (Adams & Rau, 2004; Bastawrous et al., 2014; Boot et al., 2014; Carrière & Galarneau, 2011; de Wind, Scharn, et al., 2018; de Wind, van der Noordt, et al., 2018; Giandrea et al., 2009; Gignac et al., 1996, 2019; Kromer & Howard, 2013; Schulz & Martire, 2009; Sewdas et al., 2017; Sims-Gould et al., 2008).

Likewise, studies have extensively examined retirement planning decisions (Beehr, 2014; Damman et al., 2013; De Preter et al., 2013; de Wind, Scharn, et al., 2018; Ekerdt, 2010; Feldman & Beehr, 2011; Gignac et al., 2019; Kooij et al., 2008; Koolhaas et al., 2013; Nilsson, 2012, 2016; Oakman & Wells, 2013; Scharn et al., 2018; Sewdas et al., 2017; Wang & Shultz, 2010). This research underscored that participants' concerns about disclosing needs like health, caregiving and retirement varied with caregiving responsibilities and physical health injuries being perceived as safer or more legitimate to discuss compared to chronic physical or mental health needs, age-related changes, and training or skills development. Controlling information and keeping needs private was of greater concern in the latter instances than the former. Retirement was an area that required disclosure, but the timing of disclosure, especially not disclosing too soon, was paramount to many participants to ensure continuity in their employment and inclusion in the work life of their organization. That so many respondents noted multiple areas where communication decisions needed to be made and challenges in what to say, to whom, and when to share information, underscores the complexity of disclosure decision making. Maintaining privacy and control over information may be preferred, but it was not always viewed as desirable or feasible given job-related demands and the need to maintain positive relationships with others. Greater attention in theory and future research is required to better understand how needs shape privacy and control of information.

Approach-avoidance goals, maintaining one's reputation, and perceived job insecurity

The DPM posits that disclosure decisions are shaped by approach goals where individuals pursue rewarding or desired outcomes, as well as avoidance goals where efforts are expended to prevent punishment or undesired outcomes (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). To date, the types of goals pursued by workers in general, and older workers in particular, have been unclear. This study highlighted that approach goals aimed at establishing and fostering connections with co-workers were important. However, to understand support needs, avoidance goals in the form of maintaining one's reputation and avoiding job loss in the future were critical to workers.

Specifically, maintaining one's reputation was a key theme that contributed to decisions whether to communicate support needs. This theme was shaped by perceptions of job insecurity and concerns about future job loss. Previous theory and studies have noted the importance of impression management, have highlighted motivations to convey a particular self-concept to others, and have examined the ways that individuals construct self-images (Bolino et al., 2016; DuBrin, 2011; Goffman, 1959; Krieg et al., 2018; Leary, 1995; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Rofcanin et al., 2019; Vickers, 2017). Novel in this research was the overall importance of this goal and the perceived fragility older workers had of their reputation in the hands of others. Older adults were concerned that disclosing support needs to colleagues could be misused in a way that undermined their presentation of themselves and their reputation as a productive and skilled worker. They also were concerned that it would impact their ability to remain employed. The changing nature of impressions and the stability or fragility of workplace identities, especially as they

relate to age and factors like job tenure and type of work, have not been studied in disclosure decision theories or in the impression management literature (Bolino et al., 2016) but warrant increased attention.

Contextual factors that shape decision making

Disclosure decision theories typically have not focused on ways that contextual factors, including the perceptions of others, shape decisions. Our findings emphasized the importance to disclosure of support from others in the organization. Organizational support has been highlighted in research examining whether individuals share information about chronic health conditions at work (Dyck & Jongbloed, 2000; Gignac, Bowring, et al., 2021; Gignac & Cao, 2009; Greene, 2000; Jetha et al., 2019; Jones & King, 2014; McLaren & Steuber, 2013; Robinson et al., 2015; Smith & Brunner, 2017; Westerman et al., 2017). Respondents in the current study made a clear distinction between informal and formal or “official” support and the importance of trust, which guided their disclosure decisions. Past positive and negative experiences with sharing information, concerns about whether disclosing information would have long-term future implications that went beyond one’s original support needs, and perceived ageism were key interpersonal dimensions that were factored into disclosure decisions. Few studies have examined disclosure across different roles within a workplace. However, one study of supervisors, HR representatives, disability managers, union representatives and others assessing communication-support processes among workers living with a disability found that workplace support providers often had misgivings about one another and their ability to meet workers’ needs (Gignac, Bowring, et al., 2021). These findings point not only to the need to better understand from whom older workers seek support, but also to perceptions of trust and how information might be used in the future to support or undermine older workers’ confidence and ability to sustain their jobs. This includes additional research to capture perspectives from supervisors, HR representatives, co-workers and others in workplaces.

Across the focus groups, many participants discussed issues of job insecurity, linking their concerns about job loss to their disclosure decisions, particularly to not disclosing information. Perceived job insecurity is of interest for several reasons. Research on workplace disclosure has typically focused on current needs and availability support with some research finding that a modest proportion of individuals worry about losing their job if they disclose health needs (Gignac, Jetha, et al., 2021). The findings of this study highlighted future job retention as a key component in disclosure decisions among older workers. Research defines job insecurity as a perceived threat to the continuity or stability of employment and emphasizes concepts of control, uncertainty, and anxiety about the future (De Witte, 2005; Lee et al., 2018; Shoss, 2017). Job insecurity theory also highlights individual, organizational, and societal factors as relevant and finds that older workers report more job insecurity than other age groups (De Bustillo & De Pedraza, 2010; Näswall & De Witte, 2003). In keeping with existing research, this study found that older workers frequently expressed anxiety about the future of their jobs. Their conversations captured individual-level challenges and uncertainty when looking for new work, organizational-level

perceptions that they believed others hold of the cost-benefits of employing older workers, and changes to the nature of employment at a societal level that can impact workers of all ages. These concerns resulted in being less willing to disclose support needs. Differing from much of the existing research, participants discussed feeling insecure about their future employment not only when their job encompassed more objective levels of precarity (e.g., short-term contracts), but also when participants reported permanent work with considerable job tenure and good benefits. This was largely discussed in relation to the perceptions others might hold of older workers as costing a great deal without the perception of a corresponding benefit to the amount or quality of work performed. These findings open new avenues of theoretical consideration and research related to disclosure and perceived job insecurity among older adults. Specifically, they draw attention not only to individual-level concerns workers have in sharing information (e.g., job seeking and hiring), which are typically the focus in disclosure theories, but also to broader organization-wide factors (e.g., salaries) and even considerations of the labor market among workers making decisions whether to share support needs at work.

Practice implications

The findings of this study also point to areas for improvement in organizations. As noted, participants often preferred to keep their support needs private and avoided channels of support that would make their needs public and formalized. This raises fundamental issues for organizations in how to provide support in fair, flexible, and transparent ways to garner trust if employees do not want formal intervention. The risk is that older workers will not share information which may impact their ability to receive support and remain employed. To deal with this, organizations may need to take a more proactive prevention approach that doesn’t wait for individuals to disclose a need but creates a flexible and inclusive work environment with policies and practices that give greater control to workers to manage their needs without formal intervention. Policies like flexible working hours, wellness days, and paid personal days are examples of relatively common policies in industrialized countries that can help older workers manage many personal needs. Some research finds that older workers who used a range of workplace policies and formal and informal supports in a proactive way (i.e., not just when a crisis occurred) reported fewer workplace activity limitations and job disruptions (e.g., missed meetings) and greater productivity than workers who drew on supports only in response to a problem or crisis (Gignac et al., 2018). Additional research examining workplace environments and flexible policies and practices is needed.

Also relevant in the current study was ageism and negative stereotypes, especially when held by management. Rarely did workers believe they could challenge these perceptions. Instead, most participants chose to conceal their support needs without drawing attention to themselves. They discussed how this undermined trust in their organization. Many workplaces in industrialized countries are focusing renewed attention on issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion. It is not clear to what extent ageism has risen to the forefront of these efforts. The findings of the current study underscore ageism as an area where additional awareness and training is

needed in organizations to better recognize the strengths of an older workforce.

Limitations

This research used qualitative methods to understand the experiences of older workers from their own perspective and included participants with a range of job types and from different employment sectors, as well as with diverse personal characteristics and circumstances. This enhanced the richness and trustworthiness of our data and yielded new insights into communication-support processes that older workers undertook to remain employed. However, our study may not have captured all the themes and disclosure processes experienced by older workers. Specifically, we focused on disclosure decisions and did not discuss at length the targets of communication (e.g., supervisors, co-workers), what information was communicated versus withheld and the outcomes of disclosure. We also did not include individuals who were no longer employed to understand the role of disclosure in decisions to leave work or compare the perspectives of older workers with younger workers. Additional research examining decisions and outcomes is needed with diverse samples to better understand communication-support processes. Our methodology also makes it difficult to examine some contextual factors that were not discussed by participants. For example, participants in our study typically did not comment on gender, education, race or other aspects of their identity or experiences that may be important to disclosure decision processes. Research replicating our findings and using other methodologies, including larger studies with longitudinal follow-up, is needed. It would also be helpful to examine processes where a decision has been made to disclose information from the perspectives of others in the workplace like managers, human resource professionals and co-workers. These individuals cannot comment on instances where older workers have chosen not to disclose, but they can provide insight into support needs and their impact on other groups. Finally, focus groups were held prior to the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic. Considerable changes to the nature of work (e.g., increased remote working), support provided by workplaces during the pandemic, and the nature of older workers' experiences and interactions with others need attention. Employment is an area of ongoing change not only related to the pandemic, with workers adapting to diverse job environments, the rise of AI in organizational decision making, and the globalization of work. It is unclear what the positive and negative impacts of these changes will be on older workers needing support to sustain their jobs.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study is among the first to focus on issues of sustaining participation in employment by examining the disclosure decision processes that older adults undertake and whether they are willing to share their needs with others in their workplace. The findings suggest that many older adults are aware of challenges to remaining employed. Key aspects of their communication decision making pointed to the type of need requiring support, a perceived fragility of one's reputation in the hands of others, trust, informal

support, and perceived job insecurity. These findings highlight the importance of more attention to ageism within organizational cultures, and the need for age-inclusive policies, and workplace flexibility to promote job sustainability across the life course.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare related to this research. All authors contributed to this article.

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