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THE DIVERSE POSITIONS OF FRENCH EMPLOYERS ON AGE MANAGEMENT:

The ANACT's 10,000-company Survey

Mélanie Burlet

I. INTRODUCTION

The ANACT network for the improvement of work conditions was established to improve the quality of working life and company efficiency and promote the appropriation of corresponding methods by all the players involved. It helps companies and other organizations develop innovative projects in the labor-related field.

The ANACT network encourages companies to put work on the same level as other economic factors (products, markets, technology, etc.) and focuses on the participation of all corporate players in development projects.

The question of all ages coming together in the workplace has become a major public issue around the globe. Up to now, the consensus in French society has been to promote intergenerational solidarity in the employment market: older workers leave to make room for younger workers. For several decades, French public policies supported this approach. In the past few years, though, the French government has aimed to raise the employment rate of older workers.

A number of issues have complicated this effort, however. First, early retirements do not automatically result in increased hiring of younger workers. Second, the changing demographics of the workforce have started to weaken the economic balance between wages (workers) and pensions (retired persons). Lastly, as age is the leading form of discrimination at work, age management has become a social issue. Specifically, employers currently are not supposed to take age-related characteristics into consideration in their workforce. This has been a complex adjustment, requiring a profound change in behavior. National agencies have therefore found it difficult to address this situation within French firms.¹

This study was mainly interested in the intersection between public policy and the needs of French businesses. To tackle this problem directly, the national observatory on "Age, work and employment" decided to conduct a nationwide study in 2005-2006. This project, which involved interviews with 10,000 managers on age management within their organization, was supported and financed by the European Social Fund. It sought to update the results of the national survey, known as "ESSA," conducted in 2001² after these new policies were implemented.

Against that backdrop, three complementary goals were identified over time:

1. *Use the study as a tool for regional mobilization on the topic of age management.*
The idea was to initiate discussions with the local institutions, policy makers, and partners that should be dealing with this problem and to provide them with regional information. The results could help connect the national issue to local concerns. The goal was also to share a common analysis of the problem with actors with different sets of knowledge and interests at the local level.
2. *Raise awareness of this issue among managers, which could develop social demand.*
Clearly, this study was also a way to identify potential needs from a supply standpoint. , the last objective of the study was to.
3. *Develop scientific knowledge in order to be ready to respond to potential demands by establishing methods and tools.* The goal was to understand managers' social representations and their level of awareness of this topic as they play an important role in firms' decision-making processes.

The research focuses on these core questions:

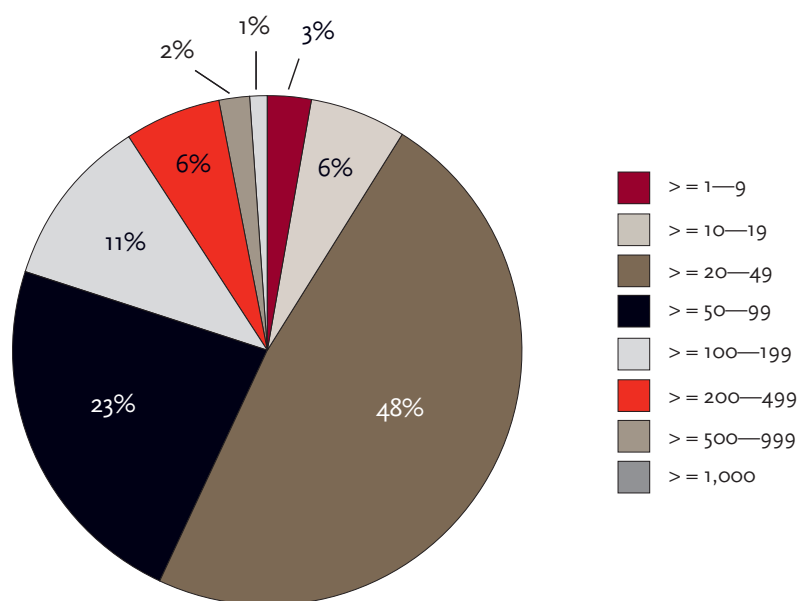
- 🌐 Is age management less important than other strategic issues?
- 🌐 In which areas of operation are managers most likely to take action?
- 🌐 What are French managers' attitudes towards age management? What is their degree of awareness, including perception of problems and the ability and willingness to act?
- 🌐 How can an action strategy be defined to tackle age management in French companies?

The idea of an action study grew out of these objectives, which meant that an original formula had to be developed to fit an action-oriented goal, without allowing the methodological aspects to fall by the wayside.

An Action Study - Background and Methodology

ANACT's 10,000 Company Study involved certain methodological choices. For example, the two-fold objectives of increasing knowledge and encouraging action had consequences for the panel. Regarding the number of interviews, there was clearly a symbolic aspect to the choice of 10,000 because it is an impressive and easy-to-remember number. However, 10,000 interviews were conducted above all because the national study aggregates 24 regional studies. The number of interviews had to be significant for each region in order for the study to be of use at the local level. So, even if for one particular region, the number of workers was low compared with the entire population of French workers, we decided to interview a larger number of managers. For example, if the statistical rules required 40 interviews for a particular region, we conducted 100 interviews in that region. Conversely, the firms were chosen to reflect the full spectrum of French companies based on two characteristics: size and sector of activity.

Figure 1: Percentage of Respondents in Terms of Size of Firm



Managers of firms with 20—99 employees represented 71 % of the respondents. The survey focused on firms with more than 20 employees as they tend to be more stable. There were some exceptions, depending on region or sector of activity. All in all, 9.6 % of the respondents were managers of a firm with less than 20 employees.

In terms of sector of activity, 31 % of the respondents were managers from the industrial sector, 28 % from trade, and 22 % from services. More specifically, industry was slightly over-represented due to the data source.

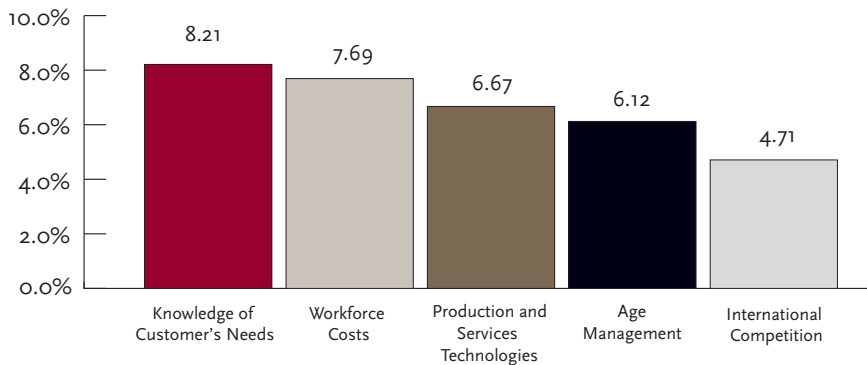
The data collection process

The study was carried out by telephone. Interviews lasted 12 minutes on average. Of the employers who were contacted, 87 % agreed to respond and only 2 % then changed their minds. The study was therefore well received.

II. IS AGE MANAGEMENT LESS IMPORTANT TO FRENCH MANAGERS THAN OTHER STRATEGIC ISSUES?

Contrary to the hypothesis that French managers do not emphasize age management as a strategic concern, the study indicates that age management is as important as other strategic issues in managers' representations.

Figure 2: Strategic Areas in Manager's Representations



Values reported are the average of a score of 0—10 given by managers for each strategic area. A score of 0 means that the topic/area is not strategic for the firm, while a score of 10 means that the field is considered as most strategic.

The average for age management is 6.12. Only two points separate the most important issues, knowledge of customers' needs and age management issues. This shows that other strategic areas do not prevent age management from being important.

Lastly, the more strategy-oriented the managers are, the more they take age management into account.

III. IN WHICH AREAS OF OPERATION ARE MANAGERS MOST LIKELY TO TAKE ACTION?

The above finding is counterbalanced by the rate of negative answers to the 18 specific areas of operation that were the subject of the age management questions. According to our survey, 18 operational characteristics, each related to age and work, constituted age-related management practices. A single practice was not enough to conclude that age was managed as an issue in itself within the organization. However, we assumed that age management did exist if employers were making an effort to tackle several issues.

The Interview

The structure of the interview questions

The 40 questions can be divided into three parts:

1. General questions about the firm.
The purpose of these questions was to collect information about the organization's characteristics and strategic choices. These questions also helped set the respondent at ease by asking him questions on familiar topics and positioning him as the decision-maker.
2. Questions regarding age management.
The series of questions was based on 18 items such as performance of younger and older workers, arduousness of work, intergenerational relationships, etc. They were asked in random order.
3. Questions related to the employer's point of view and biographical information.
This third set of questions was not extensive, but made it possible to check whether the answers tended to depend on the respondent's status, in particular his managerial level.

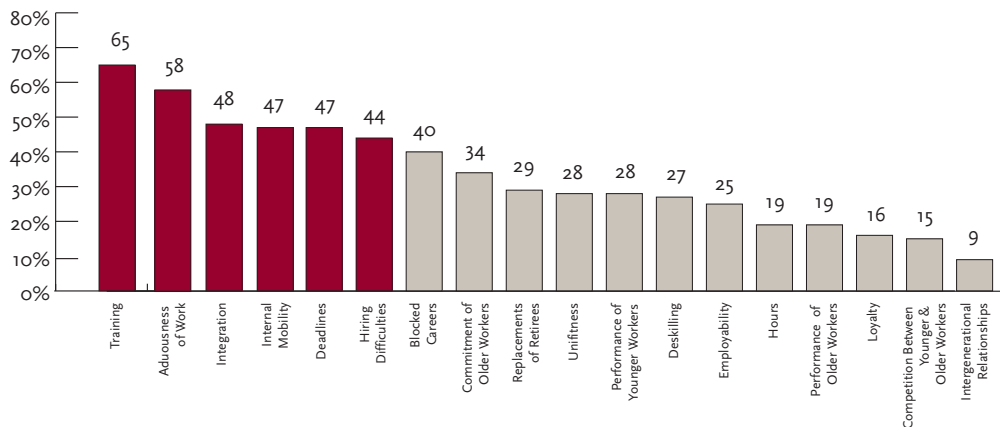
The structure of the survey responses

Four answers were available for each of the 18 are as:

- "No, it does not exist in my firm"
- "Yes, it does exist, but it is not a priority,"
- "Yes, it does exist, it is a priority, but I have not yet taken action"
- "Yes, it does exist, it is a priority and I have already taken action."

We collected information only about perceptions as expressed by the manager. It is not possible to draw a conclusion as to whether the issues actually exist.

Figure 3: Operational Areas in Manager's Representations



According to the survey, only twice did a majority (more than 50 %) of employers report that they took a characteristic into consideration – “Training” and “Arduousness of work³.” This indicates that these managers at least acknowledge this characteristic to be an important issue to consider.

- ① Most respondents tended to respond negatively to the other 16 items, meaning that they do not take these areas of operation into consideration.
- ① Employers are likely to take action on four more areas: integration, internal mobility, deadlines, and hiring difficulties. It is therefore easier to address age management with French managers by first looking at these six areas.
- ① Only 16 % stated they are adopting a number of practices in these areas: training, integration, internal mobility, arduousness of work, and hiring difficulties.

It would be interesting to capitalize on these firms' experiences and to transfer their best practices to other businesses with similar concerns. However, as the previous finding illustrated, there is a huge gap between considering and deciding to act in order to address the problem. Believing that an issue is important does not mean knowing what to do or making an effort toward resolution.

IV. WHAT ARE FRENCH MANAGERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS AGE MANAGEMENT?

ANACT made the decision to create a typology of employers' relationships with age management. Based on how respondents structured their answers (see box below), we collected three levels of information: the perception of an issue, or lack thereof; the decision to define a priority; and the decision to act. These indicators and scales were clustered to measure the level of awareness of age management. The objective was to define typical situations, with the intent to help contextualize a potential demand for an employer to deal with age management.

The survey showed a sharp split among employers.

Type	Percentage	Characteristic
Indifferent to age management	53.2	Homogeneous
Concerned with age management	46.8	Heterogeneous

The first type – indifferent – comprises managers who tend to state that they have not identified age management issues at their company. This type accounts for 53.2 % of managers and the main characteristic of this group is its homogeneity. These managers tended to answer “no” to the 18 operating items, and in particular to a series of 10 items that include intergenerational relationships and performance, career management between younger and older workers, staff loyalty, performance of older workers, hours, and unfitness.

This type of manager seems to be indifferent to age management, making it difficult for them to tackle the problem within their organization if there is one.⁴

The second type – concerned – comprises managers who tend to state that they have identified age management issues within their company. This type accounts for 46.8% of managers. However, their main characteristic is their heterogeneity as they answer “yes” to different items and in varying proportions. This type is concerned about 14 of the 18 items with varying levels of concern.

This type of manager therefore seems to be concerned about age management issues, but in such different ways that it is difficult to determine how to deal with them. It means that for researchers or consultants, it is difficult to create an intervention or awareness message to address all of these individuals' concerns together as a group.

Overall, half of the employers do not perceive there to be an issue and the other half perceives the issue, but is divided on what the issue is. These findings help us better understand how age management is perceived, but do not help find ways to tackle it.

V. HOW CAN AN ACTION STRATEGY BE DEFINED TO TACKLE AGE MANAGEMENT IN FRENCH COMPANIES?

By identifying different managers' representations, we hope to find ways to tackle age management issues. It appears that policy makers will have to rethink how they communicate on this topic. Perhaps it would be better to target specific messaging; that is, policy makers can tailor age management messaging to address the different levels of firms' concerns. Generic communication is still necessary, but it could be useful to communicate more specifically on the potential ways to address the issue or, for example, on best practices. Some firms need to be assisted in order to find solutions, whereas others still need to be convinced that issues exist.

To deepen our understanding, we decided to explore the two types of managers separately:

1. The "indifferent" type

First, are there any rifts within the "indifferent" type (which represents 53.2 % of the entire population)?

It comprises:

	Number	Rate	Absolute rate
The core "NO"	2,847	55.6%	29.6%
No but, yes but...	2,272	44.4%	23.6%
Total	5,119	100%	53.2%

The Core "NO"

Of the "Indifferent" respondents, 55.6 % are clearly reluctant to deal with age management, having given negative answers to the same seven items. They represent 29.6 % of the whole population.

The issue for this type of manager is to raise awareness of the situation; for example, by developing demographic approaches. They need to understand how the profile of their workforce has changed in recent years and how it is likely to evolve in the coming years. This diagnosis should be done by job type because the situation can be healthy at the firm level, whereas it can be precarious for one or more specific jobs as older workers have critical skills. Indeed, in a firm, if only older workers possess the skills critical for specific types of jobs, the firm might be "vulnerable."

No but, yes but ...

Approximately 44.4 % of this type of manager gave negative answers but responded, "yes" to one item. The likelihood of action on their part is low, but attention should be paid. These managers could choose to act — which is particularly significant as this group represents 23.6 % of the entire population. The six items these managers responded "yes" to could therefore serve as starting points for awareness: employee loyalty, deadlines, performance of younger workers, performance of older workers, unfitness, and competition between younger and older workers. The challenge is now to identify these managers as quickly as possible as they may be more willing to take action. This would consist of introducing age management in other social demands, developing an "age mainstreaming."

2. The “concerned” type

Is it possible to reduce the heterogeneity of the “concerned” type?

It comprises:

	Number	Rate	Absolute rate
“Yes” Older workers	2,306	51%	24%
“Yes” Younger workers	2,203	49%	22.9%
Total	4,509	100%	46.9%

This type can be divided into two segments:

- 🌐 51% of “concerned” managers responded “yes” to items that referred to older workers (performance of older workers, intergenerational relationship, unfitness and older workers, performance of older workers, etc.).
- 🌐 49% of “concerned” managers responded “yes” to items that referred to younger workers (performance of younger workers, loyalty of younger workers, integration, etc.).

In brief, these two types are essentially consistent, differing with respect to their target population. They mention a desire for a higher level of involvement of different age groups. This reveals that the different approaches are segmented by age, even though they are voluntary actions. There is a risk, then, of continuing to take a curative approach in addressing the incorporation of age management; on the other hand, there is also the risk of shifting the problem. For example, if the decision is made to create “soft jobs” for older workers, younger workers would bear the brunt of the harder work.

Given this wide disparity in concerns, there is a huge risk of segmentation in age management. Interventions in firms are required to address different needs to avoid this segmentation. Managers have to develop a systemic approach to the problem. Age has to be dealt with at all stages of professional life, though different actions may be taken depending on the age/professional stage of a particular worker or workforce. Moreover, managers should be aware of the need to anticipate issues in order to adjust to situations before problems appear.

Lastly, age management requires varied methods by developing demographic, diachronic, and systemic approaches including health, organization, skills, etc. Age management should promote planning for and promoting long-term responses because age management requires an exploration of several sets of problems and the use of several techniques. Age management reveals the importance of minding and taking care of working conditions.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study provided some key information on how French managers deal with age management. The first important finding is that, despite the weakness in social demand, French managers consider age management to be a strategic issue in their company (averaging around six points). This issue is as important as other common strategic issues; they are not mutually exclusive. However, there is a gap between the strategic concerns and the operational issues, even though 47% of 10,000 managers state that they have identified age management issues. Moreover, there are many different levels of concern and ways to be concerned. In particular, there is, on the one hand, a sharp split between those who are “concerned” and those who seem to be “indifferent.” On the other hand, there is a huge risk of segmentation between older workers and younger workers. For these reasons, national public policy and strategy will have to be fine-tuned in terms of communication and methods.

This study will also make it possible to mobilize in different ways in order to disseminate the findings to practitioners and to managers in order to promote age management at work; there have already been some publications by region. These documents have been widely distributed to local players.

Lastly, the results of the study have made it possible to create communication tools in order to hold discussions with employers and HR managers. For example, the agency publishes a leaflet (six pages long, called “Profil’âges”) which provides information on the study and ideas for implementation. For example, it suggests they ask themselves whether average age is useful in managing their human resources as that figure can conceal different breakdowns of age in various population groups. It is used to facilitate mutual understanding and allows the agency to leave a document with each employer after a meeting.

Implications for Employers:

The issues of age management need to be tackled by:

- developing demographic approaches by job type
- adopting systemic approach towards working conditions: health, organizational work, skills, etc.
- dealing with at all stages of professional life

No matter how it is achieved, developing age management in firms is of the utmost importance in order to improve both working conditions and firms’ performances, given the demographic, social, and economic challenges they are facing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College was founded in 2005. Working in partnership with workplace decision-makers, the Center promotes the quality of employment for the 21st century multi-generational workforce. The Center strives to put evidence into practice to improve employment experiences for both employers and employees. We place a particular emphasis on workplace flexibility that supports 21st century ways of getting work done and enhances employees' work experiences. Our multi-tiered strategy includes combining employer engaged research and academic rigor with innovative communications. We engage multi-disciplinary teams of researchers from around the world to forward three research streams – the US National Initiatives, the State Initiatives, and the Global Initiatives.

The Sloan Center's Global Initiatives partners with scholars and employers around the world. Together we collaborate on innovative employer-engaged studies and evidence-based practical publications about and for today's global, multi-generational workforce. Current projects include: our Country Context series, our Mind the Gap Employee/Employer series, and the Generations of Talent Study.

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REFERENCE:

- 1 The first explanations tended to be: “French employers do not care about age management,” “This is not a priority for them,” “Age management is less important to them than other strategic issues,” etc.
- 2 “ESSA” stands for “Survey of workers’ employment based on age.” It was conducted by the French national research center. It means “ Enquête sur les Salariés Selon l’Age”.
- 3 In France, these two operational areas are considered crucial to allow the extension of the work life by prolonging work ability.
- 4 However, every firms are supposed to find ways to postpone aging at work. The seniors’ employment rate in France is only about 38 percent.