



# **What do workplaces need to know to help older workers stay on the job?**

## **A qualitative study of older workers' disclosure decisions**

Monique A.M. Gignac, PhD  
IWH Speaker Series  
September 20, 2022

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## Funding:



Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en  
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

# Takeaway Messages

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- Maintaining privacy is a preferred strategy, but it is not always desirable or feasible.
- Impression management goals highlight the perceived fragility of older workers' reputations.
- Job insecurity is a key factor driving communication decisions.
- A preference for informal assistance raises challenges for organizations when employees do not want formal intervention and are not willing to communicate their needs.
- Perceived ageism was commonly noted – it diminished trust and undermined sharing of needs.



# Background: Context

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- Historic labour shortages are affecting every Canadian job sector.
- Many workers aged 50 plus years want to work longer, often beyond a traditional retirement age.
- In making the decision whether to continue working, workers consider numerous factors – their finances, personal health, opportunities for meaningful activity, and workplace context (e.g., job demands and flexibility).

(Adams & Rau, 2004; Boot et al., 2014; Carrière & Galarneau, 2011; de Wind et al., 2018; Damman et al., 2013; Feldman & Beehr, 2011; Gignac et al., 2019; Glandrea et al., 2009; Kromer & Howard, 2013; 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)

# Less well understood...

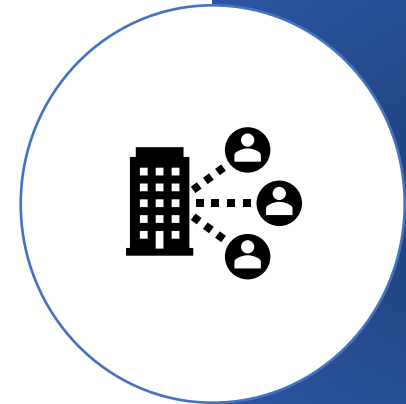
- What work-related challenges do older workers say are impacting their job sustainability?
- Do older workers with work-related needs disclose them to others to get support, or do they believe not sharing personal needs is the best strategy to extend their working life?



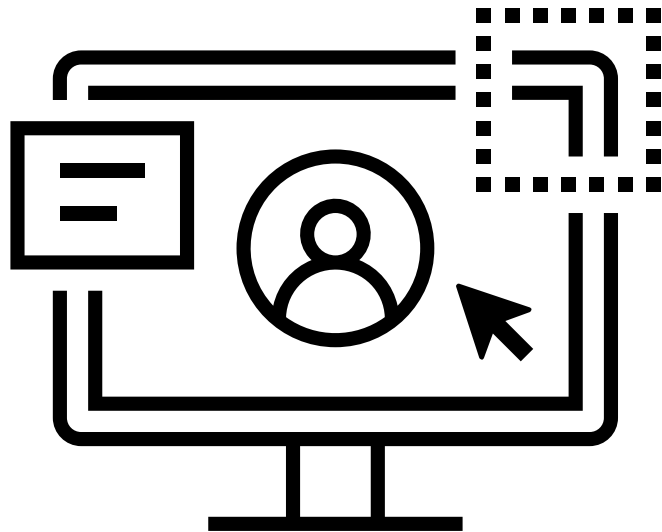
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To address labour shortages and maintain and enhance a diverse, inclusive workforce, we need to better understand the employment context and communication decisions of workers aged 50+ years.



# Background: Stereotypes about Older Workers



- Research finds several negative, pervasive beliefs about older workers.
  - Reluctant to learn new skills (e.g., technology).
  - Physical and cognitive capacity changes with age may make some job demands difficult.
- Studies find that negative aging stereotypes often are not supported by workplace data.
- Perceived stereotypes or ageism may mean that older workers choose not to disclose personal information.

(Bal et al., 2011; Henkens, 2005; Ng & Feldman, 2013)

# Theories of Disclosure Decision Making

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Theories of disclosure decision making emphasize the expectations of those disclosing.

- What are an individual's goals?
- What does the individual believe the outcomes will be?
- What are their concerns?



# Theories of Disclosure Decision Making

**Communication Privacy Management Theory (CPM):** Emphasizes the importance of controlling information; stress when the ownership of information is lost or misused (Petronio, 2013).

**Disclosure processes model (DPM):** Approach and avoidance goals drive decisions (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010).

- Approach expectations: people will share when they anticipate a positive or rewarding outcome (e.g., improved relationship, help with needs).
- Avoidance expectations: people will not share when they anticipate a negative or undesired outcome (e.g., loss of promotion or career opportunities).

# Employment Research

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Workplace disclosure research often has focused on mental health conditions and emphasized decision making as guided by:

- A need to disclose (e.g., condition severity and impact)
- Concerns about stigma
- Perceived support

(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)

# Current Gaps



Communication theories largely have not been applied to employment contexts (Gignac, Jetha, et al., 2021).



Theories identify important concepts (control, positive/negative goals), but they do not illuminate specific needs, decision-making considerations, or contextual issues.

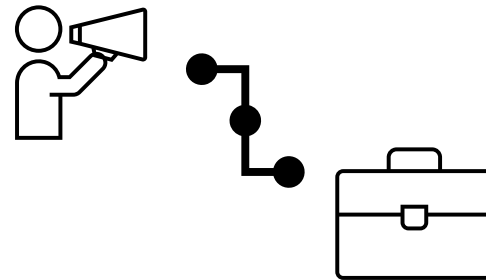


Other employment research focuses on disclosure of health conditions, but not older worker perspectives.

# Research Questions

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What work-related challenges do older workers report impact their job sustainability? What are their needs?

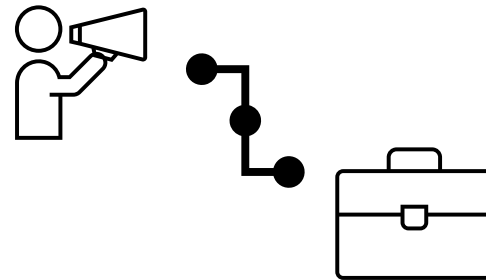


# Research Questions

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What work-related challenges do older workers report impact their job sustainability? What are their needs?

What factors are important to understand about disclosure decisions from the perspective of older workers?



# Study Design and Participants

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Qualitative content methods and analyses.

Inclusion criteria:

- Adults  $\geq$  50 years
- Currently employed or employed in past 12 months
- Working  $\geq$  20 hours per week

Participants drawn from a panel of ~100,000 Canadians:

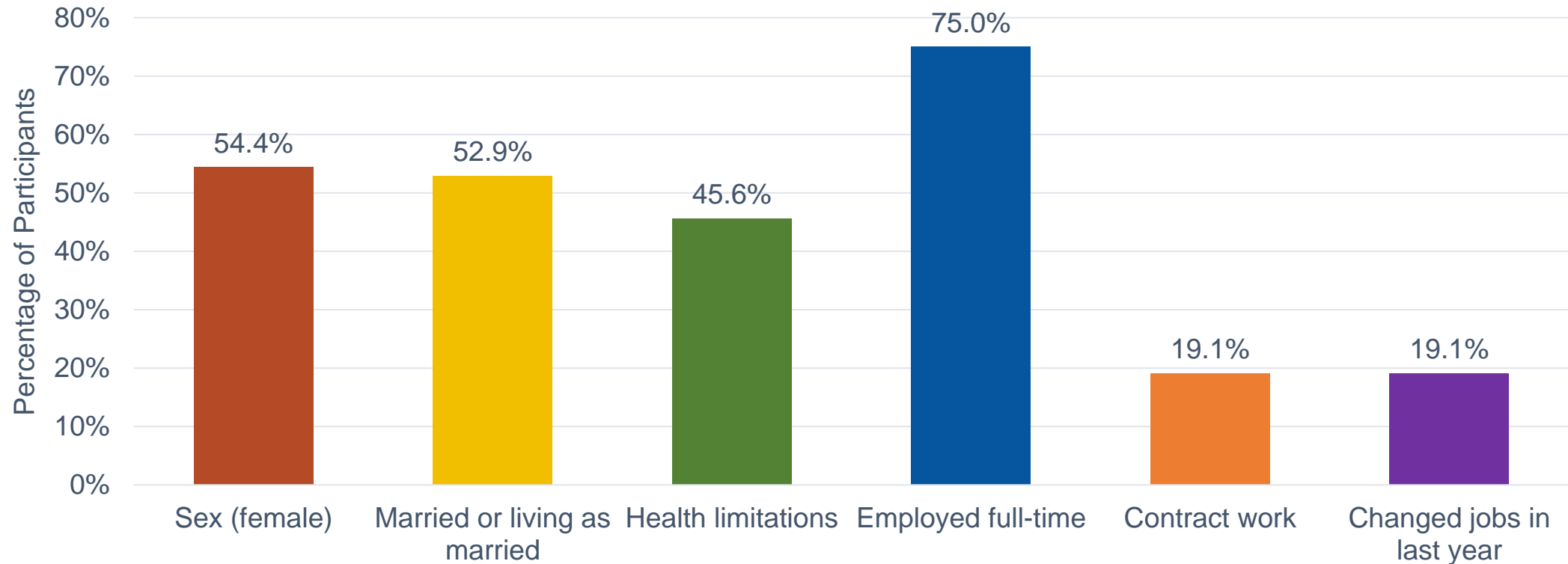
- No upper age limit for participation
- Recruited a range of job types and job sectors
- Recruited participants with and without chronic health conditions causing disability at work

# Procedure

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- Focus groups of 6-8 participants each from the greater Toronto area (pre-COVID-19).
- Some mixed health/disability groups; some groups comprised only of individuals living with a chronic condition.
- Discussions lasted ~90 minutes; were audio-taped and transcribed.
- Questions broadly focused on work experiences; perceived age-related changes; support needs; and disclosure and privacy decisions.
- Transcripts were analyzed using conventional content analysis.

# Results: Sample Characteristics (n = 68; av. age = 60.4 years)





# Overarching Perspectives and Themes

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- Most participants wanted to remain employed, up to or past age 65 years.
- Participants recognized that sharing personal information was part of a good relationship with others (fosters connections; proactively addresses work-related issues).
- In general, there was reluctance to share information about personal needs or a recommendation to only share what information was needed.

# Four Inter-related Themes Emerged

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## Theme 1: Perceived need to communicate

“It’s a personal  
issue until it  
affects what  
you’re doing.”  
(Male, 66 years,  
security guard)

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Theme 1:  
Perceived need to  
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Theme 2:  
Maintaining one’s  
reputation

“It can be  
dangerous, it can  
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Theme 3: Trust in  
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perceived support

“I would always  
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You don’t know if  
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Theme 4:  
Perceptions of 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)



## Theme 1: Perceived need to communicate



- **Living with a health condition**
- **Normative age-related health changes**

“[If] you’ve got a bad hip, you’ve got diabetes, or whatever – 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)

“Everybody who’s got kids knows that things happen. You’ve got to take time off work... 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)



## Theme 1: Perceived need to communicate



- **Caregiving responsibilities for family members**

“When my husband took sick and he had to be away, they were really, really good with me. They accommodated me, no problem.”

(Female, 54 years, retail salesperson)



## Theme 1: Perceived need to communicate



- **Skills and training-related needs**

“I think we do have to keep relevant... Every opportunity that is presented at my workplace for me to learn, I grab it.”

(Female, 60 years, teacher)

“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)





## Theme 1: Perceived need to communicate



- **Retirement planning**

“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)

“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

# Impression Management

- Participants spoke of the importance of others' impression of them.
- Considerable time and effort went in to cultivating a reputation as a productive and skilled worker over the course of one's working life.
- Reputations were seen as fragile and vulnerable to age misperceptions (i.e., stereotypes, ageism).
- Communicating support needs, especially health-related needs, could undermine one's reputation and make a person vulnerable to gossip, misperceptions about job abilities, or lost future opportunities.



## Theme 2: Maintaining one's reputation

“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)

“I don’t think I would confide in someone at work. They make...assumptions. ‘Oh well, if you’re ill, are you going to be able to do this or that?’”

(Female, 51 years, software/technology manager)

“I didn’t talk about [my multiple sclerosis] 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

Conversations about the workplace were extensive and multi-faceted

Discussions emphasized:

- ❖ Preventing gossip and the protection of privacy
- ❖ A preference for informal support over formal supports/intervention
- ❖ Trust



### Theme 3: Trust in others and perceived support

- **Formal versus informal support**

“It makes it more official. You tell [HR] 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)

“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)



## Theme 3: Trust in others and perceived support

- **Trust**

Mentioned repeatedly as a key consideration in all communication decisions.

Undermined by perceptions of ageism in the workplace, making people less willing to share their personal needs.



## Theme 3: Trust in others and perceived support

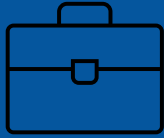
### • Trust

“The vice-president there started calling me gramps.” (Male, 63 years, adult education teacher)

“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)

“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)

“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

- Job insecurity was pervasive (i.e., a perception of risk to future employment).
- It was discussed not only by those in precarious work situations (e.g., contract work), but also by those with stable, secure employment.
- Participants with greater job insecurity were less willing to disclose their needs, more concerned about their reputations, and had less trust of others at work.
- Three sub-themes:





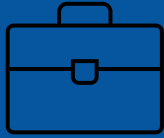
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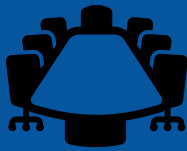
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Challenges in finding a new job as a worker over aged 50 years



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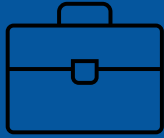
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Cost-benefits of keeping older versus younger workers



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### Organizational level:

Cost-benefits of keeping older versus younger workers

### Societal level:

Labour market insecurity (e.g., contract work, absence of benefits)



## Theme 4: Perceived job insecurity

Challenges in finding a new job: “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)

Cost-benefits of older workers: “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)

Labour market insecurity: “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)

# Study Limitations

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- May not have captured all themes experienced by older workers, especially in part-time and contract work.
- Additional research needed to focus on the targets of communication (e.g., supervisors, co-workers), how much is communicated and when.
- Participants often did not discuss contextual information that may be important – e.g., gender, education, race, culture.
- Focus groups were held prior to the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic.

# Summary

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- Disclosure decisions vary related to needs (health, caregiving, skills building, retirement).
- Maintaining privacy and control over information is preferred, but is not always desirable or feasible given: a) job-related demands, b) the desire to maintain positive relationships with others, and c) maintaining skills.
- Impression management goals highlight the perceived fragility of older workers' reputations at the hands of others.
- Perceived job insecurity is a key factor in driving communication decisions – it was important not only in precarious work, but also when work was permanent and stable.

# Practice Implications

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- A preference for informal assistance raises challenges for organizations in providing support if employees do not want formal intervention and are not willing to communicate their needs.
- Perceived ageism was commonly noted – it diminished trust and undermined sharing of needs.

# Practice Implications

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- A preference for informal assistance raises challenges for organizations in providing support if employees do not want formal intervention and are not willing to communicate their needs.

Suggests a need for policies that proactively create flexible and supportive environments to enable workers to adapt and maintain privacy

- Perceived ageism was commonly noted – it diminished trust and undermined sharing of needs.

Highlights the importance of awareness and addressing ageist attitudes and behaviours as part of equity, diversity, and inclusion policies



# Thank You

Gignac MAM, Bowring J, Shahidi FV, Kristman V, Cameron JI, Jetha A. (2022). Workplace disclosure decisions of older workers wanting to remain employed: A qualitative study of factors considered when contemplating revealing or concealing support needs. *Work, Aging and Retirement*: waac029. <https://doi.org/10.1093/workar/waac029>

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The screenshot shows the journal article page for "Work, Aging and Retirement". The article title is "Workplace Disclosure Decisions of Older Workers Wanting to Remain Employed: A Qualitative Study of Factors Considered When Contemplating Revealing or Concealing Support Needs". The authors listed are Monique A M Gignac, Julie Bowring, Faraz V Shahidi, Vicki Kristman, Jill I Cameron, and Arif Jetha. The article was published on 10 September 2022. The page includes a table of contents on the left, a list of authors, and an abstract section. The abstract text reads: "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".

# Thank you

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