

The impact of older employee networks on motivation and commitment

Master Thesis

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Abstract

The ageing workforce is an essential topic in the present labour market as it affects many organizations and will continue to do so in the near future. In order for organizations and HR specifically to deal with this trend, they need to focus on older employees. Therefore, this researched looked into two older employee networks to see if such a network could offer older employees some support. This study specifically looked into the impact of older employee networks on the motivation and commitment of ageing respondents, as motivation and commitment are important for employees and the organization. In order to do so, fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of two older employee networks. This study found that older employee networks can impact the motivation and commitment of respondents in different ways. It is important to mention that negative age discourses and stereotypes were apparent in the interviews, impacting the motivation and commitment of respondents. Respondents mainly joined the network to overcome negative age discourses and stereotypes and felt they are stronger together. They mostly have a negative association with the older age and therefore do not identify with their own age and prefer to look at the subjective age instead. This research created new insights into older employee networks and further studies about older employee networks could look into this.

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1. Introduction

The ageing workforce is a challenge in the current labour market. The retirement age is increasing in countries and employees remain longer on the workforce in order to prevent the workforce from shrinking (Ng & Feldman, 2008). Fertility rates have decreased while life expectancies have increased over the past years which has led to an ageing workforce worldwide, which is changing the dynamics on the work floor (Van Dalen, Henkens, & Schippers, 2010). Life expectancy has significantly increased in the Netherlands from an average of 71.5 years in 1950 to 81.8 years in 2019 (CBS, 2019). According to Akkermans et al. (2016), the share of older employees will keep increasing over the upcoming years. The United Nations (2019) even predicts that the share of employees with the age of 60 years and older will increase more than twofold by 2050. Older employees are crucial in the labour market since the average age of employees within organizations is increasing and older workers need to be aware of their strong position in the labour market.

The ageing workforce has become an important topic in today's world and therefore the HRM field is in need of more scientific studies regarding age within organizations. Over the past years, more critical studies regarding age have been done based on the current developments (Thomas, Hardy, Cutcher, & Ainsworth, 2014). However, it remains a challenge for Human Resource managers to find compelling strategies to motivate older workers and keep them engaged within the organization since there is still not much research available (Dellve & Eriksson, 2017). Age is a crucial part of diversity but diversity research focused on age has been overshadowed by research regarding gender, ethnicity, race and religion (Hancock & Tyler, 2007; Kirton & Greene, 2016).

One of the topics that these studies have focused on is diversity networks such as LGBTI networks, women's networks, ethnic minority networks and young employee networks (Dennissen, Benschop, & van den Brink, 2019). Diversity networks bring a specific group together which, in case of an older employee network, would be the older employees (Y. Benschop, Holgersson, Van den Brink, & Wahl, 2015). However, older employee networks have not been studied before and there are only a few organizations with older employee networks in the Netherlands (e.g., Ministry of Internal Affairs, KPN, Rabobank) (*Medewerkersnetwerken in het vizier*, 2017).

Diversity networks could be a great asset for organizations to be able to manage diversity. Randel et al. (2018) illustrate the importance of belongingness for intrinsic motivation of

employees. This feeling of belongingness can be fostered by networking activities (Lee & Kim, 2011; Randel et al., 2018). Older employee networks can create feelings of purposefulness and meaningfulness for older employees, and this could potentially result in feelings of belongingness. Chalofsky and Krishna (2009) state that older employees are in need of meaningful work which can result in motivation and long-term commitment, and older employee networks could perhaps be such a source. The study from Lee and Kim (2011) argues that social networks offer employees social support and belongingness, which can result in positive behaviours and attitudes. This is confirmed by several other studies, for example, Dennissen et al. (2019) state that diversity networks can strengthen social ties which can result in increased satisfaction and feelings of social support. Lee and Kim (2011) argue that feelings of social support can result in motivation and commitment of the workforce. Plaisier, Broese van Groenou, and Keuzenkamp (2015) argue that emotion-related goals are very important for older employees, such as deepening one's existing relations. Older employee networks could potentially help to fulfil such emotion-related goals from the ageing workforce.

The average age within organizations is increasing and therefore older employees are a crucial part of the workforce. Previous research regarding diversity networks have shown that there is a potential for older employee networks to have a positive impact on motivation and commitment of members. Motivation and commitment have a positive impact on organizational performance, and it can enhance employee well-being, therefore resulting in a win-win situation for both the employee and the organization (Heavey, Halliday, Gilbert, & Murphy, 2011). The goal of this research is to gain more knowledge about older employee networks by focusing on how these networks support the ageing respondents. This study will contribute to the HRM diversity field since older employee networks have not been studied before. Based on previous research, and the needs for future research, the following research question has been formulated: *How do older employee networks impact the motivation and commitment of the ageing respondents?*

This study contributes to theory in several ways. First of all, this study highlights the impact of an older employee network on the ageing respondents. The whole world is dealing with an ageing workforce and yet there is no research available regarding older employee networks so this study will address this gap since older employee networks have the potential to result in a more motivated and committed workforce. The average age of employees within organizations is

expected to increase over the upcoming years, making this research even more relevant. This study gives an insight into the needs of older employees on the work floor. In addition, it contributes to the research field of diversity networks by including research about older employee networks, which makes research about diversity networks more complete since this is an under researched area. The impact of different diversity networks could be compared and used for future research. To conclude, this research adds a contribution to the commitment literature as this research used the three-component model of commitment.

This study is also practically relevant for several reasons. It is a struggle for HR to keep older employees motivated and engaged (Dellve & Eriksson, 2017) and this study provides a better understanding into the needs of older employees which HR management could use to support older employees in the organization. This study aims to get an insight into the impact of older employee networks on employees, therefore adding to practice. Organizations with an older employee network could improve their practices based on this study, and it could possibly result in organizations becoming more aware of older employee networks and eventually introducing an older employee network within the organization. This research could therefore be very beneficial for the HR department of organizations since introducing an older employee network could potentially be a major support for older employees. This study can be used by organizations and HR specifically to support older employees within organizations.

For this research, the data was collected at two different organizations: a national governmental organization and an International financial services provider. The national governmental organization has several departments in the Netherlands and two of these departments have one older employee network which have been researched in this study. The International financial services provider has several locations both in The Netherlands and abroad and one older employee network of one of these locations in the Netherlands has been studied. In total, fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted for this study, seven for each older employee network. All respondents are a part of the older employee network and among these respondents are both men and women who are employed within different higher positions of the organization. The interviews followed an explorative approach and therefore an abductive approach has been applied. A critical realist approach was used to support this, since the aim of this study is to gain a deep understanding on the impact of older employee networks on the motivation and commitment of the ageing respondents. This approach has elements of both

objectivism and interpretivism and therefore makes it possible to stay as objective as possible while also trying to understand the meaning of what is being said during the interviews (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). Some elaboration on the critical realist perspective will be provided in section 3.2.

The structure of the rest of the paper is as follows: chapter two will describe the theoretical framework consisting of the most important concepts of this study. Next, some elaboration will be provided on the decisions being made in the methodology chapter. Chapter four will display the results based on the conducted interviews. This study will end with a conclusion and discussion.

2. Theoretical background

In this section, an outline of the main theories and concepts will be provided based on a literature review. The literature review has created insights in crucial topics for this paper. This paper is mainly focused on gaining insights on older employee networks in regard to motivation and commitment. Age in organizations has proven to be a critical aspect of diversity management in the last few years. Therefore, the first part of the literature review will be focused on age in organizations. The second part will highlight the emergence and importance of diversity management within organizations. In the next chapter, the concept of diversity networks will be explained and elaborated on, as older employee networks are a small fragment of this cluster. In the last two sections, the concepts motivation and commitment will be highlighted since these concepts are crucial within this study.

2.1 Age in organizations

In diversity management literature, often researched categories consist of gender, religion, sexual orientation, disability, race/ethnicity and age (Acker, 2006). Age is considered to be an important diversity issue which Human Resource Managers need to be aware of and focus on within organizations since the whole world is dealing with an ageing workforce (Kirton & Greene, 2016). Festing and Schäfer (2014), highlighted the importance of studying age and taking generational differences into account within the HRM field. Organizations often fail to implement the right employability-enhancing practices for older employees, such as educational opportunities, reduced workload and enhanced participation (Fleischmann, Koster, & Schippers, 2015).

Age has several dimensions and in the literature, there is no agreement on chronological age in terms of when an employee can be defined as “old” and some researchers consider this a

problem (McCarthy, Heraty, Cross, & Cleveland, 2014). Definitions regarding older employees differ in literature and often vary from 40 years to the retirement age (McCarthy et al., 2014). In this study, the focus is on “older employees” which are employees above the age of 50 since starting from this age, individuals are more often unemployed (Kirton & Greene, 2016). In addition, subjective age is also important to take into account when conducting research in an organizational setting (Akkermans et al., 2016). Chronological age is one’s actual age, and subjective age is based on one’s self-perceived age (Akkermans et al., 2016). Subjective age is all about how the individual identifies himself/herself in terms of age and what age the person desires to be (Kaliterna, Larsen, & Brkljacic, 2002). Most studies look at chronological age and fail to take subjective age into account and to fill this gap, subjective age is an important concept within this research. The study from Akkermans et al. (2016) illustrate the importance of taking subjective age into account in relation to employee motivation. Organizations need to focus on the opportunities for older employees and make the employees aware of such opportunities, and therefore focusing on subjective age in addition to chronological age (Akkermans et al., 2016).

2.2 Diversity management within organizations

Age is an important part of diversity management, and thus the focus of this paragraph is on diversity management within organizations. Diversity management practices can be defined as “the practices that organizations have put in place to manage diversity among all stakeholder groups” (Yang & Konrad, 2011, p. 28). Diversity management tries to build a business case for the organization and is therefore focused on the benefits for the organization as well as for the individual. Workforce diversity can even lead to a competitive advantage for organizations by focusing on attaining valuable, rare, inimitable and organized resources (Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop, & Nkomo, 2010).

On the other hand, solely focusing on the business case could result in more inequality on the workforce and could potentially result in withdrawal and higher turnover as “it can introduce tensions in existing inequality structures, potentially creating more advantageous situations for historically subaltern identity groups” (Zanoni et al., 2010, p. 18). Employees need to feel that they truly matter and therefore from a moral and economic standpoint, organizations should also focus on the social justice case. In reality, the social justice case is often overshadowed by the business case since organizations are mostly focused on making profit (Zanoni et al., 2010). The social justice focuses on reducing inequalities in the workforce. According to Randel et al. (2018)

employees need to feel a sense of both belongingness and uniqueness to really feel included. Feelings of inclusion can benefit teams within organizations and can enhance motivation, commitment and overall performance of employees (Bell, Özbilgin, Beauregard, & Sürgevil, 2011). Diversity management within organizations is therefore essential.

2.3 Diversity networks

Diversity networks could be a great tool for organizations to be able to manage diversity (Dennissen et al., 2019). The use of diversity networks within organizations has flourished over the past years (Dennissen et al., 2019). Diversity networks within organizations can be defined as “employee resource groups which are initiated to inform, support, and advance employees with historically marginalized social identities” (Foldy, 2003, p. 92). In the case of older employee networks, the “one single social identity” would be the older age, since all members from an older employee network have that in common. Diversity networks focus on the different needs of minorities within organizations. According to the study of Dennissen et al. (2019), diversity networks within organizations also serve the goal of promoting equality. It is crucial for minorities to feel a sense of inclusion within the organization since this can increase one’s psychological well-being and overall performance (Nair & Vohra, 2015).

Employees who are a part of the same diversity network have similar characteristics. This can be explained by the social identity theory which states that individuals aim for a positive social identity and aim for identification with the in-group (Kirton & Greene, 2016). So, members join a network because they can identify with that particular group (Kirton & Greene, 2016). In order to attract individuals to diversity networks, it is important to focus on criteria that are important for them. For example, several studies indicate that employability is important for older employees (Akkermans et al., 2016; Barrett, Montepare, & Geriatrics, 2015).

Different types of diversity networks exist such as cross-cultural, gender, LGBTI, young employee, and older employee networks (Y. W. M. Benschop, Brink, & Dennissen, 2020). Diversity networks organize different sorts of activities, both formal and informal, depending on the focus of the diversity network (Foldy, 2003). As mentioned in the introduction, no scientific research is conducted regarding older employee networks. However, two columns were released about the older employee network of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, called: “Grijze Leeuwen”. This older employee network is focused on reducing the generation gap between old and young employees by engaging both parties (Kreffer, 2009). The column from Kreffer (2009) argues that

older employees are not less productive compared to younger employees. The column from Baars (2008) sees older employees as extremely valuable and experienced. Baars (2008) argues that the mentality of employees in mid-fifties asking each other when they will leave for retirement needs to change. The older employee network: “Grijze Leeuwen” therefore aims to make work for older employees more attractive by providing opportunities to coach younger employees, supporting one another and providing educational trajectories (Baars, 2008). Since there is no scientific research done regarding older employee networks, the next paragraphs will focus on previous research regarding diversity networks and its impact on employees.

Research has indicated both positive and negative results of diversity networks within organizations (Dennissen et al., 2019). Several studies have focused on the importance of social support for individuals within the organization (Dellve & Eriksson, 2017; Kirton & Greene, 2016; Peters & Lam, 2015). This could be achieved by giving employees an active role within the organization by offering them responsibilities, supporting them, providing feedback, and encouraging them (Dellve & Eriksson, 2017). Olajo, Oyeboade, and Gbotosho (2017) concentrated on the relationship between commitment, motivation, and social support in a university library. This study has found a significant, positive relationship between social support and work motivation and commitment (Olajo et al., 2017). Raza, Akhtar, Husnain, and Akhtar (2015) indicate that employees with a higher job security are more loyal, committed and attached to the organization. Dennissen et al. (2019) argues that diversity networks can result in feelings of social support. Such feelings of social support can result in a more motivated and committed workforce (Lee & Kim, 2011). Pini, Brown, and Ryan (2004) indicate that women’s networks create a sense of collective identity since members share their experiences with one another and this has also reduced feelings of isolation. Lee and Kim (2011) confirm this and state that social networks reduce feelings of isolation and instead create feelings of belongingness, which can result in increased motivation and commitment. Dennissen, Benschop, and van den Brink (2020) demonstrate the changed status regarding young employees from being seen as “lowest servants” to “ambitious talents” so the young employee network has contributed to acceptance of young professionals. McFadden and Crowley-Henry (2018) researched LGBT employee networks and found that such networks provide employees with an active voice, which can result in organizational commitment.

However, studies have also highlighted the negative consequences of diversity networks such as the reproduction of inequalities (Konrad, 2007; Rothstein, Burke, & Bristor, 2001). Dennissen et al. (2019) also indicate that diversity networks can either challenge or reproduce inequality in the workplace. In-group identification can also result in out-group discrimination, which could reproduce inequalities in the workforce (Acker, 2006). Some studies indicate that ethnic minority networks do not reduce inequalities (Friedman, 1996). Dennissen et al. (2019) argue that “women’s networks are often the object of ridicule, affecting their legitimacy and resulting in women’s reluctance to participate actively” (Dennissen et al., 2019, p. 968).

Research regarding diversity networks is quite ambiguous since some studies argue for the positive impact of diversity networks while others do not. Older employee networks have not been studied before, but the impact of other diversity networks on minorities as mentioned in the previous paragraph could perhaps have an impact on older employees as well. Older employee networks could perhaps be a great source for employees since previous research has indicated that networks can result in strong ties and reduced feelings of isolation, which can result in more motivation and commitment (Lee & Kim, 2011). Over the past years, more studies have evidenced that managing diversity is an important indicator for organizational commitment and job performance (Findler, Wind, & Barak, 2007). Van Knippenberg, De Dreu, and Homan (2004) argue that diversity in the workplace can result in higher employee motivation and performance. Diversity networks can be a great asset for organizations to be able to manage diversity, which could potentially result in motivation and commitment. However, in the literature it remains unclear how diversity networks might impact different forms of motivation such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and different forms of commitment such as affective commitment, continuance commitment and normative commitment and this study aims to fill this gap. Therefore, the next sections will focus on the different forms of motivation and commitment that will be central in this research.

2.4 Intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation

Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation have been widely researched topics especially in the educational field and both concepts are considered to be quite different and can therefore result in varying performance of employees (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The literature assumes that “intrinsic and extrinsic motivation mediate the relationship between incentives and performance” (Kuvaas, Buch, Weibel, Dysvik, & Nerstad, 2017, p. 248). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can occur

simultaneously (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In literature, there is still a disagreement on the effect of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as some authors argue that both forms of motivation are negatively related while others do not. Diversity networks might impact both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and therefore both forms of motivation are important in this research.

2.4.1 Intrinsic motivation

Intrinsic motivation can be “defined as doing of an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separable consequence” (Oudeyer & Kaplan, 2009, p. 1). This means that intrinsically motivated individuals are motivated for the activity itself instead of the reward. Internal rewards and personal satisfaction are central within intrinsic motivation and such rewards can create positive feelings for individuals which can be reciprocated to the organization. Enjoyment is central within intrinsic motivation (Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2013). In the next paragraph, the focus will be on the importance of intrinsic motivation for both individuals and the organization.

Intrinsic motivation is very important for employees as it enhances the psychological and physical well-being of employees (Webster, 2008) and therefore, this concept is essential in this research. For example, intrinsic motivation can create feelings of pleasure and satisfaction for employees (Vallerand & Ratelle, 2002). Intrinsically motivated employees can result in overall happiness and improved quality of life, and therefore intrinsic motivation is important for employees. Employees need to feel supported by the organization and such feelings can create feelings of relatedness which can positively influence employee performance (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Diversity networks could enhance such feelings (Lee & Kim, 2011).

2.4.2 Extrinsic motivation

Extrinsic motivation is often seen as the opposite of intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Extrinsic motivation can be defined as “the desire to perform an activity with the intention to attain positive consequences such as an incentive or to avoid negative consequences such as a punishment” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 245). This means that extrinsically motivated individuals are not motivated for the activity itself but instead for the reward or to avoid a punishment, so it is based on tangible incentives (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It is an ongoing debate whether extrinsic motivation is beneficial for employees and the organization, and the next paragraph will focus on this debate.

Gagné and Deci (2005) argue that extrinsically motivated employees trying to avoid a punishment are likely to develop feelings of anxiety because they feel pressured. Vansteenkiste et al. (2007) states that extrinsic motivation results in reduced job satisfaction and reduced life happiness. On the other hand, Mitchell, Schuster, and Jin (2020) found that extrinsic motivation can result in needs of satisfaction and intrinsic motivation. Even though literature is not in line when it comes to the impact of extrinsic motivation, it is essential to take extrinsic motivation into account to see whether extrinsic motivation plays a role in employees' motive for joining the network or whether the older employee network results in extrinsic motivation for the employees.

2.5 Commitment

The concepts of motivation and commitment are often being studied together. Previous research regarding diversity networks has shown that networks can have a positive impact on motivation and commitment, and therefore both concepts will be central within this research.

Organizational commitment has been an area of interest for organizational behaviour researchers since 1970 (Kothiyal, 2005). In this study, commitment is very important, both from an organizational and an HR perspective. Several studies have shown that organizational commitment has a positive influence on performance (Rashid, Sambasivan, & Johari, 2003). Organizations aim for a committed workforce since this can result in a competitive advantage. From an HR perspective, organizational commitment is crucial because this can enhance employee's health and well-being (Panaccio & Vandenberghe, 2009). Perceived organizational support is essential in order to have a committed workforce (Panaccio & Vandenberghe, 2009). Therefore, employers need to invest in their employees to create a committed workforce (Dekker & van der Veen, 2017). Older employee networks can be a source of social support which can result in organizational commitment (Lee & Kim, 2011). The act of reciprocity and the social exchange theory are both important to explain organizational commitment, since employees are more likely to put in more effort when they feel appreciated (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010).

Three forms of commitment will be focused on in this research consisting of affective commitment, normative commitment and continuance commitment which fall under the three-component model of commitment (Bouckenooghe, Cools, De Clercq, Vanderheyden, & Fatima, 2016). The three-component model explains the psychological state of an individual by identifying three different components that affect how an individual feels in the organization (Bouckenooghe et al., 2016). This model argues that the psychological state "has implications for the decision to

continue or discontinue membership in the organization” (Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993, p. 539). There has been some criticism on the three-component model and most criticism regards the difficulty in distinguishing the different commitments from each other and Solinger, van Olffen, and Roe (2008) argue that the three-component model cannot be used. However, the three-component model is the most commonly used commitment framework and has been widely researched (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002) and has therefore been used in this study.

Affective commitment is the affection one has for its job which means that the individual feels a strong emotional attachment for the work he or she does and towards the organization itself (Snape, Lo, & Redman, 2008). The level of enrichment of the job has been found to be related to affective commitment. According to several studies, affective commitment is the strongest indicator for both organization-relevant and employee-relevant outcomes (Bouckenooghe et al., 2016; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002) such as performance and employee-wellbeing (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). Employees whose expectations have been met in the organization are more likely to feel a stronger sense of affective commitment (Meyer et al., 1993).

Continuance commitment is the fear of loss an individual might feel when leaving the organization (Snape et al., 2008). This experienced loss could be monetary, professional and social (Snape et al., 2008). Meyer et al., (1993) found that employees with high levels of continuance commitment are focused on the perceived costs, and will stay in the organization because they feel they need to. Romzek (1990) argues that individuals compare their investments within the organization to the things an individual would gain in case of leaving the organization. According to several studies, continuance commitment is negatively related to or not related to employee health and well-being (Meyer et al., 2002).

According to Allen and Meyer (1990), normative commitment can be defined as a perceived obligation from an individual to remain working in the organization and therefore often compared to moral commitment. For example, if the organization has invested a lot of time and resources in training a particular employee, this employee might feel the moral obligation to remain working in the organization (Randall & Cote, 1991). Normative commitment is positively related to employee health and employee well-being (Meyer et al., 2002) which is important to point out because it is beneficial for employees.

3. Methodology

In this section, the research methods and strategy of this study will be explained. This chapter will include the research approach, philosophical stance, case description, data collection method, data analysis method, and to conclude the research ethics and reflexivity.

3.1 Research Approach

In order to answer the research question, qualitative research has been conducted. To be more specific, a multiple case study has been conducted. The goal of this research was to find out whether and how the phenomena “the older employee networks” have an influence on the motivation and commitment of the ageing respondents. Older employee networks have not been studied before, and this study aims to gain a deep understanding of the impact of older employee networks in relation to motivation and commitment and therefore qualitative research seems to be a suitable method. Qualitative research concerns the study of social phenomena which is essential within this research since the social phenomenon of an older employee network is central within this research (Bleijenbergh, 2013). Qualitative research “allows the researcher to see and understand the context within which decisions and actions take place, which is best understood by talking to people” (Myers, 2019, p. 5). Myers (2019) indicates that qualitative research fits well for exploratory research, when not much is known yet about the phenomenon, which is the case for older employee networks. An adequate amount of research is available on motivation and commitment, which made it possible to clearly conceptualize these concepts. Qualitative research is more suitable since the researcher is more in control than for example in quantitative research, which makes it possible to gain richer data (Boeije, 2009).

This study aims to delve deeper into the underlying causes of what is being said, which fits well with qualitative research. In order to answer the research question, a multiple case study has been conducted which provided the opportunity to study the phenomenon of two older employee networks within its real-life context (Symon & Cassell, 2012). In this study, two cases are central: the older employee network of a national governmental organization and the older employee network of an International financial services provider and these have been analysed in depth. The goal of a case study is “to spot the interesting, the different, the unusual, the novel, and the surprising” (Symon & Cassell, 2012, p. 353) and this study aimed to do so by conducting interviews. An in-depth case study made it possible to interview different respondents, who all

contributed something different, which resulted in interesting views regarding the older employee network in relation to motivation and commitment. Gustafsson (2017) argues that a multiple case study makes it possible to gather data within different contexts and its evidence is stronger and more reliable compared to a single case study and therefore a multiple case study was conducted.

3.2 Philosophical stance

The underlying philosophy of this research is critical realism. Critical realism is often used in social science (Saunders et al., 2009) and is therefore applicable to this research. This underlying epistemology is somewhat in between positivism and interpretivism (Saunders et al., 2009). In this study, there is a decent amount of research regarding age, motivation, and commitment while older employee networks are under researched. A philosophical stance in between positivism and interpretivism is suitable since age, motivation and commitment have been clearly conceptualized, while this was not possible for older employee networks since previous research is lacking. Critical realism is focused “on explaining what we see and experience, in terms of the underlying structures of reality that shape the observable events” (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 138). Our senses are not always correct and are often biased, which is important to be aware of according to critical realists (Saunders et al., 2009).

There are two important steps which need to be considered when conducting and analysing the interviews according to critical realists. First, in this research, the respondents talked about how they experienced certain things and the researcher has a certain interpretation of what has been said, which is followed by the second step, that of mental processing (Saunders et al., 2009). It is difficult to find the underlying causes and therefore the researcher needs to be aware that she cannot mentally process everything and use her sensory and reasoning to come to a conclusion (Saunders et al., 2009). The aim is therefore “to look at the bigger picture of which we only see a small part” (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 140). It was crucial to delve into the underlying causes of the answers of respondents and therefore follow-up questions were very important in this study. It was important for me as the researcher to be as objective, realistic, and unbiased as I could.

3.3 Case description

In this research, the two cases are the older employee networks from a national governmental and an International financial services provider, which are anonymized for privacy reasons. The unit of analysis are the respondents from both of the older employee networks. The two departments

from the national governmental organization ensure democracy and safety within the Netherlands. Both departments together have approximately 36,000 employees together. The financial services provider is active in insurance, banking, leasing, real estate, and capital management and is focused on long-term sustainability and has introduced a special ethics committee to solve ethical dilemmas. The organization has over 40,000 employees, and it is a relatively young organization. Both organizations strongly value diversity and inclusion as they have introduced several diversity and inclusion policies. In addition, they both have established several diversity networks and members from the older employee network from both organizations have been focused on in this study.

Both older employee networks analysed in this study are focused on employees of the age of fifty and older, so all respondents are fifty+ since both organizations define employees as “older” starting from the age of fifty. Some more elaboration on both older employee networks will be provided in section 4.1. The data (transcripts of interviews) was all primary data since the researcher conducted this data herself. The participants of the case study were selected based on whether they were a part of the older employee network of the organization at the time of the interviews. In total, fourteen interviews were conducted. Myers (2019) argues that the perfect number of interviews does not exist, but that it is rather important that the respondents vary in terms of having different voices. Fourteen interviews seem to be a suitable number of interviews which provided the researcher with the opportunity to interview seven men and seven women varying in terms of their membership period and whether they were on the board of the older employee network or not at the time of the interviews. The specific characteristics of the respondents can be found in appendix 2.

3.4 Data collection method

Primary data was collected to obtain results since this is crucial for the underlying critical realist epistemology. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain viable data. Myers (2019) argues that “interviews are one of the most important data gathering techniques for qualitative researchers in business and management” (p. 121). Interviews allow researchers to obtain comprehensive data from people in different situations and settings (Myers, 2019). Semi-structured interviews are a compromise of structured interviews and unstructured interviews (Bleijenbergh, 2013). Since there is a lot of information concerning age, motivation and commitment, the interview questions regarding these topics have been made based on the existing

literature. On the other hand, since older employee networks have not been studied before, a clear conceptualization of this phenomenon was not possible and therefore broad open questions were formulated for this topic, which allowed for new topics to emerge during the interviews. Therefore, a semi-structured interview was the best fit for this study. This interview approach minimizes the risks of both approaches while also using the advantages of the structured and unstructured interviews (Myers, 2019). This flexibility created new insights which would have been missed out on by following a strict structure of questions, which will be elaborated on in the results section. Semi-structured interviews fit well with the underlying epistemology because in order to be able to delve deeper into the underlying causes, some questions needed to be prepared beforehand to be able to ask strong follow-up questions. It is essential for the respondents to be able to explain their opinions instead of projecting the researcher's own bias. Therefore, a critical realist approach was taken to be able to give the most objective answer to the research question as possible.

Both organizations were selected because they both have an older employee network, and the researcher had asked for a balance in gender, membership time, and board and non-board members, which both organizations were able to provide. The researcher did not know any of the respondents personally, which was a specific choice since objectivity is important for critical realism. The interview guide can be found in Appendix 1. This guide was based on the theoretical framework for the important topics of diversity, age, motivation, and commitment. As discussed prior, questions regarding the older employee network were loosely defined and open to interpretation by the respondent.

This research is focused on finding the impact of older employee networks on the motivation and commitment of employees. To achieve this goal, the interview guide was developed to be able to answer the research question properly. Each interview started with some general questions regarding the employee's current position within the organization. Next, the focus was on more specific questions. This part was based on four different topics, namely: diversity within the organization, the older employee network in general, motivation and commitment. Some of these topics had subtopics which can be found in appendix 1. The first topic asked specific questions regarding the perception of diversity and age of the respondents. The second topic was focused on the perception of the older employee network of the respondents. The third and fourth topic asked a specific question regarding the different forms of motivation and commitment in relation to the older employee network. New questions and follow-up questions

emerged during the interviews depending on how the interview went and how extensive the answers of the respondents were. Since this is exploratory research, the researcher left room for the respondents to touch upon new themes. For example, one respondent talked for a while about the passing of his parents, which resulted in an interesting finding.

3.4.1 Collecting data during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Due to the Covid-19 crisis, all interviews have been conducted online using skype. With the recent developments, it was not possible to conduct the interviews in person, so an online platform was necessary to be able to actually do the research. Some studies have looked into the limitations and opportunities of conducting interviews (Lo Iacono, Symonds, & Brown, 2016; Seitz, 2016). Several online platforms such as Skype have the possibility to make use of a video function, which means the element of seeing one another can also be created through an online platform. Reading body language is more difficult when conducting interviews online, but the researcher can be prepared by paying careful attention to what the respondent says and focusing on the facial expressions of the respondents (Seitz, 2016), thus the researcher followed this advice. Lo Iacono et al. (2016) even argue that in certain situations, online interviews resulted in more effective and richer data than face-to-face interviews since in face-to-face situations, respondents sometimes feel that they cannot speak freely and openly. Online interviews provided the interviewer and the interviewee with more flexibility in terms of time and place.

The concept of privacy is especially important when conducting online interviews. The “mirror effect” might emerge, which means that during the interview, some images might be visible from the interviewee’s side which were not intended for the interviewer to be seen. I was prepared for this, but fortunately such a situation did not occur to my knowledge. The study from Drabble, Trocki, Salcedo, Walker, and Korcha (2016) argue that online interviews provide respondents with more privacy, increased perceived anonymity and reduced distraction compared to face-to-face interviews. So, the validity and credibility of the research was still guaranteed during online interviews.

3.5 Data analysis method

Template analysis has been used to analyse the results from the interviews. As mentioned in section 3.4, within this study, a combination of a clear structure with some form of flexibility has been followed for the data collection. Template analysis provides both structure and flexibility since

adaptations can be made based on the aim of the study (Symon & Cassell, 2012). According to the criteria of Symon and Cassell (2012), 10-30 interviews can be conducted in order to use template analysis as the analysing method. In this study, fourteen interviews have been conducted, so it fits the requirements from Symon and Cassell (2012). Compared to other data analysis methods, template analysis provides the researcher with a lot of freedom since there are only a few specified procedures (Symon & Cassell, 2012). In this research, an abductive approach has been applied, and template analysis applies to all different approaches: deductive, inductive, and abductive. An abductive approach made it possible to develop and change theories based on the findings. A major advantage is the possibility to shift between theories and the field situation (Alrajeh, Fearfull, & Monk, 2012). Abductive reasoning enhances creative thinking and there is not yet literature available on older employee networks while an adequate amount of literature is available on age within organizations, motivation, and commitment and therefore the abductive approach was a suitable approach. Template analysis provided me with the fortuity to let new themes arise during the interviews, which will be elaborated on in the next paragraph.

The coding structure within template analysis is not hierarchical but rather flexible, which is beneficial since it is important to get a deep understanding of what the respondents say and mean. All interviews had been transcribed before the first stage of coding. After everything had been transcribed, I carefully looked at the predefined dimensions and indicators for some of the concepts to make sure I had a clear understanding of what had been researched.

During the first stage of coding, the researcher chose relevant passages from the transcribed interviews (Bleijenbergh, 2013). I did so by printing all the transcripts and used colour markers to highlight the relevant passages. The researcher double-checked whether the selected passages were all useful and whether relevant information was not left out. I also listened to some interview parts again when I was in doubt, which made the step of open coding go smoother.

Next, I provided an indicator for all the relevant passages as Bleijenbergh (2013) suggested, and I tried to be very specific to make sure I did not leave any relevant information out. When all passages were given an indicator, I looked at all the indicators to give me some directional ideas for my study. The goal of the second phase of the coding was to distinguish indicators from one another by grouping the indicators by dimensions. Some dimensions were already predefined like intrinsic and extrinsic motivation which also appeared in the data as interview questions had been prepared for this topic, but some new themes also arose during the interviews resulting in new

dimensions. For example, the perception of age stereotypes and age discourses within the organization and society and the lack of identification with the older employee network arose during the interviews. I went back into the literature in order to critically analyse these new themes. During the second phase, I also realized that some indicators did not apply to a certain dimension and either had to be moved to another dimension or deleted, so it was an iterative process.

During the last phase, the dimensions were grouped together by providing the chosen passages with a concept. In total, five concepts were used to distinguish the data: diversity within the organization, age within the organization, the older employee network in general, motivation and commitment. Finally, I looked at all the indicators, dimensions, and concepts again to see if I missed anything and the coding process stopped when no new themes emerged. It was an iterative process since I went back and forth between the indicators, dimensions, and concepts. A codebook was constructed to show how I found patterns in the data as advised by Bleijenbergh (2013) which can be found in appendix 3. This had a positive impact on the confirmability of this study.

3.6 Research ethics & reflexivity

Myers (2019) explains the importance of ethics in research as he speaks of the “golden rule” which indicates that researchers need to think of how respondents might feel when decisions are being made. The “golden rule” is central in this research since the respondents were crucial to be able to conduct this study, so they needed to be treated fairly. Myers (2019) argues for the important aspect of honesty in ethical research. In this study, integrity is assured. Before the start of each interview, all respondents had been asked for their permission to record and transcribe the interview. The researcher only had access to the recordings and the researcher and first and second examiner will have access to the transcripts from the interviews which was clearly mentioned to the interviewees. The researcher ensured that the recordings of all interviews were deleted once the coding process had finished. Each respondent had the opportunity to get a transcript from their interview, and certain interview parts could be deleted if the respondent asked the researcher to do so.

In addition, the aim of the study was explained to all respondents and the results of the study will be shared with the organization afterwards and anonymity of respondents has been guaranteed. Only the interview number, fictitious name, gender, age, duration of membership, and possible board membership of the older employee network will be mentioned in the study as all respondents gave their permission. Before each interview, the researcher explicitly mentioned how their anonymity will be guaranteed. To do so, I used fictitious names for the respondents in the

results section, which can be found in appendix 2. It is critical for respondents to feel comfortable with the information they share, and therefore the researcher also explicitly mentioned that respondents can withdraw at any moment.

It is also important to acknowledge my role as a researcher in this study and therefore reflexivity needs to be taken into account. Reflexivity can be described as “an awareness of the researcher’s role in the practice of research and the way this is influenced by the object of the research, enabling the researcher to acknowledge the way in which he or she affects both the research process and outcomes” (Symon & Cassell, 2012, p. 72). For the critical realist epistemology, it is crucial to be as objective as possible and to really focus on what is being said during the interview. The researcher needs to be aware that what she observes is not the complete truth, and therefore using her own reasoning to come to a conclusion is important. A theoretical framework was set up to be able to gain a deep understanding of the research, and therefore I need to be aware of my own bias as I read a lot of literature before conducting the interviews and was therefore aware of several stereotypes about older employees.

I am personally very interested in this topic, and I have a positive feeling towards older employees since I see them as knowledgeable, and this could have impacted the analysis. When the topic age was discussed, respondents often drew on age discourses and referred to me as “young” and made jokes about me being young and not being able to relate to physical problems. My identity as a researcher could have impacted the answers from the respondents. Since I am younger than all respondents, I might have interpreted answers differently from how respondents initially meant it, as I cannot completely relate to their situations. These different biases need to be taken into account when analysing the results. Section 5.5 will elaborate more on my position as a researcher in this study.

4. Results

The focus of this section is on the results of the interview transcripts. This data is analysed based on template analysis as mentioned before. The results section is structured according to the main themes that were found in the interviews.

4.1 Background of older employee networks

It is important to take into account that organization one in the analysis is a national governmental organization while organization two, is an International financial services provider. The older

employee network of both organizations has existed for over ten years. Both organizations keep their members informed either through e-mail or through an online portal. Organization one has around 350 members and organization two has 159 members in the older employee network. Both older employee networks have a board consisting of four to five board members and one chairman. Employees can become a member of the older employee network once they turn fifty years old, so the chronological age matters. Older employees have realized that society, and the organization overall, perceive them as old, ready for retirement and not of much added value. They want to come together and change this attitude as they do not want to be ignored and instead want to show that they are still important for the organization and therefore both networks were created.

It is important to mention that the older employee network of the International financial services provider, organization two, has gone through a tough reorganization and therefore has barely organized any activities over the past year since the previous board either left for retirement, or had to leave due to the reorganization. Different types of activities within the network can be distinguished from one another: activities focused on physical and mental vitality and employability such as walking activities and readings with guest speakers about how to find happiness in work and activities focused on the hard side, such as workshops on how to compose a CV or how to update your LinkedIn profile and congresses about pension funds.

4.2 Perception of diversity within organization and network

The topic of diversity does not directly apply to the research question. However, it is a noteworthy aspect to consider when studying older employee networks, as diversity is a fundamental component that needs to be understood to be able to explain the existence and core competency of older employee networks. Based on the respondents' views, a distinction can be made between respondents who argue that diversity is handled very well within the organization while others argue that diversity within the organization is still an area of improvement. The following quotes are used to illustrate this:

R5, Asha, organization 1, woman, no board member, age 64: *“Based on my observations, I think when you look higher up in the hierarchy, the more white people you see, so I perceive less diversity higher up and it is still a white stronghold and unbalanced women versus men and old versus young in different aspects and little ethnic diversity, rarely people with a disability and that is a shame in my opinion”.*

R14, Zeger, organization 2, man, no board member, age 57: *“It [diversity] is high on the agenda and last week we have hired our 60th refugee, which was our goal, to give those*

people an opportunity and within the department distribution where I work 45 nationalities are employed so quite diverse in terms of culture but also in terms of man / woman, LGBTI+ and of course young and old too so that is nice”.

Diversity is important to both respondents as the first respondent argues that “*it is a shame*” while Zeger says “*that is nice*” when it comes to how the organization handles diversity. However, their perceptions differ on diversity management within the organization. Asha puts an emphasis on the white majority as she talks about a “*white stronghold*” and “*little ethnic diversity*”. It is important to take Asha’s background into account as she is of African descent and might therefore be more focused on this diversity component.

On the other hand, Zeger argues that diversity “*is high on the agenda*” as he perceives the organization to focus on different diversity aspects. It is also important to take Zeger’s background into account, as he is a white Dutch man. Both respondents differ in their gender and ethnicity which impacts how they perceive diversity, as Acker (2006, p. 452) argues that “people in dominant groups generally see inequality as existing somewhere else, not where they are”. Zeger belongs to the dominant group as he is a white man, and Asha belongs to two minority groups as she is a woman of colour. Feelings of inclusion are very important both for employees and the organization as this can enhance one’s well-being and overall performance (Randel et al., 2018). It is often perceived that Caucasian males are more capable at work compared to minority groups (Acker, 2006), resulting in exclusion of minority groups such as black women, which can impact their well-being.

Asha and Zeger both have a broad perception of diversity as they mention different aspects of diversity. This is also evident in the other interviews, as thirteen out of the fourteen respondents referred to different aspects of diversity. The membership of the older employee network could be a reason for this since the older employee network is a part of the broader group of diversity networks and therefore respondents are more aware of the concept of diversity. Twelve out of the fourteen respondents mention age when being asked about diversity within the organization, this seems logical since they are all part of the older employee network which is focused on the “older age” and therefore all belong to that group.

Three different opinions can be distinguished when respondents shared how the older employee networks handle diversity:

R3, Willem, organization 1, man, no board member, age 61: “*I think everyone is welcome at [the older employee network] so in that sense, they cope well with diversity for example*

in terms of gender, sexuality, ethnic diversity, those are not issues, at all so I believe we are an open community”.

R7, Sanne, organization 1, woman, no board member, age 58: *“They should focus on it [diversity]more, they should focus more on creating awareness since that barely has their attention”.*

R12, Julie, organization 2, man, no board member, age 62: *“I don’t think that it [diversity] has their attention, at least I cannot remember that they posted much about it or nothing at all actually, so I don’t think they are focusing on it [diversity]. To be honest I don’t know what their focus is on at all since I have barely seen any posts on the portal”.*

Willem mentions that everyone is “welcome” and therefore believes the network to manage diversity well, while Sanne indicates that the network does not focus enough on diversity and should focus more on “creating awareness”. Again, it is important to focus on the background of the respondents as Acker (2006, p. 452) states that “one privilege of the privileged is not to see their privilege”. For example, in the first quote, Willem highlights that the older employee network handles diversity well because he belongs to the majority group and therefore does not perceive inequality “in terms of gender, sexuality and ethnic diversity” while Sanne belongs to a minority group in terms of gender. Julie is not aware of the focus of the older employee network as the network is quite inactive and therefore assumes that diversity is not the priority of the network.

4.3 Paradox of older age

The paradox of older age is worth discussing since it occupies a prominent place in the perception of the respondents in this study, and it impacts the motivation and commitment of respondents, which will be elaborated on in sections 4.6 and 4.7. During the interviews, it occurred that on the one hand respondents associate the older age with experience and knowledge but at the same time also have a negative association towards their older age and perceive it as a risk. This can be acknowledged as a paradox, which is a remarkable finding.

The following fragment illustrates the positive association towards the older age:

R1, Adam, organization 1, man, no board member, age 61: *“I think you should have a good mix of different ages because they complement each other. Age is linked to a certain uh knowledge that you have acquired at a given moment so having a good mix is essential”.*

This association of older employees as knowledgeable is possibly linked to positive stereotypes of older employees as Bal, Reiss, Rudolph, and Baltes (2011) argues that older employees are perceived as wiser and more experienced. Such stereotypes have an influence on how people perceive themselves (Bal et al., 2011).

On the other hand, respondents also associate the “older age” as a perceived risk and therefore have a negative association with their age, which is the other side of the paradox. In order to understand the negative perception, it is important to define the term ageism: “ageism is the complex, often negative construction of old age, which takes place at the individual and the societal levels” (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2018, p. 3) Ageism is a complex concept that seems to affect everyone at some point in their lives (Oswick & Rosenthal, 2001). As a result, ageism is often not seen as a problem since it affects everyone and is therefore considered to be normal (Oswick & Rosenthal, 2001).

However, there are several stereotypes regarding older employees that can have a major impact on older employees. Older employees are often seen as less flexible, less aesthetic, less willing to learn, and less technological (Thomas et al., 2014). Such perceived negative stereotypes result in a perceived risk for older employees, which can cause stress and therefore impact the emotional well-being of employees (Macdonald & Levy, 2016). Such negative stereotypes have a stronger impact on older employees compared to positive stereotypes (Hertel, van der Heijden, de Lange, & Deller, 2013).

Age discourses can result in stereotypes and ageism. Age discourses represent older people negatively, which can influence the self-perception of older employees negatively. Ainsworth and Hardy (2009) focus on two powerful age discourses: the discourse of the body and the discourse of the mind. The discourse of the body is focused on the deterioration of the body as people get older, which pictures workers as less worthy. The discourse of the mind “is central to how we understand employment and unemployment” (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2009, p. 1203). Both discourses impact older employees negatively and the outcomes are similar to outcomes of negative stereotypes such as reduced mental well-being (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2009).

The following excerpt highlights the age discourse of the mind within the organization resulting in a negative perceived stereotype:

R9, Teun, organization 2, man, board member, age 54: *“Yes, certainly important [age important part of diversity]and uh especially when you look into the financial sector you see that people have quite a few years of service, so there are several people who are 50 plus, but on the other hand you also see that there are only a few employees over the age of 60 because the organization perceives them as too old and the organization thinks that you can learn less and process less and I do not agree with that but that stands out and that makes me afraid and stressed when I turn 60, do I get fired too”?*

The respondent is aware of the negative stereotype regarding the older age, which influences his perception of the older age. Teun is worried about getting older because he perceives the organization to believe in negative age stereotypes and act on it by terminating his job. Such feelings of anxiety and “*stress*” impact the well-being of employees (Macdonald & Levy, 2016).

It is also a noteworthy finding that respondents frequently mentioned that they made career decisions based on the perceived risk of getting older and therefore perceive their own age negatively. This is especially evident for organization two, the International financial services provider, and the constant reorganization could play a part in this. Reorganizations can be stressful for employees and especially for older employees since on average, older employees “are likely to remain unemployed for a longer period than younger workers” (Alaka, 2006) confirming the perceptions of older employees as negative stereotypes towards the older age tend to overshadow positive stereotypes (Thomas et al., 2014).

R13, Veerle, organization 2, no board member, woman, age 56: “Uh I am aware that I should develop my skills broadly so that was the reason I left the financing department because I thought if I would be fired at my age because they think you are less productive, and that is something which I fear with the many reorganizations that we are going through, every time I squeeze my hands again when I don’t get fired with a new reorganization”.

R10, Thijs, organization 2, no board member, man, age 61: “Well, when I was in my 30’s and when my then manager started talking about if I wanted to join a management trainee program, I asked myself should I do this now? Because I am now in my 30’s and I will not get another opportunity, so at some point you feel the pressure to make a career, you should indeed not wait until you are 50 plus because they will choose the younger employees because they think have more energy”.

Both quotes show a few similarities. Both respondents feel anxious because of their older age and perceive less opportunities due to their older age. Both quotes draw on the age discourse of the mind as they are worried to get fired due to their older age because they perceive age discourses and negative age stereotypes to be present within the organization.

When respondents explained how old they feel, it stood out that most respondents view their subjective age younger than their chronological age, 11 out of the 14 respondents to be precise. In organizations, youth is often considered to be the norm (Thomas et al., 2014). Older employees can feel pressured to behave similar to younger generations, which requires identity work and can result in withdrawal (Akkermans et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2014). There is even a term called “successful ageing” which places an emphasis on older employees taking

responsibility for their own lifestyle, well-being and health (Thomas et al., 2014). The following quote illustrates that the respondent puts an emphasis on being fit and exercising, which requires identity work:

R13, Veerle, organization 2, no board member, woman, age 56: *“I feel 35. I don't feel 56 at all. You know as I said, I completed a master's degree when I was 46. As far as I am concerned, those things are not age-related, but the reality is that it is often seen that way and I think that is a shame. Look, I am very fit, I exercise a lot, you know I really feel 35, but people over the age of 50 are often seen as oh you are about to retire, and I don't like that at all”.*

This quote shows that Veerle does not want to be associated with her chronological age and that she prefers to look at her subjective age instead. This also relates to perceived present age discourses within the organization resulting in identity work from the respondent. The respondent desires to be perceived younger and therefore distances herself from her chronological age. It becomes evident that the majority of the respondents indicate the older age with fewer opportunities and therefore rather look at their subjective age. Respondents often have a limited time perspective and therefore feel that their retirement is approaching. A limited future time perspective is often associated with limited possibilities (Akkermans et al., 2016).

It is also noticeable that respondents who describe their subjective age close to their chronological age or older than their chronological age, also have the desire to be or be perceived younger. The following interview fragment highlights this:

R12, Julie, organization 2, no board member, woman, age 54: *“My body is slightly older than 54 due to my disease and that makes me very disappointed and I think it's a shame that age is so dominant, for example people who lose their job when they have the age of 50 or older, that it suddenly becomes a thing that when you are older than 50 that you won't find another job so yeah it gets worse when you get older”.*

This fragment also highlights that the respondent perceives her age to be a risk for finding employment. The perception of older age as a risk due to perceived negative stereotypes is a recurring finding. This excerpt also draws on the age discourse of the body, since the respondent argues her body to be older than her chronological age, which disappoints her. The age discourse influences how the respondent perceives herself.

When respondents are being asked how the perception of members over the age of fifty is within the network, respondents respond defensively, which is a meaningful finding. The following quotes are used to illustrate this:

R1, Adam, organization 1, board member, man, age 61: *“Look, we do not consider ourselves old. We do discuss struggles with each other, for example if someone is no longer allowed to do a training and so on, we discuss that with each other. But we don't see each other as old lollipops ready for retirement no we don't want to be seen like that”.*

R3, Willem, organization 1, no board member, man, age 61: *“I generally have the impression that there is a fairly positive self-image, this is not well a kind of sad event”.*

It is evident that both respondents assume or perceive other people to have a negative feeling towards their older age because they mention *“we don't see each other as old lollipops no we don't want to be seen like that”* and *“this is not well a kind of sad event”*. Their responses might be affected by organizational age discourses resulting in negative stereotypes as this affects how respondents perceive themselves (Macdonald & Levy, 2016).

Negative answers overshadow the positive answers when respondents share how the organization handles age as respondents perceive they have less opportunities due to their age or even perceive to have been discriminated based on their age:

R4, Arie, organization 1, board member, man, age 60: *“And then I was rejected the job offer based on the fact, well it was not explicitly said that way, but well because there had to be more diversity in the team [...] And there were already a lot of uh employees over the age of 50 they did not pick me [...] So talking about bias, so apparently there is age discrimination at the national government obviously”.*

This statement indicates that Arie perceived the rejection as *“age discrimination”*. The respondent wanted to share this perceived injustice as it saddened him because he shared: *“It is nice to be able to share my story with you because I was devastated for a while because of it [perceived age discrimination]”* so it impacted his mental well-being which is confirmed by the findings of Stokes and Moorman (2020). Arie also shares: *“Look, when you're a bit older, you also take a lot of experience with you [...] and to then reject someone because there are already too many with experience, that I really resent”* so Arie draws on the positive stereotype of older employees as *“experienced”* as he wants the researcher to believe older employees are valuable to the organization.

It is largely accepted that negative stereotypes can result in discrimination of older employees (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2018). Previous research has indicated that many older workers are being discriminated against based on their age (O'Loughlin, Kendig, Hussain, & Cannon, 2017). Based on the answers from respondents, it can be argued that most respondents have been through work situations in which they felt that they were not hired, not promoted or not

able to do a training because of their “older age” and therefore perceive their age as a risk. The study from Voss et al., (2018) indicates that discrimination regarding older employees could also reinforce stereotypes and therefore age stereotypes and age discrimination are closely intertwined.

4.4 Network creating age awareness

It stands out that most respondents indicate that they have become more aware of the term age since they joined the older employee network. It is often mentioned that speaking to like-minded people in age has made respondents more aware, in addition to joining network activities. A distinction can be made between positive age awareness focused on the opportunities ahead and negative age awareness drawing on negative age discourses. The following quote highlights the network resulting in positive age awareness:

R3, Willem, organization 1, no board member, man, age 61: *“You become more aware of it [age] through the workshops, you will also put more things into perspective and those workshops help with creating awareness so yes the wisdom with which you look at things and I do notice now that I am still developing myself enormously and uhm how I look at reality and different perspectives or something like that, but that comes with the years because of the experiences you have, the people who come your way and yes then you start to see things differently, it really creates a bit of awareness which is nice”.*

This quote indicates that the older employee network creates “*awareness*” which has a positive impact on the respondent since he is more aware of the opportunities ahead. Willem realized that he is still developing himself which is very positive. He leaves the researcher with the impression that he is not focused on his retirement but instead focused on the various possibilities within the organization because of the older employee network which he finds “*nice*” and this is in line with the findings from Akkermans et al. (2016, p. 432) who found “that open-ended perceptions of remaining opportunities and time play an important role in successful aging at work”.

On the other hand, it is also noticeable that some respondents indicate that they have become more aware of their older age since joining the network and have started to see their age as a “*problem*” and as a risk:

R13, Veerle, organization 2, no board member, woman, age 56: *“Yes I am seeing it more as a problem now. I did not see it as a problem, but I found out that members of the network see it as a problem and in society you also notice that it is a problem, and I was never aware of that and never saw myself as a problem, but you are around it so much, so you start seeing it as a problem. I don't understand why that should be”.*

The age discourse is evident within this quote. Veerle perceives society to be negative about older employees, and this has caused her self-perception to change drastically in a negative way. It all comes back to the paradox of the older age again because she also shares “*I notice that I can fulfil a leadership role in this to also include people because, because of my age, I have built up a lot of knowledge and my team acknowledges that too*”. The paradox of associating the older age with experience and knowledge can exist at the same time as perceiving the older age as a problem or as a risk.

4.5 Older employee network to overcome challenges

The older employee network of both organizations has gone through a change of name because the previous name put too much emphasis on the older age of the group. Instead, the new names put emphasis on staying active and feeling young. The name change draws on age discourses and stereotypes since older people are often being perceived as not fully functional and the network wants to overcome such discourses and negative stereotypes.

R2, Cinta, organization 1, board member, woman, age 64: “*Yes so that [we don’t want to be put aside for being older] was more of what we try to do precisely here [the older employee network], which is why we have really changed our name because we would like to show that, uh, that also people over the age of 50 and over 60 still have an important contribution to the organization uhm and therefore we approach it from a positive perspective so through our knowledge and through our seniority uhm we also contribute to the organization*”.

R10, Thijs, organization 2, no board member, man, age 61: “*In fact, you want everyone who, whether young or old it does not matter, to help to stay active within [organization 2] because you do not want to create the feeling like oh, that is a group that is already looking forward to retirement, no we can still accomplish a lot and have a lot of knowledge*”.

Both quotes indicate that they want to highlight the positive impact that an older employee can have on the organization through their gained knowledge. It also seems that they perceive a negative association regarding the older age within the organization or perhaps even stereotypes regarding the older age as touched upon before. The quote from Thijs shows that he does not want to make a distinction between young and old people. This leaves the impression that he does not want to be associated with his chronological age, probably due to perceived misconceptions regarding the older age.

Respondents also elaborated on the main reasoning for joining the older employee network. It stood out that respondents mainly joined the network because of the desire to have social support, to provide social support and to show that they can still accomplish things and therefore look for a sense of purposefulness and meaningfulness within the network. In other words, respondents mainly joined the network to overcome the negative side of the paradox of older age and highlight the positive side.

R7, Sanne, organization 1, no board member, woman, age 58: *“Look, I just want to have the chance to develop myself and I don’t want to be put aside or get discriminated against [...] I got rejected because of my older age because I was too expensive for the organization... so with such a network you can relate to one another and help one another”.*

R12, Julie, organization 2, no board member, man, age 62: *“I think helping colleagues is very important and that is very important to me, yes so if colleagues have problems or maybe age-related problems then we can talk with each other and maybe come to a solution together. I mean together you are stronger than alone; I firmly believe in that”.*

Sanne indirectly says that she perceives the older age as a risk and joined the network to look out for the fifty-plus community so to receive and provide social support to overcome age discrimination. The need for social support and willingness to provide social support is also evident from the quote of Julie. Older employees are looking for social support since this makes it easier to cope with perceived age discrimination as they can share their problems. The next section will elaborate more on what members get out of the network.

4.6 Impact of older employee network on motivation

As already elaborated on in previous sections, respondents mainly joined the network to overcome the challenges linked to negative age discourses and stereotypes. Negative age discourses and stereotypes influence how respondents perceive themselves, and it also shapes how respondents are motivated within the network. Therefore, the following two sections will elaborate on the impact of the older employee network on the motivation of the respondents. On the one hand, based on the interview results, the network results in personal satisfaction, empowerment, enjoyment and inspiring each other to overcome age discrimination for respondents, which is intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, the membership of the older employee network also results in the desire to network, acquire knowledge, and to have a safety net, which can be defined as

extrinsic motivation. Extrinsically motivated individuals are rather focused on the outcome instead of the activity itself, so they are either focused on gaining an incentive or avoiding a sanction.

4.6.1 Older employee network resulting in personal satisfaction, empowerment, and enjoyment

The older employee networks support the needs of members in different ways. Several respondents share that the network results in personal satisfaction, empowerment, and enjoyment:

R5, Asha, organization 2, board member, woman, age 54: *“It is great to be able to make an impact within society, even though it is on a small scale, but every little bit helps, we help each other to get more out of work and to feel happier which makes me happy”.*

R1, Adam, organization 1, board member, man, age 61: *“I really enjoy doing things for the network, it really satisfies me because people like it when the website is updated, right because that is my job [job within the network] so that gives me a good feeling”.*

R2, Cinta, organization 1, board member, woman, age 64: *“Such a workshop about happiness at work really made me think and then I also started to read more about it and I really noticed that I started to enjoy my work even more and now I just take a break when I feel I need it to recharge and that makes me feel more active and productive so I am very happy with that yes, I really enjoy organizing and attending the activities of the network because it can really make a difference for people because it makes you a happier person”.*

The experiences from the respondents within the network are very positive but different in several ways. Asha and Adam get a good feeling from being able to do something for other members. Both respondents are trying to make an impact, each in their different ways. Asha found empowerment within the network by coming together as a network and supporting each other, resulting in satisfaction and enjoyment. Adam feels satisfied because the network makes it possible for him to help others. Cinta shares that the workshops are very valuable to her. The workshop made it possible for the respondent to change the way she works. Cinta feels satisfied to be able to make a difference for other members and herself through the network because it creates happiness and satisfaction.

Respondents are also intrinsically motivated to inspire each other and overcome age discrimination, and this relates to the main goal of the network as touched upon in section 4.5: to show that they can still make an impact within the organization. The following interviewee feels a sense of empowerment:

R7, Sanne, organization 1, no board member, woman, age 58: *“I get a lot of fun out of it [the older employee network] because it has ensured that I explicitly focus on 50 plus and so that also ensures that I can focus on 50 plus for delta flex [job within organization] and to see what their behaviour is and creating awareness within the network and delta flex”.*

and what are the experiences of others like? Are there more cases of colleagues being rejected at age and how do you handle this? Can we do something about it so that it does not happen again”?

Sanne is zealous about creating age awareness and is eager to apply the knowledge she gained from the network within her work and vice versa. She seems passionate about the older employee network and the network is a safe place for her to share her thoughts on age discrimination. The respondent is also focusing on the older age more from her work perspective because of the network.

4.6.2 Older employee network resulting in desire to network, acquire knowledge and desire to have a safety net

It is remarkable that for several respondents, the network results in different forms of extrinsic motivation: such as the desire to network, acquire knowledge, and to have a safety net. Such extrinsic reasons can appear at the same time as intrinsic reasons based on the interviews, and this is in line with the article from Ryan and Deci (2000).

Based on the interview results, some respondents are motivated to gain an incentive while another respondent is motivated to avoid a sanction. The following respondent illustrates that he is involved within the network to avoid a sanction:

R10, Thijs, organization 2, board, man, age 61: “*I think I will not get the chance anymore so I really hope that I can continue to work at [organization 2] until I retire and that is why once I was a member I wanted to tackle this here with this network and be really involved because look I love the[organization 2], but I also want to show that I am involved because I just want to continue working here because it is difficult to find other work at an older age”.*

The respondent shares that he “loves” the organization, but he also wants to participate actively within the network to show that he is committed, to ensure that he does not get fired, and therefore uses the network to avoid this. The network is like a safety net for Thijs.

The following respondents highlight that the network motivated them to network, acquire knowledge and to have a safety net:

R3, Willem, organization 1, no board member, man, age 61: “*Networking is very important to me because look if you want to get a promotion and make things happen, you really depend on your network, so I really got that out of the network”.*

R4, Arie, organization 1, board member, man, age 60: “*I do gain knowledge from other employees within [the older employee network], or, for example, about “going with that*

job” [congress], look I already know more about pensions now and about how to retire early on so that really helped”.

R13, Veerle, organization 2, no board member, woman, age 56: *“You know there is a group of people somewhere you can turn to when you do run into problems, I can't imagine right now that I would need it but I can imagine now I know, now it feels like a kind of rock in the background of I don't need you, but if I ever need you I know where to go”.*

The quotes have in common that the respondents all want to gain something from the network. They are motivated to be a part of the network and participate within the network because of the perceived good side effects of the network. The perceived positive consequences are different for the respondents. For example, networking is very important for respondent 3 because making a promotion is a priority to him, while Arie likes to learn more about pensions. Veerle perceives the network as a safety net in case she needs it, which gives her a feeling of security.

4.7 Identification and commitment

Based on the interview results, the older employee networks studied can also result in commitment from the respondents. In order to understand commitment, it is important to look at the identification of respondents with the older employee network. According to Tuzun (2009) identification and commitment are closely related so this section will look into the identification of respondents with the older employee network. Alvesson, Lee Ashcraft, and Thomas (2008) argue that feelings of identification can result in commitment. Some respondents compare the strength of their commitment towards the older employee network to another commitment target which is interesting to point out because it says something about their identification with the older employee network:

R10, Thijs organization 2, board member, man, age 61: *“I notice that commitment from my part shows to the extent to which I want to contribute something and that is emotionally important for me. There are different levels of commitment, and I am a member of a consistory and the connection here is much stronger than with the older employee network. I really feel very committed with both and I love the people and I really want to go for it, but more at the consistory because they are more my people”.*

R4, Arie, organization 1, board member, man, age 61: *“No [it does not withhold me from working elsewhere] and look if you had asked this question for the LGBTI network then I would doubt because that really is a reason for me to continue working here. I feel so connected to the network, really emotionally until my toes, I feel connected to it and if you compare that with [the older employee network], you simply cannot compare and what exactly the cause of it is, I do not really know because I fall in both categories because of course I am 50 plus and LGBTI but maybe it also depends on the people who are in the*

network and I just don't feel old... and with the LGBTI network, we have a clear portfolio an higher in the hierarchy they see us, and with the older employee network this is not the case".

Both respondents indicate that they are more committed to another target compared to the older employee network. With other words, both respondents do not identify with the older employee network as much. Thijs identifies more with the “consistory” because he identifies more with the people in it compared to the older employee network. Arie argues that the network is not visible enough and that the portfolio does not align with the network’s interests, thus the significance of the network is too low to be perceived as impactful resulting in lesser identification with the older employee network compared to the LGBTI network. Tuzun (2009) argues that the more a person can identify with something, the more committed this person will be. So, within this study, the more a member can identify with the network, the more committed this member will be towards the network. Some respondents do not identify with the older age and the negative age discourses and stereotypes influence this identification. There is such a stigma on the older age which can impact the commitment of respondents with the network (Macdonald & Levy, 2016). According to Macdonald and Levy (2016), identification with your own age and people of similar ages increases one’s well-being, improving the job satisfaction and commitment of older employees which makes it possible for organizations to focus more on overcoming negative age stereotypes and age discrimination on the work floor.

The following respondent does not want to be associated with the network because she does not agree with the overall goal of the network:

RI3, Veerle, organization 2, no board member, woman, age 56: “*Look, I have not been there for a while now, but a kind of a trade union mentality that we have to stand up for ourselves, for example, and that is not what I feel connected to because we complain all the time and think that you can and can do anything because you are older look that is not how it works. The mentality really needs to change [...], No no I don't really have to be a member anymore actually when I think about it that way because it radiates negative on you rather than it is seen as positive that you are a member”.*

The respondent also shared: “*I do not want to be labelled*” meaning she does not want to be “*labelled*” by the perceived constraints of her age. The respondent feels that the outside opinion of the network is negative and therefore does not want to be associated with the network. Her perception of the outside opinion is based on negative stereotypes and age discourses, and therefore she does not want to be connected to the older employee network as she does not want to be viewed

negatively and therefore rather distances herself from the network. So, the respondent draws on negative age discourses, resulting in less identification with the older employee network.

According to some respondents, the network is too focused on preparing members for their retirement instead of focusing on the future and the opportunities ahead as Akkermans et al. (2016) suggested. Instead, some respondents would like the network to focus more on building and creating relationships between members, which can result in more identification with the network:

R7, Sanne, organization 1, no board member, woman, age 58: “Yes, those informal things are important, and we should focus on that more so that you get to know each other a little better and that you know about each other oh you work there and you there so uh what can we do for each other and not mainly focus on pensions and stuff so there is still room for improvement there”.

Sanne highlights the importance of creating social ties within the network. Social ties can create feelings of social support (Dennissen et al., 2019) which in turn can result in increased commitment (Lee & Kim, 2011). Social ties are important for the emotion-related goals of older employees (Plaisier et al., 2015).

On the other hand, one respondent shared that she really identifies with the network and is therefore loyal and committed to the network and the organization:

R6, Maya, organization 1, no board member, woman, age 59: “If I had to leave the organization, it really would be with pain in my heart, I am very grateful to [the network] that I can be a member and experience these beautiful activities together with nice people of my age, obligation is a big word but really with pain in my heart I would have to say goodbye because I really love the people and I really feel at home and we should embrace the older age and show this to others and make a change in society”.

Maya is an exception to this since she is the only respondent who really identifies with the “older age” and even mentions that we should “*embrace the older age*” and is eager and dedicated to make a change within society. Maya feels attached to the network, as she shared that she is “*proud to be a part of the network*”. Her identification with the network results in commitment towards the network. The next section will focus on the impact of the older employee network on the commitment of respondents.

4.7.1 Impact of older employee network on commitment

As touched upon before, negative age discourses and stereotypes have an impact on how respondents look at themselves. This also influences how respondents are committed within the

network. Therefore, this section will focus on the significance of the older employee network for respondents in terms of commitment.

It is evident that based on the interviews, the older employee networks can result in feelings of (emotional) attachment, loyalty, dedication, and responsibility which fall under commitment. In the theoretical background, 3 different forms of commitment were distinguished: affective commitment, continuance commitment and normative commitment, also called the three-component model (Meyer et al., 1993). Based on the interview results, an overlap between the three forms of commitment is visible and therefore in this analysis, the three-component model has not been used as it was found not to be applicable. Instead, the overarching term commitment was used in the analysis. Commitment can be defined as “a volitional psychological bond reflecting dedication to and responsibility for a particular target” (Klein, Solinger, & Duflot, 2020, p. 3). Since the interview questions about commitment were focused on the three-component model, the questions were focused on one target: the older employee network. As section 4.6 talked about motivation, it is important to distinguish motivation from commitment and Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) argue that self-interest is always present within the concept of motivation. On the other hand, commitment can cause employees to behave contrary to their self-interest (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002).

The network has resulted in commitment for respondents in different ways, the following quotes explain this:

R6, Maya, organization 1, no board member, woman, age 59: *“The network is really something that I am proud of because the organization does not do much in terms of age, but the network tries to do that and that also makes me feel more committed to the organization and I get a lot of energy from this because they stand up for our rights, and I find it beautiful”.*

R2, Cinta, organization 1, board member, woman, age 64: *“I feel connected with the fellow members, we can rely on each other, and we are in the same phase of life, and we can talk about this so really that coming together knowing that you can really count on each other, I just think it is very nice and we just really want to achieve something for each other and with each other”.*

The excerpts have in common that the network results in feelings of belongingness, social support, and social connections, so the older employee network creates community building. The network builds social support between members and makes it possible to share experiences with each other “without having to conform to the majority culture” (Dennissen et al., 2019, p. 976). So, the

network brings the members together and this is also confirmed by the study of Dennissen et al. (2019) about diversity networks. Maya shows her pride for the network, resulting in commitment. She is committed towards one target: the network, resulting in commitment towards another target: the organization, as she appreciates and identifies with the network. Cinta highlights that she feels connected to the network because members can count on each, which creates a bond, resulting in dedication and responsibility towards the network.

A few respondents shared that they do not want to leave the organization because of the older employee network, which is illustrated below:

R12, Julie, organization 2, board member, woman, age 54: “I was looking at a sister organization at a [similar organization], not that I wanted to go there, but an acquaintance of mine works there and he said like we have 40 networks there, but no older employee network in the organization, then I thought well I don’t want to go to that organization because I think it is really important that an organization is committed to this”.

Julie shows her loyalty towards the older employee network as she shared that she would not work in an organization that does not have such a network, so the network is a major reason why she works at her current organization. Hence, this implies that an organization having an older employee network is crucial for Julie as it stands up for her interests since she shared: “we need to show the organization that we can still accomplish things” and the older employee network helps her to do so. Overall, based on the interview results, the older employee network can be a major support to respondents.

5. Conclusion and discussion

In this final chapter, the research question will be answered. In addition, theoretical and practical implications will be explained and suggestions for future research will be discussed. The discussion will be concluded with a personal reflection and limitations of the study.

5.1 Conclusion

The aim of this research was to provide insights into older employee networks, as older employee networks have not been researched before. Motivation and commitment are both important to employees and the organization, and therefore the following research question was formulated: *How do older employee networks impact the motivation and commitment of the ageing respondents?* Interviews were conducted to answer the research question which resulted in several findings which will now be discussed.

The paradox of older age is crucial in answering the research question formulated as it impacts the motivation and commitment of respondents. Respondents associate the older age with “*experience and knowledge*” and with a perceived risk simultaneously, which can be seen as a paradox. This is in line with literature as Bal et al. (2011) argues that images of older people are mixed. Age discourses can result in age stereotypes and can have a major impact on how older employees perceive themselves, especially negative age stereotypes. The associations from respondents drew on ageism, age stereotypes and age discourses which are essential in this study as they impact the motivation and commitment of respondents. Respondents especially drew on age discourses of the mind as these impacted the career decisions respondents made as some respondents feel that they are now “*too old*” to make a career which makes them anxious about the future in terms of finding employment elsewhere or making a promotion. Such negative age discourses resulted in reduced mental well-being such as stress and anxiety for the respondents.

An interesting finding is that almost all respondents feel younger than their chronological age or have the desire to be younger and therefore prefer to look at the subjective age instead. Almost all respondents distance themselves from the association of “*older people*” as they perceive society to think of them as “*ready for retirement*”. The negative age discourses are central here as well, causing the respondents to have negative associations with their chronological age. Negative age discourses and stereotypes have a stronger impact on respondents compared to positive age discourses and stereotypes, which is in accordance with the literature. Respondents are frustrated about the negative age discourses within the organization and society and therefore often react defensively when it comes to the older age. This frustration manifests itself when respondents explain that they have been discriminated against because of their older age or have colleagues who have been discriminated against based on their age. This has resulted in respondents to perceive their own age as a risk and a problem. So, ageism, age discourses, age stereotypes and age discrimination are closely related and influence how older employees perceive themselves and the older age in general. Both older employee networks aim to overcome the negative side of the paradox, and respondents primarily joined the network to show that they matter and are looking for appreciation. Both networks’ names indicate that the members do not want to be associated with their chronological age, as they put their emphasis on characteristics that are associated with youth.

The older employee networks impact the motivation of respondents in different ways. The network impacts the intrinsic motivation of respondents, for example. It stood out that respondents feel empowered to overcome negative age discourses and to make an impact within the organization and society, and this creates a common ground for respondents. Respondents enjoy helping each other with age-related problems and enjoy learning from the workshops, as a result the network creates a bond between respondents, and feelings of joy, meaningfulness, and purposefulness for respondents, which is in line with literature. The network also results in extrinsic motivation of respondents, as respondents are motivated to network within the older employee network and gain knowledge from the network about various topics, such as retirement. Respondents find the network to be advantageous for their future career or life after retirement. Some respondents are also motivated to be involved within the network to make sure that they do not end up being unemployed as they perceive their own age to be a substantial risk and use the network to show they are motivated, hence respondents drew on age discourses of the mind. This is especially evident for respondents of organization two, and the continuous reorganization could have had an influence on this.

The network also impacts the commitment of respondents in different ways. Respondents' identification with the network has an impact on their commitment towards the network. Some respondents do not identify with the network for various reasons which impacts their commitment towards the network. Most respondents do not identify with the older age, as they perceive the older age mostly negatively. Some respondents do not want to be "*labelled*" by the older employee network, as they perceive outsiders to have a negative view towards the network. In addition, some respondents do not agree with the overall goal of the network, impacting their commitment towards the network. It is also frequently mentioned by respondents that they would like the network to focus more on informal things, such as getting to know each other, instead of focusing on the hard side of the network (e.g., retirement). A change in these areas could positively impact the commitment of the respondents towards the network.

On the other hand, the network also strengthens the social ties between respondents resulting in feelings of social support as they feel that "they can rely on each other" resulting in commitment from respondents, consistent with Lee and Kim (2011). Some respondents also show their pride for the network, as they are grateful to be a part of the network, and appreciate the network looking out for them. So, emotion-related goals are fulfilled for some respondents.

In conclusion, negative age discourses, negative age stereotypes and age discrimination affect how respondents perceive the older age. The older employee network aims to overcome this, resulting in a common ground for respondents. The network is a safe place for respondents to share their stories, as they are all older and have gone through similar situations, resulting in motivation and commitment for the respondents in various ways. As a result, the older employee network is beneficial for some respondents on both a resource and relational level, in line with the study from Dennissen et al. (2019) about diversity networks. However, a lack of identification with the network from some respondents results in lesser commitment.

5.2 Theoretical implications

This research contributes to literature in various ways. First, this study contributes to literature about older employee networks, as these have not been studied before. This study found that older employee networks studied can have a major impact for both the members and the organization. The older employee network can result in motivation and commitment for its members which is beneficial for the respondent and the organization, and this is new information within literature. The older employee networks studied, aim to overcome negative age discourses and stereotypes and therefore this study contributes to literature about ageism. Age discourses can result in age stereotypes, and they can have a major impact on how “older” respondents perceive themselves and the world around them. Negative age stereotypes have a more extensive impact on this perception compared to positive stereotypes and this can result in reduced psychological well-being, confirming Hertel et al. (2013). Age discourses can impact how respondents perceive and experience the older employee network, therefore contributing to the literature of ageism and older employee networks.

This study also contributes to diversity literature as this study found respondents in the dominant group to perceive less inequality, which confirms Acker (2006). In addition, it contributes to the literature of diversity networks in general. Several other diversity networks have been studied before such as young employee networks, ethnicity networks and LGBTQI+ networks, but this is still an under researched area. This study draws upon and adds to several studies about diversity networks such as the study from Dennissen et al. (2019) who argue that diversity networks in general provide members access to information as well as support, confirmed by this study. This study also confirms the findings from Olajojo et al. (2017) who found a positive relationship between commitment, motivation and social support. The older employee network

can create feelings of belongingness and therefore reduce feelings of isolation, which enhances motivation and commitment for members, supporting Lee and Kim (2011). However, the older employee network is found to be different from other diversity networks in terms of identification since respondents often do not identify with the older age impacting the commitment of respondents, contradicting the findings of Dennissen et al. (2019) about young employee networks in terms of identification.

Finally, this study contributes to the literature about commitment, since this study found the three-component model not to be applicable. The three-component model is the most accepted commitment model. However, this study found some overlap between the different commitment components, making it difficult to distinguish the different components and therefore the model was not used, confirming the findings from Solinger et al. (2008). Klein et al. (2020) argue that multiple commitments exist at the same time and change over time, and therefore they need to be studied in cohesion and longitudinal instead of in isolation and static like the three-component model does.

5.3 Practical implications and recommendations

Several practical implications can be drawn from this study. First of all, this study found that older employees are in need of forming social relationships and are looking for emotional connections, confirming the findings from Plaisier et al. (2015). This study found that older respondents enjoy talking to like-minded people as it creates a safe place for them to discuss age-related problems and the workshops enrich them in different ways. So, an older employee network can fulfil the emotion-related goals of members. Therefore, I would recommend organizations with an older employee network to focus on this by organizing different activities for members to really get to know each other, such as organizing speed dates within the network.

In addition, I would recommend organizations to think of introducing an older employee network as it can result in motivation and commitment of respondents which is beneficial for the members and the organization. HR management and the board of older employee networks should focus on negative age discourses and stereotypes as well, as this has a major impact on older employees. In order to do so, they first need to properly understand the negative age discourses and stereotypes about older employees and its impact in order to cope with these phenomena and this study carefully explains this, therefore contributing to practice.

Furthermore, they could make a quiz about stereotypes regarding older employees and split the organization or the network up in teams and discuss these stereotypes to create more understanding and awareness within the organization and the network, which could enhance older employees' well-being. I would also propose, organizations with both an older employee network and a young employee network to connect with each other as both age groups deal with different age problems, and this could create a safe place and mutual understanding between both groups.

5.4 Future research

Based on this research, there are a couple of implications for future research. Based on the interview results, it appears that intrinsic motivation is more visible for board-members compared to non-board members. An explanation could be that intrinsically motivated employees are more likely to choose to become a board member or identify more with the network and are therefore more motivated to make things happen within the network. Future research is needed to delve into these underlying reasons, since intrinsic motivation is highly beneficial for employees and the organization.

Future research can also look into the possibility of doing a participant observation in addition to interviews as the experience of respondents is important and therefore a combination of interviews and a participant observation could be beneficial (Bleijenbergh, 2013). A comparative case study would be insightful since this study found intrinsic motivation of respondents to be less visible for organization two and the continuous reorganizations within this organization might be an explanation for this. The older employee network of organization two has barely organized any activities over the past year due to a change of board possibly impacting the intrinsic motivation of members. A comparative case study could look into the reasons for such differences.

Additionally, future studies could also try to attain more respondents and thereby sketching a fuller picture of respondent's perceptions towards their age as this study found one member to truly identify with the older age while other respondents rather look at their subjective age. There is a considerable stigma on the older age resulting in less identification with the older employee network and future research could investigate the emergence of this stigma and look for possible solutions for organizations to overcome this stigma.

Furthermore, future studies could examine the possibilities of studying more diversity networks within one organization, as this could be helpful in identifying differences and

similarities between networks, contributing to literature regarding diversity networks. A comparative case study could be conducted between an older employee network and a young employee network as both networks deal with different age problems and this could create interesting insights for literature and organizations.

To conclude, the three-component model of commitment was found not to be applicable in this study as elaborated on before, which confirms the work of Solinger et al. (2008). Klein et al. (2020) stresses that multiple commitments can exist at the same time for employees, which can be synergistic, neutral or conflicting in relation to each other. Klein et al. (2020) established a new commitment framework, called the “commitment system theory”, where they look at commitment targets instead of the psychological state of employees, and thus considering that commitment targets can change overtime. This model has not been empirically tested, and future commitment studies could use this model in a longitudinal study to see how commitments change.

5.5 Limitations and personal reflection

Finally, there are some limitations in this research that need to be addressed. First of all, I chose this topic out of personal interest. I had often heard that it is harder for older people to find employment and I had seen it in my environment which makes me sad. So, I was already aware of several stereotypes regarding older employees, and I decided it would be interesting to do my research about older employee networks as they had not been studied before, and I wondered what such a network had to offer to employees. I look up to older people as I feel that they are more knowledgeable than younger people like me. I always try to learn from older people, for example, within internships I try to gain knowledge from them which I enjoy. So, I view older people very positively, which could have impacted how I interviewed the respondents or interpreted respondents’ answers (Haynes, 2012). To analyse the results critically, I wrote my preconceptions about older employees on paper and tried to delve deeper into the meaning of what was said by the respondents. I often listened to interview parts again to make the step of “mental processing” (Saunders et al., 2009) more dependable. However, I had preconceptions about older people going into the interviews, and this needs to be considered when analysing this research.

The second limitation is that I had one contact person within both organizations, and they both reached out to members from the older employee network to schedule an interview with me. It is important to mention that both of my contact persons are quite high in the hierarchy of the organization, and therefore their co-workers are also in the higher ranges of the organization.

Therefore, the respondents in this research occupy higher positions. I did not interview respondents in the lower ranges of the organizations, as I would have preferred to see whether their experiences in the network differ. This limitation needs to be considered when examining the results of this study.

The third limitation is that due to the Covid-19 crisis, I was not able to do a participant observation. A participant observation provides the researcher with the opportunity to receive the “maximum information about the present” (Bleijenbergh, 2013, p. 90). It would have been insightful to see whether the descriptions of respondents during the interviews are similar or equal to the observations of the researcher during the participant observation, as this could have created an extra dimension in this research.

The last limitation is that this was my first-time conducting interviews of one hour. I was quite nervous for the first interview and looking back, I did not ask enough follow-up questions which was a missed opportunity. However, throughout the interview process, I asked more follow-up questions as I gained confidence. However, some more follow-up questions should have been asked especially on the topic of intrinsic motivation as I found board-members to be more intrinsically motivated compared to non-board members and I should have delved deeper into these underlying reasons. Some respondents were in a hurry during the interview because they had other meetings afterwards, therefore impacting the length and depth of their answers, and this needs to be considered.

I had read articles before the interviews on how to conduct interviews and this really helped me as it is important to analyse the person in front of you, to adjust to the respondents’ preferences. I realized that some respondents wanted to have some small informal talk while others mainly wanted to focus on the content of the interview. Respondents often shared that they enjoyed the interview because I was spontaneous, and they felt I was interested in them and asked critical follow-up questions. Respondents explained that they felt comfortable sharing confidential information with me because I created a safe space for them, which positively impacted the research. I really enjoyed the interview process and learned a lot as a researcher.

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Appendix 1 Interview guide

Before the official part of the interview (not recording):

First of all, the interviewer will quickly introduce herself and thank all the respondents individually for their cooperation in the research. The interviewer will mention that this research is conducted for her Master Thesis of Strategic Human Resources Leadership. The goal of the research will be explained to the respondents. The approximate time of the interview will be mentioned, and the interviewer will ask whether the interviewee has any objections regarding the interviewer recording and transcribing the interview. The interviewer will mention that all the information discussed in the interview will be anonymized except for the interview number, fictitious name, gender, age, duration of membership, and possible board membership of the older employee network and the researcher will clearly ask for their permission. Only the interviewer, first examiner and second examiner will have access to the fully transcribed interview which will be clearly mentioned to the respondents. The interviewer will also clearly state that the respondents have the opportunity to revise the transcript and make adaptations based on their needs. The researcher will explicitly ask whether the individual will give his/her consent for this. In addition, the researcher will also clearly state that respondents can withdraw from the study at any time. To conclude, the interviewer will ask whether there are any questions at the moment and when all questions have been answered, the interviewer will start the interview.

The official part of the interview (recording):

The following information regarding the interview will be provided:

- Interview number:
- Date of interview:
- Time of interview:
- Fictitious of the interviewee:
- Organization:
- Gender of the respondent:
- Age of the respondent:
- Board member?
- Membership period of the older employee network of the respondent:

General follow-up questions (these will be provided in Dutch since all the interviews will be held in Dutch):

- Zou u dat nog wat verder/ uitgebreider kunnen toelichten?
- Zou u dit nog kunnen illustreren met een voorbeeld?
- Heeft u nog meerdere voorbeelden die hierop van toepassing zijn?
- Hoe voelt u zich daarbij?

Based on the research question formulated and the theoretical framework, the following topics need to be covered in the interview:

-Topic 1: Diversity within the organization

-Subtopic 1.1: Age within the organization (chronological age, subjective age) (Akkermans et al., 2016)

-Topic 2: Older employee network in general (some of the respondents' answers related to motivation and commitment)

-Topic 3: Motivation

Subtopic 3.1: Intrinsic motivation in relation to the older employee network

Subtopic 3.2: Extrinsic motivation in relation to the older employee network

-Topic 4: Commitment

Topic 4.1: Affective commitment in relation to the older employee network (emotional attachment, enrichment) (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

Topic 4.2: Continuance commitment in relation to the older employee network (alternative employment, investment) (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

Topic 4.3: Normative commitment in relation to the older employee network (sense of duty/moral) (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

The interview will first start with some general questions (**This will be in Dutch since all interviews will be held in Dutch**):

Aan het begin van het officiële interview, zal de interviewer de respondent vragen om zichzelf even kort voor te stellen (leeftijd, positie binnen het bedrijf, lidmaatschap duur ouderennetwerk)

- Hoeveel uur werkt u gemiddeld per week en wat zijn uw taken zoal?
- Bekleed u nog andere posities buiten uw huidige organisatie?

Specific questions (This will be in Dutch since all interviews will be held in Dutch):

Topic 1 Diversity within the organization:

1: Wat zou u me kunnen vertellen over diversiteit binnen de Rabobank?

Subvraag: Waar associeert u het mee?

Subtopic 1.1: Age within the organization:

2: In hoeverre vindt u het concept leeftijd een belangrijk onderdeel van diversiteit? (Acker, 2006)

Subvraag: Zou ik mogen vragen hoe oud u bent? (Chronological age)

Subvraag: Hoe oud voelt u zich? (Subjective age) (Akkermans et al., 2016)

3: Speelt leeftijd een rol in uw werk?

Subvraag: (Zo ja) hoe?

Subvraag: Hoe wordt er in de organisatie met leeftijd omgegaan?

4: In hoeverre heeft u belangrijke carrière beslissingen gemaakt, gebaseerd op leeftijd?

Subvraag: Zou u dit nog kunnen illustreren met een voorbeeld?

5: Tot welke leeftijd zou u graag willen blijven werken?

Subvraag: Wat zijn uw drijfveren om door te werken tot deze leeftijd?

Topic 2 Older employee network in general: (Sommige antwoorden van de respondenten relateerden aan motivatie of commitment)

6: Wat zou u me over het ouderennetwerk kunnen vertellen?

Subvraag: Hoe bent u bekend geworden met het netwerk?

Subvraag: Hoelang bestaat het netwerk al?

7: Wat doet het netwerk zoal?

Subvraag: Waarom bestaat het netwerk?

Subvraag: Wat hebben jullie zoal al bereikt?

8: Wat is de voornaamste reden waarom u lid bent geworden van het ouderennetwerk?

9: Wat heeft het ouderennetwerk voor u betekend tot dusver?

10: Hoe vindt u dat het ouderennetwerk met diversiteit omgaat?

11: Hoe zag u het concept leeftijd voordat u lid werd van het netwerk?

Subvraag: Is dit veranderd sinds u lid bent geworden van het netwerk?

12: Wat zou u me kunnen vertellen over hoe 50-plussers binnen het ouderennetwerk waar u lid van bent worden gezien? (Toomey & Rudolph, 2017)

Topic 3 Motivation:

13: Wat vindt u leuk aan uw werk?

Subtopic 3.1 Intrinsic motivation:

14: Draagt het ouderennetwerk bij aan het plezier dat u uit uw werk haalt? (Oudeyer & Kaplan, 2009)

Subvraag: Zo ja, hoe?

15: Biedt het netwerk u ondersteuning/ support in uw dagelijkse werk? (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

Subvraag: Zo ja, hoe?

Subtopic 3.2 extrinsic motivation:

16: Draagt lidmaatschap van het netwerk ook bij aan uw werk/ carrière/ ontwikkeling? (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Subvraag: Zo ja, zou u een voorbeeld kunnen geven?

17: Wat zou u me kunnen vertellen over de beoordeling die u krijgt binnen uw huidige functie van managers, collega's etc? (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

Subvraag: Heeft het netwerk hier enige invloed op?

Topic 4 commitment:

18: voelt u u verbonden met het netwerk?

Subvraag: Zo ja, hoe?

Subtopic 4.1 Affective commitment:

19: Wat zou u me kunnen vertellen over de banden die u met andere medewerkers heeft opgebouwd binnen het ouderennetwerk? (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

20: Wat voor een mogelijkheden biedt het ouderennetwerk de mogelijkheid om u te verrijken binnen het bedrijf? (Zargar, Vandenberghe, Marchand, & Ayed, 2014)

Topic 4.2 continuance commitment:

21: Stel dat u een andere baan zou hebben binnen een ander bedrijf, wat zou u dan het meeste missen aan het ouderennetwerk? (Snape et al., 2008)

Subvraag: Weerhoudt u er dit van om eventueel elders te gaan werken? (Snape et al., 2008)

Topic 4.3 Normative commitment:

22: Voelt u een verplichting naar het ouderennetwerk om werkzaam te blijven binnen uw huidige bedrijf vanwege wat zij voor u gedaan hebben? (Snape et al., 2008)

Afsluiting:

Ik wil u graag heel hartelijk bedanken dat u heeft deelgenomen aan mijn interview. Heeft u nog vragen? Zijn er nog aspecten die niet aan bod zijn gekomen? Is er nog iets dat ik vergeten ben dat ik mee kan nemen? Wilt u nog iets kwijt dat niet aan bod is gekomen?

Wat vond u van het interview? Kent u toevallig nog leden die mee zouden willen doen aan mijn onderzoek?

Ik ga het interview deze week transcriberen. Zou u het fijn vinden als ik u het transcript daarna naar u toestuur zodat u kunt kijken of u het ermee eens bent?

Appendix 2 Description of respondents

Interview number: Date of interview: Time of interview:	Fictitious name: Gender: Age:	Board member? Membership period:
1 30-03-2021 10:00	Adam Man 61	Yes 10 years
2 12-04-2021 10:30	Cinta Woman 64	Yes 10+ years
3 12-04-2021 12:00	Willem Man 61	No 8 years
4 12-04-2021 13:30	Arie Man 60	Yes 2 years
5 12-04-2021 15:15	Asha Woman 64	No 10+ years
6 13-04-2021 11:30	Maya Woman 59	No 10 years
7 13-04-2021 13:30	Sanne Woman 58	No 1.5 years
8 13-04-2021 15:30	Eline Woman 55	No 5 years
9 14-04-2021 09:30	Teun Man 54	Yes 3 years
10 14-04-2021 11:15	Thijs Man 61	Rabobank Yes 3 years
11 14-04-2021 15:00	Rob Man 62	No 5 years
12 15-04-2021 10:30	Julie Woman 54	Yes 5 years
13 15-04-2021 13:30	Veerle Woman 56	No 4 years
14 16-04-2021 11:00	Zeger Man 57	No 4 years

Appendix 3 Coding template

Concept	Dimension	Indicator
Commitment	Network creating a bond	Feeling of belongingness because of similar age/ emotional attachment
		relying on each other gives good feeling
		Network deepens existing relationships
		Dedicated to show added value of older employees
		Feeling of belongingness because of similar age resulting in dedication
		Network creating support
		Network creating inspiration resulting in commitment
		Proud to be a part of the network
		Pride for network resulting in organizational commitment
		Loyalty towards organization because of existence
		Network inspires, resulting in dedication and responsibility
	Network supports members resulting in dedication and responsibility	
	Motivation	Identification network impacting commitment
Covid-19 affecting personal contact resulting in less commitment		
Intrinsic motivation		Intrinsic motivation from the content because of updating website which makes members happy
		Intrinsic motivation from the content because the content of the network is similar to content of the job and complement one another
		Intrinsic motivation from the content because diversity and inclusion are close to heart so results in satisfaction
		Intrinsic motivation from content to make society better
		Intrinsic motivation from content to support other members
		Intrinsic motivation to support other members and inspire each other
Intrinsic motivation from the form, doing something extra		

		Intrinsic motivation from the form to make things better
		Intrinsic motivation from the form because inclusion close to heart
		Intrinsic motivation from the form because improving society
		Intrinsic motivation from the form to help each other with age discrimination
		Intrinsic motivation from the form because of enjoyment
		Intrinsic motivation from form because of making an impact
	Extrinsic motivation	Motivated to make use of schemes (award)
		Motivated to gain knowledge from network (award)
		Motivated to gain knowledge from network and specifically about age related problems (award)
		Motivated to gain knowledge from network about retirement (award)
		Motivated to think of organizational changes (award)
		Motivated to gain knowledge about vitality and loneliness (award)
		Motivated to gain knowledge about relevant topics (award)
		Motivated to be able to make a career (award)
		Motivated to learn about retirement and possibilities to retire beforehand (award)
		Motivated to be able to receive social support (award)
		Motivated to be able to network to approach people (award)
		Motivated because there is a group that looks out for your interests (award)
		Motivated to have a support group if needed (award)
		Motivated to be able to solve problems through network (award)
		Motivated to be able to learn from one another (award)
Older employee network in general	Focus of activities	physical (&) (or) mental vitality/employability
		hard side of activities
	transition	new leadership network
		Changing network and becoming more active
	Perceived goal network	Hard goals network
		Soft goals network

areas of improvement	physical (&) (or) mental vitality/employability
	building relationships
	Financial rewards
	Goal oriented
	Visibility
	Negative association
Joining network to make an impact	Asked to join network to provide workshops
	Asked to join network to improve visibility
	Joining network to provide and receive social support
	Joining network to discuss topics and to stand up for interest of older employees
Diversity management within network	Diversity within network in terms of Creating contact between young and older employee network
	The network is an open community
	The diversity focus needs to be more on creating awareness
	Showing appreciation for diversity, but not everyone is excited about it
	Diversity is not a hot topic within the network
Network creating age awareness	Learning all sorts of things on how to stay active within the organization because of network
	Reflecting on own age because of network
	Awareness of age discrimination because of network
	Perceiving older age as a problem because of network
	Awareness of opportunities left because of network
Positive perception of older employees within network	Discussing struggles and talking about older age positively, also mentioning that they are not old and don't want to be considered old (defensive)
	Perceived positive self-image within network, also mentioning that it is not a sad event (defensive)
	Perceived positive self-image within network but indirectly questioning if the interviewer has a posnetwork,age about older employee (defensive)
	Improved awareness within network of opportunities ahead
	Perceived positive self-image but also mentioning that it is not negative (defensive)

Age within the organization	Preference of balancing different generations within organization	Age as a part of diversity is important because different generations can complement one another
		Age as a part of diversity is important because you need to reflect society and different generations can complement one another so a mix of generation is essential
		Age as a part of diversity is important to balance different generations and to transfer knowledge
		Age as a part of diversity is important due to perception of age stereotypes
	Subjective age	Self-identification younger than chronological age
		Desire to be younger
	Career decisions based on perceived risk of age	Making sure to keep up with developments due to perceived risk of age
		Feeling pressure to make a career due to getting older
		Changing job within organization to expand on knowledge due to perceived risk of age
	Organization handling age	Perceived age discrimination
		Frustration about fewer opportunities perceived due to older age
		Questioning appreciation of older employees from the organization
		positive perception of opportunities left within organization
	Preferred retirement age opportunity focused	Not retiring until no opportunities left
		Retiring before retirement age due to opportunities outside
Diversity within organization	Narrow Perception of diversity	Recalling diversity in terms of gender
	Broad perception of diversity	Recalling diversity in terms of colour, gender, age, ethnicity
		Recalling diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, disability, ethnicity, and inclusion
		Recalling diversity in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, and inclusion
		Recalling diversity in terms of colour, gender, ethnicity
Recalling diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender, refugee		