

Internal and External Continuity Strategies to Support Senior Employees' Choice of Extended Working Life in Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study explores how HR professionals perceive older employees' intentions to continue working beyond the official retirement age and what strategies organizations would apply concerning their older employees. This study uses the theoretical lens of Atchley's (1989) continuity theory, a social gerontology theory that holds that aging people maintain existing internal and external continuity working structures.

Methodology: A qualitative study was adopted. 17 HR professionals were interviewed through a semi-structured in-depth interview guide within the 12 public universities in Sweden (anonymous). Empirical data were thematically analyzed through the theoretical lens of continuity within internal and external continuity strategies.

Findings: This study argues for some internal and external continuity strategies that help older employees be active longer than normal aging. These are a) mentoring and knowledge sharing program (internal continuity), b) a competence and experiences appreciation program (internal continuity), c) providing sufficient facilities for flexible working and work satisfaction (external continuity), and d) establishing provision for part-time employment after retirement (external continuity).

Practical Implications: This study can contribute to previous studies by bringing the higher education institutions (HEI) sector into the organization studies.

Originality/Value: This original study contributes to social sustainability through empirical and theoretical evidence to support and develop the older community of society.

Limitations: This study needs to include more variations of interview data. It would be interesting for future researchers to study what age management strategies support older employees in improving their skills and what this study needs to focus on.

1. Introduction

While some employers and employees focus on decreasing retirement ages, greater attention is paid to ways of extending older workers' careers, and providing access to human and financial resources seems to be the essential criteria for contributing to the retention of older employees at the workplace (Furunes et al., 2011). Vickerstaff (2010) argues for an 'unavoidable obligation' to work for a longer

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time differentiated by class, gender, and race. Larsen & Pedersen (2017) focus on aging labor force participation in most OECD member countries since 2004 not only in the age groups 60-64 years but also among people 65 and older. Hennekam & Herrbach (2015) argue that older workers want organizations to adapt to their workplaces and HR practices can only help older workers extend their working lives regardless of occupational status or age. Frøyland and Terjesen (2020) argue that older workers' opportunities for late careers are influenced by employer attitudes and willingness because the perceptions of older workers do rest on concrete experiences of older workers and processes or mechanisms of positioning and polarization that sometimes occur within the workplace. Jonsson et al. (2020) investigate some obstacles to the retention of older workers on an organizational level, such as line managers' high workload, and the absence of age-management strategies.

The existing literature does not cover qualitative, in-depth interview data (Jonsson et al., 2020); Frøyland and Terjesen, 2020). Therefore, this study adopts a qualitative interview method. This study does not adopt survey data because it shows general factors and their relationship to each other. However, this study adopts case study data because case studies (Flyvbjerg, 2006) provide context-sensitive information on everyday HR strategy work. This study conducts 17 interviews with HR professionals within the 12 public universities in Sweden (anonymous). Empirical data are thematically analyzed through the theoretical lens of Atchley's (1989) continuity theory, a theory of social gerontology that holds that aging employees attempt to preserve and maintain existing internal and external continuity working structures. Thus, this study argues for some internal continuity strategies, such as mentorship, knowledge-sharing, and experience appreciation programs. This study also argues for some external continuity strategies, such as work flexibility, and part-time employment opportunities. These strategies help older employees be active during retirement age as normal aging allows.

First, this study summarizes past studies after reviewing relevant past literature and identifies research gaps, which are stated in Table 1. Based on these research gaps, the research problem statement, the purpose of this study, and specific research questions have been stated.

Table 1.

Research Gaps for the Research Problem Statement of this Study

Author(s)	What past relevant studies focus on	What past studies do not focus on, which are regarded as research gaps
Öylü et al. (2023)	Women with low education exit working life earlier	How older workers continue their work in late working life exploiting opportunities and tackling obstacles
Grødem & Kitterød (2022); Frøyland and Terjesen (2020)	Opportunities in late working life for Nordic older workers	
Kosonen et al. (2021); Jonsson et al. (2020)	Obstacles to late working life for Nordic older workers	
Kuitto and Helmdag (2021).	The public pension system rules and the effects of macro-level institutional pull, push, and retention factors	How continuity theory contributes to the research about why older people continue their work and why bridge employment
Shacklock & Brunetto (2011); Shacklock et al. (2009)	The notion of "older workers' intentions to continue paid working."	

Bonsdorff et al. (2009)	The concept of bridge employment from a continuity theory	
Arman et al. (2021).	Legitimacy for early versus delayed retirement	How continuity strategies can support people who are near the official retirement age
Baruch et al. (2014); Axelrad and Mahoney (2017)	Flexible retirement strategies Vs. fixed retirement age and reasons behind the changes in retirement	
(Hairault et al., 2010).	How a fair pension scheme extends the retirement age	
Fisher et al. (2016)	Retirement timing and its factors	
Lee et al. (2017); Qi et al.'s (2019)	HR approaches to retirement and the growth pattern in the average effective retirement	
Wainwright et al.'s (2019); Maltby (2011);	How the workplace is ready for the desirability of extending working life	How HR professionals view extending working life in higher education institutions (HEIs)
Nilsson (2016); Wiktorowicz (2018)	An inclusive and sustainable extended working life.	
Philipson et al. (2019)	The promotion of extended active life	

Source: Literature review by the Author

1.1 Background and the Problem Statement of the Study

The literature gaps stated above urge the author to do new research on continuity strategies concerning older workers. Because, past studies give us themes about older employees' intention to continue paid work (Shacklock & Brunetto, 2011; Loretto & White, 2006) and several employees' intentions of full retirement from a continuity theory and life course perspective (Bonsdorff et al., 2009). Past studies also focus on retirement age. Some studies argue how retirement age issues affect extending the working lives of older employees (Axelrad & Mahoney, 2017; Baruch et al., 2014). Other studies address retirement timing, job searching by older unemployed workers (Hairault et al., 2010), and factors affecting the decision to extend the working life (Kuitto & Helmdag, 2021; Nilsson et al., 2011). Some recent literature examines opportunities and obstacles to late working life for Nordic older workers, not focusing on how older workers continue their working in late working life exploiting opportunities and tackling obstacles (Öylü et al., 2023; Grødem & Kitterød, 2022; Frøyland & Terjesen, 2020; Kosonen et al., 2021; Jonsson et al., 2020). Overall, *'what internal and external continuity strategies organizations would apply concerning their older employees' intentions to extend their working life beyond retirement age'* is theoretically less well known.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

Therefore, this study aims to explore how organizational internal and external continuity strategies can support older employees' choices of extended working life beyond the official retirement age. In line with the purpose, this study addresses the following specific research questions:

RQ1: How do human resources (HR) professionals experience why aging employees intend to continue working beyond the official retirement age in higher education institutions (HEIs)?

RQ2: What internal and external continuity strategies would organizations apply to support older employees' choice of extended working life?

2. Relevant Past Studies

In this section of the paper, this study first reviews past relevant studies, analyzing their findings to determine research gaps, which contribute to writing about the research problem statement, research purpose, and questions as stated in the introduction section. Secondly, this study discusses the theory of continuity as the analytical tool for this study.

2.1 Literature Review

2.1.1 *Opportunities and Obstacles to Late Working Life for Nordic Older Workers*

Öylü et al. (2023) argue that women with low education exit working life earlier than men, while men with high education have a higher probability of moving to self-employment than women in late working life. Grødem & Kitterød (2022) examine how older workers in Norway enjoy much more flexibility and opportunities to adapt their pensions to their needs, which gives individuals considerable freedom in a certain period of life. Kosonen et al. (2021) argue that agency analysis of aging employees offers insights into the complexity of the retirement process because older workers may face several limiting factors, including internalized attitudes towards aging at work when continuing their careers beyond the official retirement age. Frøyland and Terjesen (2020) argue that older workers' opportunities for late careers are influenced by employer attitudes and willingness because the perceptions of older workers do rest on concrete experiences of older workers and processes or mechanisms of positioning and polarization that sometimes occur within the workplace. Jonsson et al. (2020) investigate some obstacles to the retention of older workers on an organizational level, such as line managers' high workload, and the absence of age-management strategies.

2.1.2 *Retirement and Retirement Age*

Retirement is an expected phase of life that is meaningful through social discourses as a master retirement narrative (Smith & Dougherty, 2012). Arman et al.'s (2022) study of the national-level meta-narratives, which are dominant in delaying retirement, primarily addressed the individual and the social partners rather than organizations employing older workers. Both societal and organizational-level actors produce co-existing records that create legitimacy for early versus delayed retirement (Arman et al., 2022). On the other hand, Baruch et al. (2014) argued for flexible retirement strategies as the current system is unsustainable. Axelrad and Mahoney (2017) investigated current trends in increasing the pensionable age, while Baruch et al. (2014) addressed eliminating the fixed retirement age. Lee et al.'s (2017) study identifies dimensions of the typology of HR that differentiate organizations' approaches to retirement.

2.1.3 *Reasons Behind Extended Working Life*

Among others, Axelrad and Mahoney (2017) investigated the reasons behind the changes in retirement age in 24 of the 34 OECD countries. They found that the growth of the older segment of the population and increased life expectancy led policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to rethink the length of working life and pension eligibility age. Wainwright et al.'s (2019) study focuses on how the workplace is ready for the aging worker and a high degree of uncertainty among employees regarding the desirability of extending working life. Maltby (2011) suggests that when adults in general and 'older workers' in particular are valued, and workability and stability in workgroups are provided, then extending working life can be successfully achieved.

Qi et al.'s (2019) study examines the growth pattern in the average effective retirement age in Sweden. Nilsson (2016) develops a theoretical model contributing to the critical debate that societies, employers, and managers can apply to provide older workers with an inclusive and sustainable extended working life. Philipson et al. (2019) explore how the promotion of extended active life has created uncertainty between the ending of work and the beginning of retirement.

2.1.4 Retirement Timing and Job Searching by Older Unemployed Workers

A fair pension scheme extends the retirement age and encourages a more intensive job search by older unemployed workers (Hairault et al., 2010). Fisher et al. (2016) examine how retirement timing is related to the consequences of some critical factors in terms of individual, family, work, and sociocultural factors.

2.1.5 Factors Affecting the Decision to Extend the Working Life

The public pension system rules and the effects of macro-level institutional pull, push, and retention factors could contribute to the effective retirement age of older workers in 15 OECD countries from 1992 to 2010 Kuitto and Helmdag (2021). In the study of competencies for extending working life in Poland, the author argues for lifelong learning and the competencies of people aged 50+ are more important than their formal education (Wiktorowicz, 2018).

Nilsson et al. (2011) focus on factors affecting the decision to extend the working life, such as mental health, physical work environment, work pace, and skills, which are associated with the can outcome, and reasons such as, work is an integral part of life, working time, and the management attitude toward older workers, whcih are associated with want to outcome.

2.1.6 Older Employees' Intention to Continue Paid Work

Shacklock and Brunetto (2011) investigated the notion of "older workers' intentions to continue paid working" using the meaning of working (MOW) model to analyze data collected through a cross-sectional, survey-based, self-report strategy. Shacklock et al. (2009) investigated the impact of certain work-related variables, such as flexibility and interests outside of work, etc., on older workers' intentions to continue paid work, varying between men and women. Bonsdorff et al. (2009) examine the concept of bridge employment from a continuity theory and a life course perspective, investigating several employees' intentions of full retirement or engagement in bridge employment. In their study, Loretto & White (2006) find that many older employees expected to continue working, but various barriers frustrated those expectations, especially over-rigidity in employers' approaches.

2.2 Theoretical Approach: Theory of Continuity

This section presents continuity theory to understand the phenomena better. During the COVID-19 and post-pandemic, employers have no early retirement or encouragement policies to continue work. According to this study, older employees willingly continue their jobs due to a sense of belongingness reason, not economic reasons. Thus, the theoretical lens of continuity is relevant to this study.

2.2.1 Continuity Theory

Atchley's (1989) continuity theory, a theory of social gerontology, holds that people in the workplace attempt to maintain existing internal and external structures of working life. They use strategies connected with their past experiences of themselves and their social world to achieve this aim. The basis of this theory is that older people want to enjoy increased psychological well-being in retirement as a similar lifestyle they previously enjoyed. Thus, continuity is an impressive strategy of institutionalization. As individuals grow older, they are predisposed to maintaining continuity in their habits, associations, choices, etc. (ibid). Therefore, continuity can be either internal or external.

- Internal continuity that requires memory can be related to intrinsic issues such as ideas, affect, experiences, preferences, and skills, and
- External continuity can be related to physical and social environments, role relationships, and activities resulting from extrinsic factors of familiar settings and people.

Internal and external continuity help older adults keep their strengths and minimize the effects of deficits as normal aging occurs. Atchley (1989) reviewed several past studies and found a great deal of continuity in skills, roles, relationships, environments, and activities over periods of the everyday lives of older adults in their 50s, 60s, and 70s.

Pushkar et al. (2010) tested the continuity theory to examine positive affect (PA) and negative affect (NA) when older adults choose to work what they enjoy while limiting their involvement in less critical activities and how psychological well-being is correlated with finding meaning in their actions.

This study utilizes continuity theory, a theory of social gerontology, which means *'the scientific study of old age and its effects on the body'*. Furthermore, it has three propositions with regards to the associations between individual characteristics and the social structure/roles: (a) since the people's resources and abilities increase, the ability to continue in social roles increases; (b) while the restrictiveness of the social structure falls, the ability of older people to maintain and continue desired social roles increases; and (c) people with the most satisfying and desired social roles are unlikely to want to relinquish these roles (Covey, 1981). These propositions are consistent with this study's unit of analysis. Thus, in this research, older employees' intentions to continue to work even beyond retirement age are compatible with Atchley's (1989) continuity theory.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Approach and Context of the Case

This study adopts qualitative interview data analysis (Flick, 2014) because it helps discover the issues in practice. This study conducts 17 interviews with HR professionals via Zoom meetings to explore the phenomena. However, the specific research questions (such as RQ1 and RQ2) may not support adopting quantitative methods, such as the questionnaire survey data. Moreover, survey data give only some factors and their relationships to each other. Like this study, case studies (Flyvbjerg, 2006) provide context-sensitive data.

This study's case covers 12 universities (n=12) purposively selected from the Swedish higher education sector, the whole sector as a case. The organizations were anonymous, and the primary function was to provide higher education services, which were homogeneous. The organizational size ranged from below 1,000 to around 6,500 employees. Regarding gender mix, the employees of two-thirds of organizations were balanced. In the case of the age mix, in over two-thirds of organizations, the majority were aged 40, i.e., the age mix was balanced along with employees over 55 years.

Why doesn't this study select private firms as case organizations? The chosen past studies did not cover public-sector organizations like public universities. Moreover, through conducting two pilot interviews, it was found that university employees can continue their research for a longer time. Furthermore, there was better access to university participants selection by contacting the author of this study's known HR colleagues.

3.2 Data Collection Strategy

3.2.1 Participants' Selection and Profile

This study uses purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Bryman & Bell, 2011) to select interview participants. The author of this study initially visited the websites of case organizations to search for potential participants. Then looked at the LinkedIn profile of people who came up, what employment they continue, and how long. To encourage more participants, this study uses word-of-mouth peer recommendations.

This study initially emailed around 40 potential participants with a formal invitation containing an information letter comprising the study's purpose and overview. Then, follow-up emails, phone calls, and follow-up calls were made, and finally, this study got 17 responses, so the response rate is around 50%. Seven interviewees from each of the seven organizations and two interviews from each of the five organizations have been conducted to get a total of 17 interview datasets. Among the participants, there were 11 women and six men. The participants were aged between 33 and 67. Most participants were between 50 and 59 years old, and fewer were below 40 and above 60.

This study selected 17 HR professionals, comprising seven HR managers, five HR specialists, three HR consultants, and two HR officers, due to their outstanding career progress and excellent background in the HR field. The participants have longer HR managerial work experiences and specialized knowledge in HR strategy work, mainly dealing with HR and work environment questions.

3.2.2 Interview Process

This study conducted two pilot interviews to get a good pre-understanding of the study's topic, which helped to revise the interview guide for the study. The semi-structured interview guide mainly entails how HR professionals view older employees' intentions to continue their working life. Besides introductory general and concluding reflection questions, the semi-structured questions also cover what continuity strategies organizations would apply concerning their older employees.

After finalizing the confirmation of each interview participant, this study completed the interviews through a digital platform like Zoom video meetings. The interviews lasted around 1 hour. With permission, zoom video records would later ensure some specific details through the non-verbal expressions of the respondents.

3.3 Data Analysis Strategy

This study transcribed the interview recordings, then coded them, and thematically (manually) analyzed the empirical data (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Flick, 2014; Charmaz, 2014). Firstly, the interview video recordings were watched. Secondly, the responses were classified, tabulated, and summarized. Thirdly, this study decides which information is relevant to this study.

This study uses a code structure under the hierarchical coding process to get themes and ideas addressing the focused codes and initial codes hierarchically. Empirical qualitative data have been interpreted using individual quotes within the texts to highlight the main findings in the results section. Regarding variations in empirical data, this study looks for variations in the answers/responses between the different case organizations and participants. However, this study does not find any variations.

This study analyses the empirical data using the theoretical lens of Atchley's (1989) internal and external continuity approaches. Internal continuity focuses on using ideas, affect, experiences, preferences, and skills in the job process. However, external continuity focuses on the continuation of enjoyment of either physical and social environments or role relationships and activities in employment in later life, which result from extrinsic factors of familiar settings and familiar people.

3.4 Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

This study ensures ethical considerations regarding voluntary participation, non-disclosure, anonymity, and confidentiality (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Flick, 2014; Charmaz, 2014) using the information letter and consent to participate form. This study keeps materials such as interview recordings, transcriptions, and coding draft sheets locked away. The interview guide has been developed based on the findings of the pilot interviews at the beginning of this research process. Another measure to increase the study's reliability was conducting the pilot interview with HR professionals within the private and public sector organizations. Moreover, all responses the participants provide are subjective.

3.4.1 Statement of Ethical Approval

The author declares that ethical issues during the research process have been ensured. The author takes appropriate initiatives to protect the privacy and rights of interview participants.

4. Empirical Results

In line with the research question (RQ1), the study summarizes the HR professionals' experiences on the older employees' intentions to continue their working contracts beyond the official retirement age. The results have been generalized by studying twelve organizations in the sectoral case, the public

universities of Sweden. In Sweden, the official retirement age is over 65 years for both males and females. Sometimes, it is 67, and after 67 with the extended agreement, it gets temporary appointments for males, females, and all professions. Some aging researchers work up to more than 80 years of age with passion, whereas the official retirement age in Sweden, specifically in the public sector, is 65 years. Most interview participants reported almost the same information in this regard. One of them is explained in the quote: *"Sometimes people never leave as researchers up to around the 80s, but commonly people go about 63 to 68 years of age, but most people try to stay longer even without full benefits, just for research interest. Furthermore, the official retirement age is 65 (HR-manager-1).*

In light of how thematic coding analysis is carried out, this study presents a code structure consisting of initial coding, focused coding, and responses as evidence to get themes and ideas to answer the research questions. For more clarification, this study first interprets empirical data of each sub-head within this section of empirical results. Then, in the next section, to answer the research question, RQ2, this study analyzes the empirical results from internal and external continuity perspectives.

4.1 Code Structure: Hierarchical Coding

Experiences of HR professionals regarding reasons behind why aging employees continue working after retirement

Regular situation and continuing working

Continuing work creates a strong feeling of identification

- Aged people love attractive work
- Senior people think work is their life
- Older people think continuing work gives them some satisfaction
- Regular contributions stimulate continuing work

Attractive work and its features in late working life

- The longer they work, the more pension they get
- Attractive work stipulates their free time to concentrate on work
- Though more money and if they do not like the job, they will not continue
- Academics' job is sometimes not boring

Self-encouragement to retire at the delay

- Retire at the delay; it is up to older employees
- Employers encourage qualified older employees to continue working
- During the pandemic, retirement is expected as usual."
- Every employee has the right to make their own decision

The pandemic situation and continuing working

Self-gratification reason rather than economic behind why retired people may go back to work even during and after the COVID-19 pandemic

- It is not any different during the COVID-19
- their strong research interest in their field
- It is no economic or contribution reason; it is more their self-gratification.
- Retired people go back to work even in the pandemic and post-pandemic due to their driving forces.

No early retirement, even during a pandemic and post-pandemic

- Even during the pandemic, no early retirement
- No retired early due to pandemic issue
- No downsize due to the pandemic
- Downsizing is due to funding research projects
- Spouse retires a bit early, so older employees also retire early

4.2 Interpretation of Empirical Data Thematically

4.2.1 Intense Feeling of Identification and Personal Reasons Stimulates Senior Employees to Continue Working Beyond Retirement Age.

The older employees continue working after retirement age due to several reasons such as a) enjoying work, b) regular contributions stimulate continuing work, c) senior employees feel that work is part of their life, d) features of attractive work, and e) having benefited from work. While discussing with the interview participants, it is argued that almost all senior people within the organizations of Swedish universities continue working beyond the official retirement age because they feel strong identification. Most older employees within the university are researchers and do not want to retire early; instead, they stay longer, even more than retirement age. Moreover, people continue to work beyond the official retirement age because they love their job, this is their life, and this is their hobby, and if they continue their work, it gives them some satisfaction. One participant reported that senior researchers in HEI love their work in the quote in Table 2.

Table 2.

How Continued Working as a Feeling of Social Identity

Response	Initial coding	Focused coding
<i>[...] if some researchers are working on a research project with funding, when retirement age is 65, and they need two or more years ahead, they continue, and after that, if they want to continue, they do so with a special agreement. In this case, they are very dedicated to the administration and stay longer because they love their work. The personal reasons include feelings of contribution that they last longer and work until a later age (Work environment-specialist-3).</i>	● Aged people love attractive work. ● Senior people think work is their life. ● Older people think continuing work gives them some satisfaction. ● Regular contributions stimulate continuing work.	Continuing working as a feeling of social identity

Source: Data analysis thematically by the author

4.2.2 How Attractive the Work in the Extended Working Life

It is argued that some employees have exciting working lives and do not want to leave the organization. They contribute to the university beyond the official retirement age. Nevertheless, it is argued that in the case of administrative work, retired people return to work part-time because of their passion. Respondents' responses have been coded in Table 3.

Table 3.

How Attractive Work as a Reason for Continuing Working in Late Life

Response	Initial coding	Focused coding
One participant explained this in the quote: <i>[...] Some senior employees are dedicated to working with the job and would like to continue. They continue working with economic questions of the longer they work, the more pension they get [...]</i> (HR-consultant-13).	The longer they work, the more pension they get	Attractive work and its features in late working life
However, some older employees think differently, which makes sense from the explanation of one participant in the quote: <i>[...] they continue their working life mainly because they enjoy it. They want to stimulate their free time to concentrate on work; for example, if an</i>	Attractive work stipulates their free time to concentrate on work	

organization offers more money but does not like the job, they will not continue. (HR-specialist-4).

Furthermore, regarding how different the attitudes are between academicians vs. administrators, an HR manager argues in the quote: "Some academia-like professors continue their working beyond official retirement age because their work is their life. Moreover, their job is sometimes not boring compared to administrators' job, so they want to continue, whereas administrators do not want to." (HR-manager-16).

Though more money and if they do not like the job, they will not continue

Academicians' job is sometimes not boring

Source: Data analysis thematically by the author

4.2.3 Older Employees are not Encouraged to Retire at the Delay; it is up to Them.

The older employees are not encouraged by employers to continue their work up to late retirement age, but indirectly, they have been encouraged towards the attractive work. Moreover, experiences and knowledge are essential for the organization. Employers need help transferring knowledge and experience to younger colleagues, so that is one reason they (employers) ask them (older employees) to stay longer. Otherwise, when the older employees see that they could contribute and if they are interested in their respective field of research, as long as that ambition is aligned with the organization's goals, the employers do not interfere. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, older employees have to decide whether to delay retirement or not. Respondents' responses have been coded in Table 4.

Table 4.

How Self-encouragement is a Reason for Retirement Delay

Response	Initial coding	Focused coding
One respondent expressed the encouragement issue in the quote: [...], we have not asked the employees to retire at the delay; it is up to them. [...] If they attract research funding, they usually stay on after retirement, but they can often connect to get research funds. [...] (HR-specialist-2). Another participant said the quote: "We have not encouraged any particular senior employees to delay their retirement, but we could encourage qualified older employees to continue their working lives [...]" (HR-officer-5)	Retire at the delay; it is up to older employees. Employers encourage qualified older employees to continue working.	Self-encouragement as a reason to retire at the delay
One respondent expressed this in the quote: "No, older employees have not been encouraged to delay their retirement during the pandemic; it is normal as usual" (HR-coordinator-6). Another HR professional explained this issue in the quote: "No, we could not push anyone to do anything even to delay their retirement; every employee has the right to make their own decision in their own way and as per their interest" (HR-partner-11).	During the pandemic, retirement is expected as usual" Every employee has the right to make their own decision	

Source: Data analysis thematically by the author

4.2.4 Self-gratification Reason Rather than Economic Reasons Behind why Retired People may go back to Work even During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

Retired people who returned to work during the COVID-19 and post-pandemic periods for economic reasons or wished to contribute. By understanding HR professionals' experiences, it is clear that during Corona's post-pandemic work world, employers and employees do not see any differences from before;

everything is the same. Senior employees within the higher education sector are dedicated to the research work. These people are usually seniors who have been performing their research for 40 years, sometimes 50 years. Moreover, if retired senior employees feel competent, have goodwill, and want to contribute to the university, they return to work even during and after the pandemic. Respondents' responses have been coded in Table 5

Table 5.

How Self-gratification Reasons Dominate the Economic Reasons to Continue Work even During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

Response	Initial coding	Focused coding
One participant explained this in the quote: <i>"Retired people may typically go back to work as they want to work and love to work as they are interested in contributing to yield. It is not any different during the COVID-19 pandemic and then post-pandemic times."</i> (HR-coordinator-6).	It is not any different during the COVID-19.	Self-gratification reason rather than economic behind why retired people may go back to work even during and after the COVID-19 pandemic
One respondent expressed this fact in the quote: <i>"Retired people want to continue their work due to their strong research interest in their field, so, it is no economic reason or contribution reason, it is more their self-gratification or self-actualization reason"</i> (HR-officer-5).	It is no economic or contribution reason; it is more their self-gratification.	
One explanation by one interview participant in the quote: <i>"I think that retired people go back to work even in the pandemic and post-pandemic due to their driving forces, such as their curiosity and interest in engagement in position to contribute rather than economic reason."</i> (HR-partner-11).	Retired people return to work even in the pandemic and post-pandemic due to their driving forces.	

Source: Data analysis thematically by the author

4.2.5 There is no Early Retirement During a Pandemic and Post-pandemic, which Indicates that Older Employees Want to Continue Work.

In most organizations, there are rare cases where people retire early; in the universities, most research is funded by external money, not governmental money. Sometimes, when the researchers lose the project, they do not get the funding. As a result, they discontinue work. It makes sense that the pandemic does not affect retirement decisions among senior employees, and older employees continue working up to late retirement age. Recently, many organizations have been using research funding for COVID-19 research. Overall, it is observed that older employees continue working until late retirement age. However, if they want a good retirement and have a good time with their family, they retire early, but the number of employees, in this case, is few. Respondents' responses have been coded in Table 6.

Table 6.

How the Pandemic is not a Reason to Retire Early

Response	Initial coding	Focused coding
When it comes to the question regarding the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic, one participant directly said the quote: <i>"During the pandemic and even post-pandemic, no early retirement."</i> (HRD-consultant-7).	Even during the pandemic, no early retirement	No early retirement, even during a pandemic and post-pandemic
One respondent further explained how the pandemic has no effect on retirement decisions in the quote: <i>"No, we do not have"</i>	No retired early due to pandemic issue	

any employees who have retired early due to pandemic issues." (HR-officer-5).

One respondent has addressed the issue of downsizing and pandemics in the quote: *If we have to downsize, we could remain senior employees due to Swedish employment protection regulations, but really, we have not decreased due to the pandemic.* (HR-officer-5). Another participant reacted to this issue with the quote: *"Downsizing, yes, downsizing is mainly due to funding research projects."* (Work environment-specialist-3).

The respondent explained the family reason for early retirement in the quote below: *[...] 50% of employees retire at 67 years, and the rest retire around 63 or 64. So, the most common reason for this early retirement is because their spouse retires early, so they also retire a bit early.* (HR-manager-8).

No downsize due to the pandemic

Downsizing is due to funding research projects.

Spouse retires a bit early, so older employees also retire early

Source: Data analysis thematically by the author

5. Data Analysis From a Continuity Perspective

In line with the purpose of the study and specifically research question two, RQ2, this study analyzes empirical findings from a continuity standpoint. In this case, the university professors or the researchers continue their research work as they want to tackle Society's challenges and change culture with diverse new knowledge and perspectives. In these circumstances, organizations help older people maintain continuity in their habits and preferences of doing work like other social people. Because both internal and external continuity help them maintain their strengths and minimize the adverse effects of challenging working life as the average aging career occurs. The data analysis using the theoretical lens of internal and external continuity (Atchley, 1989) is precisely presented in Figure 1.

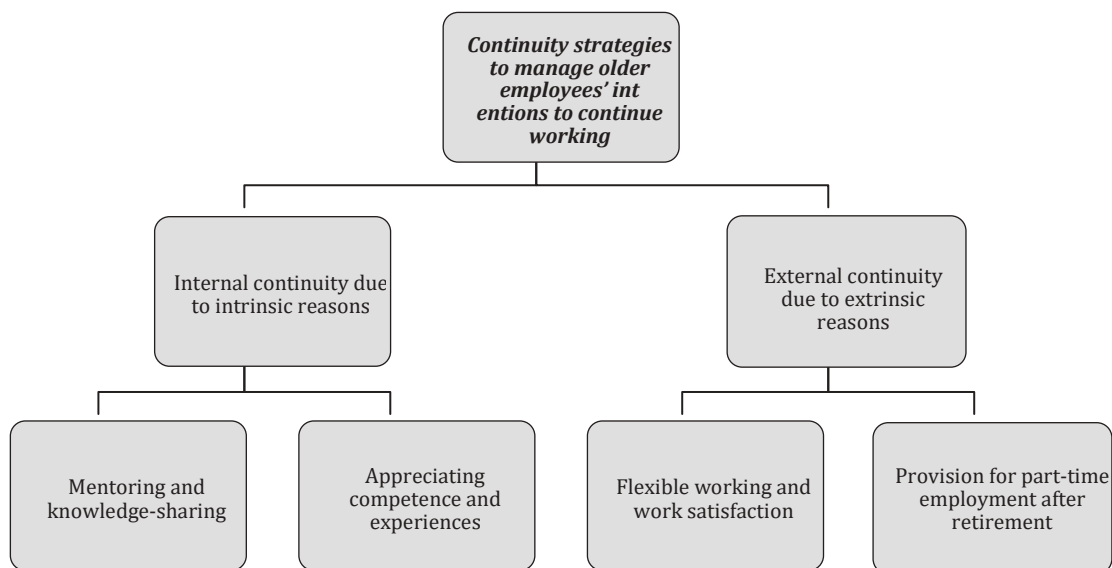


Figure 1.

A summary of the data analysis using the theoretical lens of internal and external continuity (Atchley, 1989).

Source: Empirical data analysis thematically using continuity theory by the author

5.1 Internal Continuity Strategies That Address Retirees' Intrinsic Issues

The empirical data shows that older employees want to be active in their careers by keeping their memory busy. They must consider intrinsic issues such as ideas, experiences, preferences, and skills. The best way is to continue working for a more extended time by getting support from the organization. To ensure the internal continuity of older employees' work experiences and skills, this study argues for two approaches that case organizations adopt: a) a mentoring and knowledge-sharing program and b) a competence and experiences appreciation program.

5.1.1 Mentorship Program: There is an informal mentoring program in the workplace of the case organizations, which is like a formal system where older adults have a lot of experience and knowledge to advise and help other younger adults prepare them for work. Considering this, the employers try to formulate a working group combining older or more senior persons with younger or less aged persons to ensure outcomes. The authority tries to facilitate this mentorship by campaigning a positive mindset. Moreover, the employers do not count the hours the working group delivers. Instead, they focus on what they provide: the freedom and support for sharing and transferring knowledge and expertise from one group to another. Enjoying freedom is possible when the older employees continue working for longer. As a result, older adults can utilize their earned knowledge, skills, and experiences through such type of mentorship, and subsequently, their memory would be active. Moreover, as younger adults gradually age, they are predisposed to maintaining continuity in their idea generation, innovation, skills, and competence development. It is an iterative and recurring process of continuity from age to generation.

5.1.2 Appreciating Competence and Experiences: this study's case organizations' working environment is characterized by a research environment. When researchers publish their scientific contributions in top-ranked journals, funding organizations recognize and value them. However, if they bring research funds, they are welcome because universities do not spend government research funds for those over 67 ages of their senior employees. When valuing and respecting senior employees, the interview participants argued for and pointed out that competence and academic experiences are very appreciated. It is argued that the longer they work, the more they know and are skilled. Therefore, organizations could give more benefits, including pension benefits, to people working longer. Overall, while the employers appreciate the older employees and their contributions, this would act as an organizational facility to support continued work. As appreciation makes people happy, more senior employees' memory would be active until late old age when they would be less capable of continuing their work.

5.2 External Continuity Strategies Due to Retirees' Familiar Work Environments and Role Relationships With Their Friendly Colleagues as Extrinsic

When analyzing empirical data, it is interpreted that older employees prefer to work with familiar people within the typical work environments during old age. The best way to benefit from extrinsic factors within their role relationships and activities is to continue working for a longer time. To ensure the *external continuity* of retirees' familiar work environments, this study also argues for two strategies that case organizations adopt: a) sufficient facilities for flexible working and work satisfaction and b) provision for part-time employment after retirement.

5.2.1 Facilities for Flexible Working and Work Satisfaction for senior employees are a) they have the freedom to decide their work schedule, and b) they work as little as they can to balance the workload adjusted with their age and health condition. These adaptation facilities prepare older adults to enjoy increased psychological well-being in retirement. Then, they feel satisfied with their continued work after retirement, similar to their previous enjoyable working life. Perhaps older adults in the organizations still need an official employment agreement, usually called Professor Emeritus. Still, the employers give them opportunities to use the facilities to have a room, computer, access to the library, etc. As a distinctive facility, some organizations have a particular house for senior professors and senior staff members. This study argues that the minor component of the work environment is the

individual, either older or younger, and each individual has different means. Hence, organizations have a baseline for the work environment. This extrinsic factor stimulates more senior employees to maintain external continuity in their preferences for working life activities.

5.2.2 Provision for Part-time Employment After Retirement: It is interpreted that employers facilitate continued work for some senior employees by offering part-time employment facilities after retirement and allowing a leave of absence to adapt to the working hours. The organizations also facilitate the continued work of older employees by providing, for instance, a part-time pension package. Logically, universities should have a default or official retirement age of 65 years for both males and females in our organizations. This study has found that sometimes the retirement age is 67 or 68; older adults must undergo a special employment agreement after that period. Moreover, it gets temporary appointments for both males and females and all professions. Some aging researchers work with a passion for over 80 years of age. Therefore, the part-time employment provision can give older employees back at least their everyday working life and familiar colleagues during the late-career stage. Because aging people naturally feel comfortable with ordinary people. As a result, to contribute to society's development, they have a passion for continuing their respective work; in our case, it is research and teaching. This study argues that older adults' identity and self-concept do not differ significantly before and after retirement as they engage in the same activities, similar to Gobeski and Beehr's (2009) study. Moreover, this study's empirical data interpretation also argues that older employees choose to work what they enjoy; it does not matter that they are part-time employees, similar to Pushkar et al.'s (2010) study. Nevertheless, it is true that since the part-time employment provision could limit their involvement in less important activities, their psychological well-being increases. These outside dimensions encourage older employees to maintain external continuity in their employability.

6. Discussion

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

Unlike Öylü et al. (2023), Grødem & Kitterød (2022), Jonsson et al. (2020), and Frøyland and Terjesen's (2020) studies, this study investigates how Nordic older workers continue their work in late working life exploiting opportunities and tackling obstacles to the retention of older workers on an organizational level. Like Shacklock and Brunetto (2011), this study investigated older workers' intentions to continue working. Moreover, Shacklock and Brunetto's (2011) study examines work-related variables, such as flexibility, importance, and interests outside of work, management, and organizational factors (supervision, bureaucracy, and the work environment). However, this study argues for a) mentoring and knowledge sharing program, b) a competence and experiences appreciation program, c) providing sufficient facilities for work satisfaction and d) establishing part-time employment after retirement- as the continuity strategies to manage older employees. Shacklock et al. (2009) investigated the impact of certain work-related variables on older workers' intentions to continue paid work, which varied between men and women. However, this study examined why retired people may return to work during the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic time. This study argues for flexible working and work satisfaction within remote working during the pandemic, irrespective of gender. This study argues that there is no early retirement during a pandemic, which indicates older employees' continuity for a longer time.

Bonsdorff et al.'s (2009) study examined several employees' intentions of full retirement or engagement in bridge employment from a continuity theory and life course perspective. In contrast, from a continue theory perspective, this study studied older employees' preferences to continue the more extended working contracts with employers beyond retirement. Loretto and White (2006) focused on the expectations of many older employees. Similarly, this study concentrated on why older people continue to work and found that they love their job; this is their life, and if they continue their work, it gives them some satisfaction. In contrast, this study did not focus on barriers that hinder older

employees' extended working life. Kuitto and Helmdag's (2021) study examines the effects of macro-level institutional pull, push, and retention factors on the effective retirement age of older workers.

Wiktorowicz (2018), in his quantitative study, emphasizes the relevance of different competencies of people aged 50 are more important than their formal education for extending working life. This study highlights that retired people return to work even during the pandemic because of driving forces rather than lifelong learning, which has been addressed by Wiktorowicz (2018). Nilsson et al.'s (2011) study argues that the 'can' outcome is associated with a mental health work environment, work pace, and skills. However, the 'want to' outcome is associated with factors such as working time and the management attitude of older workers. This study critically reflects on the 'want to' outcome of Nilsson et al.'s (2011) study.

This study does not choose Cumming et al.'s (1960) disengagement theory because it focuses on retirees' identity changes and essentially withdraws from pre-retirement life and society. Atchley's (1989) theory of continuity argues that though there are changes in the circumstances of retirees' lives, many aspects of older adults' working lives remain the same as they previously enjoyed. Their identity and self-concept do not differ significantly pre- and post-retirement. Moreover, many older people still engage in the same activities, including working similar jobs (Gobeski & Beehr, 2009). None of the two theories (Dawis et al.'s (1964) work adjustment theory and Atchley's (1989) continuity theory) consider the retirement-as-career stage. However, both approaches focus on older employees' retirement choices (Lytle et al., 2015).

However, this study considers how employers facilitate the continued working of older employees. This study firstly brings the higher education sector into the hub through a qualitative thematic analysis of the perceptions of HR professionals for older employees from a continuity perspective. This study contributes to previous literature about how HR practices as continuity strategies can only help older workers extend their working lives regardless of occupational status or age (Hennekam & Herrbach, 2015). Moreover, retirement age issues extend older employees' working lives (Axelrad & Mahoney, 2017; Baruch et al., 2014). This study contributes to intrinsic issues such as ideas, experiences, preferences, and skills. This study also contributes to an external continuity that entails factors of familiar settings and familiar people (Atchley, 1989).

In this study, the HR professionals' story is central, which formalizes the best continuity strategies for managing older employees. Secondly, many of the past studies on retirement timing and job searching by older unemployed workers (Hairault et al., 2010); (Kuitto & Helmdag, 2021; Nilsson et al., 2011) showed that reasons behind extending the working life quantitative data analysis. This study tries to analyze the understanding of the HR professionals' experiences on older employees' intentions to extend their working life and associated continuity strategies organizations would apply concerning their older employees. Finally, this study contributes to knowledge of organizational HR practices within continuity strategies relating to aging employees, i.e., 'age management' (Arman et al., 2022).

6.2 Implications for Practice

The identified continuity strategies are achievable and measurable for organizations. Thus, HR practitioners would directly benefit from realizing the importance of strategizing to manage older employees and support them regarding their extended working life beyond the retirement age. In addition, senior employees at the workplace can also take support from the HR continuity strategies described in our case study. This study significantly contributed through empirical evidence to support and develop the older community of society who sometimes face age inequality issues. At the same time, they continue their working life beyond 55+ years and even beyond retirement age from a sense of belongingness but not for economic reasons. Therefore, this study reflected on the social sustainability of working life.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Major Findings

The older employees want to continue working beyond the official retirement age of 65 as they can enjoy work and feel work is part of their life. They can also fix flexible work schedules, have attractive work features, and their regular contributions stimulate continuing work for a longer time. Even during COVID-19 and post-pandemic, retired people go back to work for reasons other than economic, mainly because they wish to contribute. Moreover, it is found that during a pandemic and post-pandemic, there is no early retirement in the majority of the organizations, which indicates that older employees do not continue in any way or that the pandemic does not affect downsizing. Besides, their employers only encourage older employees to continue their work in their late retirement age. They decide by themselves until and unless there are unavoidable circumstances, for example, illness or family reasons.

The internal and external continuity strategies help older employees be active during retirement age as normal aging allows. The organizations facilitate the continued work of retired people through a) mentoring and knowledge-sharing programs, b) competence and experiences appreciation programs, c) providing sufficient facilities for flexible working and work satisfaction, and d) establishing provision for part-time employment after retirement. These measures and initiatives are consistent with age management because these approaches can support managing old aging issues and older employees' late careers. Moreover, as the younger employees gradually grow older, they are predisposed to maintain continuity in their skills and competence development over working with their mentors, the older employees.

These findings contribute to previous studies by bringing the higher education sector into the business hub of HR professionals' views within organization studies. Finally, this study adds to the HRM literature on the conditions for age management and sustainable working life from a continuity perspective.

7.2 Limitations of the Study

This study needs to include more variations of interview data as it interviewed mainly HR professionals within homogeneous organizations where the nature of the activities is homogenous in the HEIs sector. Although these categories of participants, including top management, line managers, union representatives, and regular aging employees, are experts in answering the research questions, they would have given us a more holistic view. However, the number of interview participants (n=17) is comparatively low.

7.3 Future Research Direction

During the study process, it was noticed that organizations consider the right competence and skills rather than the retirement issue. Thus, an exciting topic for future research would be how the competence of aging employees affects talent calibration at the workplace. Since this study noticed that senior employees could play active roles as mentors for their younger counterparts and develop their skills, it would be interesting to study what age management strategies support older employees in improving their skills and how.

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