

A More Effective Social Protection System for Older Workers: A Case Study of the Older Adult Employment Project in Thailand

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Abstract

The phenomenon of old-age pensioners reentering the workforce is neither new nor unique and has been well-reported in several published literature. However, there are remaining challenges to this group of job seekers whose needs have yet to be well-documented from employer's perspectives, especially regarding decent work, legal landscape, and organizational culture. Our study seeks to provide a better understanding of the underlying causes of these and to help policymakers introduce social protection policies to create a more welcoming and supportive environment for older workers. The study used a case study from service companies in Thailand that participated in the Thai government's campaign on promoting older employment. Data was collected from interviews with top managers of the human resources department, and that information was analyzed by thematic analysis. Key findings highlighted that the supportive mechanisms for matching decent work, a room for integrating legal framework, and a culture that values inclusivity and fair treatment of all workers, regardless of age, can enhance the social protection system for older workers. The establishment of a modern database of older workers' skills, which ensures easy accessibility to both employers and older workers, the establishment of a task force specific for monitoring laws and regulations concerning older employment, and the development of effective measures against workplace discrimination are recommended as effective interventions for social protection.

Keywords

Decent work; older employment; older worker; social protection; workplace

Introduction

There have been numerous reports on the increasing number of older adults reentering the labor market in post-retirement, and these workers can provide needed contributions to the economy thanks to the tremendous experience they can bring to the table. In response to this phenomenon, government leaders worldwide have been urged to create working environments suitable for an aging population (Asavanirandorn et al., 2023; Handley & den Outer, 2021; Noone et al., 2018). However, the success of these programs is often limited due to several critical issues related to employing older adults in the workforce that remain unresolved (Cook et al., 2019; Yuan et al., 2022). These include but are not limited to inadequate remuneration (Been & van Vliet, 2018), age discrimination (Jecker, 2022), and disregard for their safety (Varianou-Mikellidou et al., 2019).

Governments have created social protection policies that suit the needs of older workers to address these issues (Neumark et al., 2019; van Dalen & Henkens, 2019). These policies strive to provide a conducive and inclusive atmosphere for older employees by ensuring they receive the same rights and benefits as their younger colleagues. They also symbolize the employer's recognition and appreciation of their older employees. In addition, these plans can uplift their morale and mental health in the labor market, especially in an economy based on market competition (Pechdin et al., 2023; van Dalen & Henkens, 2019). This can create a more inviting atmosphere for older people, as they are no longer seen solely as an economic asset but as valuable members of society blessed with distinctive skills and experience that benefit their employer (Fishman, 2016; Gonzales et al., 2015).

Nonetheless, research on building social protection policies for older workers is limited (Egdell et al., 2020; Kooij et al., 2020; Truxillo et al., 2015). Most of the research in this field has been on retirement security, but there is a lack of focus on fostering a supportive and inclusive work environment for older workers. Although some studies suggest that employer attitudes, human resource management focus, and moral obligations can increase the adoption of inclusive employment policies for older workers (Loretto & White, 2006; Midtsundstad, 2011), these studies often focus on individual workers' perspectives. This perspective alone does not provide sufficient evidence to develop actionable recommendations for governments, mainly because other research highlights the complexity of employer attitudes and underscores the need for holistic approaches and new national strategies to tackle age discrimination and improve employment practices, especially in developing countries. Numerous studies have found that the promotion of inclusive employment policies for older workers is often influenced by employers' perceptions and their ability to comply with national policies (Egdell et al., 2020; Kooij et al., 2020). This challenges governments in these countries to foster an age-friendly workplace environment for older workers if they fail to consider employers' perspectives (Kooij et al., 2020). Therefore, revealing these difficulties is crucial for developing countries to formulate effective policies encouraging older workers' employment and mitigating age-based challenges.

In this study, we focused on employers' perspectives on employing older workers, using Thailand as a case study. As a developing country, Thailand is experiencing a significant demographic shift: the percentage of people 65 and above is expected to rise from 13% in 2020 to 26.2% by 2024 (United Nations, 2024). As this is an enormous shift in the country's demography, the Royal Thai government has implemented several return-to-work programs to promote the employment of workers who are over 55 years of age, which is the first year

of retirement per Thailand laws, as an attempt to mitigate labor shortages in domestic production (Asavanirandorn et al., 2022). While the country's framework for old-age support has been widely praised and used as a model for other countries, Thailand still reported multiple challenges in its efforts to protect older workers, such as job mismatching in new older employees, conflicts in legal protections for older workers as well as generational differences of perceptions for older employment (Asavanirandorn et al., 2020). Therefore, the underlying causes of these difficulties could be a lesson learned for developing effective protection policies that best support older workers in Thailand and countries that face similar labor market settings.

Literature review: Critical issues in older employment

The rise in the world population's median age is an undeniable trend that significantly impacts the global labor force. This presents challenges and opportunities for employers, older workers, and policymakers. In this section, we aimed to identify critical challenges employers face when employing older people, including their employability and access to decent work, the need for an inclusive legal framework, the elimination of age discrimination, and the creation of an organizational culture that supports and welcomes older workers.

Firstly, as employers began to take notice of the increasing presence of older adults in the workforce, there is a dire need to provide working conditions tailored to this age group's unique preferences so that they are given decent work that meets their needs and expectations. Generally, decent work encapsulates individuals' hopes for their professional lives (Ghai, 2003). This entails engaging in productive tasks that yield a fair income, ensuring workplace stability and social protections for everyone, fostering avenues for personal growth and societal inclusion, and allowing individuals to voice their opinions, organize, and play a role in decisions impacting their lives. Furthermore, it emphasizes providing equal opportunities and fair treatment for all workers.

Older workers in the workforce for a prolonged period frequently prefer stability and familiarity when continuing work after retirement (Wong & Tetrick, 2017). However, some may opt for tasks that are more challenging to keep their minds engaged and have a sense of accomplishment (Asavanirandorn et al., 2022; Musich et al., 2018; Sewdas et al., 2017). This particular group typically takes on roles different from their previous employment and is often willing to tackle demanding tasks that require problem-solving and critical thinking (Sewdas et al., 2017). In their regard, flexibility is the most crucial factor, allowing them to adjust their work schedules to suit any physical or health limitations (Principi et al., 2020). However, employers are often reluctant to provide suitable tasks to older workers when time and financial constraints become significant considerations. In this case, older applicants' work preferences are not considered when employers make decisions (Beehr & Bennett, 2015; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013). This can lead to a disparity between the desires of older workers and the job provided, resulting in decreased productivity, absenteeism, and dissatisfaction (Bartoll & Ramos, 2020; Eurofound et al., 2012). One possible solution that has been discussed is the development of an easily accessible online job database tailored to the needs of older people (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA] & HelpAge International, 2012) that can help older workers find jobs more suited to their skills and experience. Simultaneously, it also allows employers to quickly identify specific preferences or limitations regarding their career prospects, thereby increasing the effectiveness of human resource management.

Secondly, the lack of inclusive and comprehensive legal frameworks that address the specific needs of this age group has also been a critical issue (Carney, 2015; Spencer, 2013). Although many countries have laws and policies that provide legal protection for workers in general, these often do not take into account the unique challenges and needs of older workers (Spencer, 2013) and are mainly the results of ineffective collaboration between respective government agencies (Chhotray & Stoker, 2009; Innes & Booher, 2010; Sullivan & Skelcher, 2017). When the agencies of the same government do not have common purposes or aims, it can be difficult for them to work together effectively, particularly when they have different mandates or levels of authority (Chhotray & Stoker, 2009). Moreover, the lack of trust between agencies can challenge the collaboration among government agencies (Head, 2008; Innes & Booher, 2010; Wagenaar, 2014). For example, one agency may not trust that another agency will fulfill its responsibilities or share its information, and it may be hesitant to work with them to produce practical results (Head, 2008; Kim & Kreps, 2020). Additionally, if these agencies do not have adequate resources to carry out the collaboration, it is unlikely to be successful, especially if the associated costs are expected to be shared between them (Head, 2008; Innes & Booher, 2010).

Lastly, some employers have raised concerns about age discrimination and organizational cultures. Recent studies have shown that the factors influencing age discrimination towards older workers can be predominantly by organizational cultures that produce the attitudes of employers and coworkers (Jecker, 2022). Employers and coworkers often view older individuals as less capable or less willing to learn new skills, especially technological ones, and thus less desirable for certain positions (van Dalen & Henkens, 2019). These misleading negative behavioral intentions toward the employment of older workers are prevalent throughout various aspects of employment, such as hiring, training, and retirement decisions (Harris et al., 2017). Organizational cultures can shape people's thinking, acting, and communication (Schein, 1990).

In some cases, workers nearing retirement, particularly those employed with the company for an extended period, are held in high regard and offered more advantages than others. Without effective organizational communication, this culture can lead to increased discrimination and unequal treatment among young employees, impacting morale, productivity, and overall organizational performance (Freeman, 2010). In contrast, organizational cultures supporting diversity and inclusion can be crucial in combating age discrimination (Moen et al., 2016). This includes providing training and education on age discrimination and its negative impacts and implementing policies and practices that specifically address discrimination based on age (Moen et al., 2016). Furthermore, promoting age diversity in the workplace can help to create a more inclusive and respectful environment for older individuals (Appannah & Biggs, 2015) and can also provide organizations with a competitive advantage by tapping into the knowledge, skills, and experience of older workers (Bloom et al., 2012; Marvell & Cox, 2017; Stypińska & Nikander, 2018).

Employers' challenges when employing older people are complex and require a holistic approach to create a protective, welcoming workplace environment. Significantly, the disruptive era has posed critical issues for employing older adults. This disruption has developed problems, mainly as a result of changes in employment characteristics impacting the capacity of older workers, which ultimately affect the well-being of older people, such as ambiguous pension benefits (Been & van Vliet, 2018), unfavored attitudes towards older dignity in the workplace (Jecker, 2022), or overlooking of the work safety conditions for older workers (Varianou-Mikellidou et al., 2019). Due to this, certain older workers may be

exploited in the workplace and vulnerable to discrimination, and they have less ability to keep up with the rapid pace of the disruptive environment.

Methodology

Scope of work

We applied a qualitative approach that used key informant interviews as the data collection method. Representatives of employers of older workers were a targeted population. Our focus was directed towards 13 companies that entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Thai Government within the framework of the Civil State Project [*Pracha Rat*] (E6) project. One facet of this initiative, executed in 2017, aimed to establish directives for employment opportunities and decent work for the older within Thai society. Anticipated as a benchmark by the government, this project is poised to serve as a blueprint for advancing decent work standards for older individuals. Consequently, examining these companies mitigates potential biases against hiring older employees, given their voluntary commitment to employing older adults. Therefore, analyzing these companies would reflect employers' existing challenges when hiring older workers, aiding policymakers in formulating social policies promoting older employment.

The scope of older workers mentioned in this study is blue-collar workers over 55 years of age, the standard retirement age in Thailand, and they perform simple and uncomplicated tasks. Therefore, we specifically looked at older adults working in a service-intensive position, which is the most favored task for this age group as it is more suitable for their physical health and requires little training (Kenny et al., 2018; Viviani et al., 2021). Typical examples are tasks like landscaping, packaging, cleaning, entry-level positions such as basic data entry, customer service, and other hospitality positions.

Theoretical considerations

Social protection is a conceptual framework designed to enhance individuals' lives and well-being within society. It focuses on preventing, managing, and overcoming risks to quality of life (Lee et al., 2014). In the labor market, most initiatives to improve social protection concentrate on increasing labor market efficiency, adapting to economic and social conditions changes, and safeguarding the right to express opinions (Lee et al., 2014). These social protection aspects are crucial for ensuring workers' income security and access to healthcare, either through benefits or other functions.

However, the significant disparity in working age may impact the interaction between social protection and labor institutions, according to Freeman (2010). The study identified two primary sources of disparity. First, close interaction between the two institutions can distort labor demand if work allocation is unbalanced. For instance, social protection measures may lead to labor allocation that does not align with production capacity or labor input quotas, resulting in higher production costs and reduced worker productivity. The second issue is discrimination against certain employee groups, particularly young workers and those nearing retirement. Workers nearing retirement often require a secure income, leading social protection institutions to provide them with more benefits than younger workers. This disparity may increase discrimination among employees across the generations.

The institutional order plays a significant role when considering claims for social protection in the workplace. The success of these claims is often determined by the power dynamics among dominant groups (Drover & Kerans, 1993). In a hegemonic order, dominant groups' claims are rarely questioned or reframed, which suggests that institutional structures can significantly influence how claims are addressed within the workplace. For older workers, who often belong to subordinate groups, achieving protection may be challenging unless their claims gain the support of dominant groups. This dynamic explains why older workers struggle to advocate for workplace protection, welfare, and recognition.

Combining these two key concepts—the interaction between social protection and labor institutions and the claims-making process for social protection in the workplace—we can explore inclusive employment for older populations. Integrating these frameworks can provide a comprehensive understanding of how labor institutions intersect to impact employment opportunities for older workers. The claims-making process allows us to examine how various stakeholders, including employers, employees, and policymakers, advocate for and shape social protection measures in the workplace. This dual approach highlights policy implementation dynamics and sheds light on the barriers and facilitators of inclusive employment practices. Ultimately, our study can identify strategies to better support older workers in accessing fair and sustainable employment, contributing to more age-inclusive labor markets.

Participants

We targeted the executive officers in 13 companies under the MOU with the Thai government. Critical inclusion criteria were those above supervisor positions who had supervised older workers for over five years. We excluded someone who could not give continuous information during our interview. We sent the invitations to all of them, but only five key informants accepted and qualified to participate in this study. Details of the participants and their businesses are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of Key Informants and Topics for Interview

No.	Position of key informant	Type of business/organization	Responsibilities assigned to older workers	Topic of interview
1	Manager of an HR Department	Selling books and stationery	Customer services such as recommending new book arrival, handling customer complaints, and other related general tasks such as cleaning, sorting, or packing books	Policies of the company regarding older employment
2	Head of a recruitment team	Retail chain company	Product sorting, cashier, public relations, and customer services	Job positions and roles assigned to the older workers
3	Chief of an HR department	Fast food franchise	Reception, housekeeping, cashier	Recruitment and selection processes
4	Manager of an HR recruitment department	Furniture chain company	Sales and customer services, such as handling customer complaints	Types of employment, hours of work, and working schedules.

No.	Position of key informant	Type of business/ organization	Responsibilities assigned to older workers	Topic of interview
5	Deputy general manager of an HR department	Retail chain company	Housekeeping, customer services, direct sales	Career development and protection for older workers

Data collection procedures

We collected information by conducting a semi-structured interview with key informants. The interview used an in-person method to encourage two-way communication, which made it easier for the participants to share their experiences. Per the interview procedure, we started by sending an email or a letter with interview materials, including questions and the project's contact information, to the accepted participants to make an appointment and communicate. On the interview date, no video or audio recordings were made, verbal consent was requested, and the written report had no information about their identity or personal information. We positioned ourselves solely responsible for conveying the details of questions and topics and only listening to the viewpoints of their information without any prejudice. The participants were hence encouraged to voice their views without concerns. In addition to the ethical practices, we informed the participants that they can refuse to answer uncomfortable questions when they feel awkward and insecure. This was done to create a friendly environment for the participants.

After conducting the interviews, we adopted methodological triangulation to ensure data reliability (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). This involved checking the interview reports against other sources of information, such as different key informants or existing research. When the need for clarification arose, we asked the informants to review their responses or be interviewed again to ensure the accuracy of their statements. If there is conflict in the information the informants provide, the research team collaborates to reach a consensus.

Analytical method

Following the proposed theories, we applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis techniques and followed a guideline from Luke et al. (2016) to achieve the study's objectives. The analysis comprises six steps: (1) familiarizing with the data collected, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming the themes, and (6) producing the report. Each step we organized as follows:

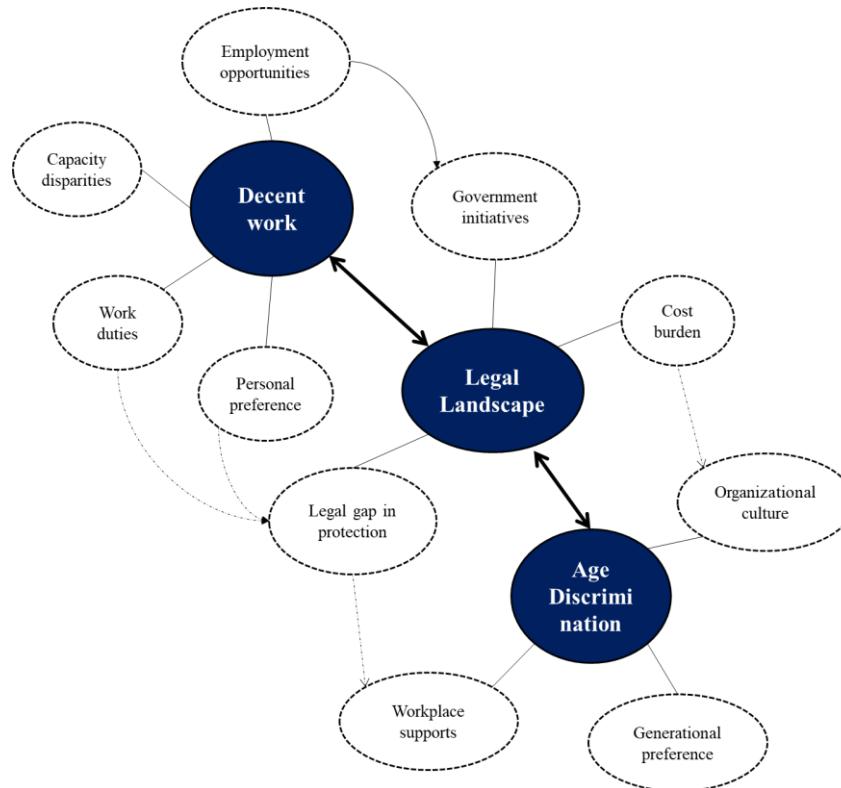
- (1) **Familiarization with the Data:** We started by becoming immersed in the data. This involves reading and re-reading the entire dataset, whether it is interview transcripts or any other form of qualitative data. Then, we took notes and made initial observations to comprehensively understand the content.
- (2) **Generating Initial Codes:** We methodically created preliminary codes by identifying noteworthy features, patterns, or themes within the challenges related to the employment of older adults. We specifically focused on aspects such as influences on decent work, the legal landscape, and intersectional factors associated with organizational cultures. The initial codes are visually represented in Table 2.

Table 2: Initial Codes for Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Decent Work	Theme 2: Legal Landscape	Theme 3 Age Discrimination
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity disparities • Work duties • Personal preferences • Employment Opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal gap in protection • Government initiatives • Cost Burden 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational culture • Workplace supports • Generational preferences

(3) Searching for Themes: We compiled the codes into potential themes, each reflecting a discernible pattern or meaningful response within the data that captures crucial challenges related to the employment of older individuals. Throughout this analytical process, we generated a thematic map, as illustrated in Figure 1, aiding in identifying emerging themes by connecting and grouping initial codes into overarching thematic categories.

Figure 1: Map of Searching Process of Themes



(4) Reviewing and refining themes: We engaged in a comprehensive examination of each identified theme, assessing its connection to the entirety of the dataset. This involved a meticulous verification process where we cross-referenced the identified themes against the coded extracts and the complete dataset. The objective was to ensure the relevance of each theme to the data and ascertain its coherence within the broader context of the study. This rigorous scrutiny contributed to the precision and robustness of the thematic analysis, affirming that the selected themes accurately captured the essence of the data and were reflective of the research objectives.

(5) Defining and Naming Themes: We clearly articulated each identified theme. This involved crafting concise and accurate descriptions that encapsulated the core meaning of each theme. The objective was to convey the challenges inherent in connecting older workers effectively and highlight the essential social protection aspects required in this context. By assigning precise names and meanings to each theme, we aimed to clarify the nuanced issues surrounding older workers, thereby contributing to a more insightful understanding of the challenges and the necessary dimensions of social protection within the realm of older employment.

(6) Writing the Report: In the conclusive phase of crafting the report, we diligently assembled a comprehensive document encompassing the analysis of identified themes. This involved weaving together a narrative supported by illustrative quotes or examples extracted from the data. The presentation of findings was executed with a focus on coherence and persuasiveness, ensuring a seamless integration of insights. Our commitment extended to align the interpretation of themes with the overarching research question or objectives, fostering a clear and meaningful connection between the analytical outcomes and the study's original intent. Through this meticulous reporting process, we aimed to provide a compelling and well-supported exploration of the identified themes, enriching the overall understanding of the research subject.

The aforementioned six-step process served as a methodical framework guiding our approach to conducting thematic analysis. This structured methodology allowed us to systematically pinpoint and scrutinize patterns embedded within qualitative data retrieved from our informants. By adhering to this process, we established a clear and organized pathway for identifying and analyzing recurring themes of employment challenges for older adults, enhancing the robustness and rigor of our qualitative data analysis for making implications for social protection policy.

Findings

We identified three emerging issues related to older workers that align with our objectives. These themes were (1) older workers seeking decent work, (2) an inconclusive legal landscape for older employment (3) inevitable intersection of age discrimination and organizational culture.

Theme 1: Older workers seeking decent work

Outcomes from key informant interviews, all participants agreed that the type of employment was the most influential factor in ensuring decent work for older Thai workers. In Thailand, two kinds of employment exist for older adults: continuous employment after age 55 and new employment for those aged 60 and over. Each type of employment involves different working duties, and it has been challenging for human resources (HR) to provide those older individuals with decent work.

Participants 1–3 emphasized that continuous employment has developed into a significant HR challenge regarding task allocations. Continuous employment encompasses remaining in the same position or transitioning to a new role within the same company. While some older individuals in this category were in good health and capable of adapting to changes, they

often lacked interest in acquiring new skills or undergoing training, even when the positions necessitated familiarity with the latest technologies. This sometimes resulted in decreased job output, performance, and overall productivity.

Those who found new employment can be categorized into two groups. Firstly, older workers who were retired but facing income security. Participant 5 noted that these workers often had difficulty finding a new job. This was because most job search databases and platforms were not designed with older users in mind, and they are primarily low-skill laborers, especially those who lack tech-savviness. As a result, they could not take advantage of these resources and present themselves well. Secondly, new employment can be found in older workers who are well-prepared for retirement. This group is more likely to be employed part-time (Participants 1-5). They were primarily found in high-skill labor (Participant 1). Their intentions of reentering work were influenced by the demand for more time for leisure activities and family responsibilities in their daily lives (Participants 1-3). As a result, they gravitated towards jobs that offer flexible hours (4-8 hour shifts) or short-term (maximum 1-year) contracts, with 3-6 working days a week (Participant 1).

In this theme, we found that the HR challenges of decent work were pronounced when considering individuals in continuous employment who face challenges in acquiring new skills or training and those with lower skill levels who struggle to navigate online platforms. If an older worker wishes to apply for a job but cannot find a suitable position that meets their needs, they may be exposed to discrimination in the workplace due to decreased productivity or be forced even to accept inappropriate roles. As indicated by Participant 5, this can be detrimental to the economy in general as it wastes these workers' productivity.

Theme 2: An inconclusive legal landscape for older employment

The Labor Protection Act (LPA) was passed in Thailand in 1998. It was amended in 2017. The LPA affirmed the employability of older adults and provided them with the flexibility to work hourly, which was widely considered the most preferable labor condition available. This created an excellent incentive for private companies to hire more older workers, particularly for short-term contracts with short-hour shifts in rush hours. Nonetheless, this legal framework conflicts with other significant legal frameworks and government initiatives for promoting older employment.

Firstly, it does not offer hourly older workers the benefits specified in the Social Security Act 1990 (SSA) (Participants 1-3). The SSA 1990 itemizes many protections and security for employees with daily or monthly contracts. Some examples include benefits to workers in cases of sickness, death, disability, childbirth, old age, unemployment, and child allowances. Unfortunately, those working on hourly contracts as specified by the LPA are excluded from this Act, denying them these essential benefits and leaving them without a financial safety net. As pointed out by Participant 2, failing to provide the specified benefits can lead to dissatisfaction among hourly older workers. This dissatisfaction may impact morale, engagement, and overall employee relations within the organization, ultimately contributing to increased turnover among older workers.

Another major challenge was that the existence of many government initiatives to promote decent work to older adults was in contrast with the LPA stipulation. The best evidence was the conflicts with the campaign Civil State Project [Pracha Rat] (E6) that allows employers who signed on to pay an individual older worker around 45 THB (1.20 USD) per hour and to

offer them no more than four to six hours each day (Participants 1-3). This amounts to a daily wage of 250 THB (8 USD), less than the legal minimum wage specified by the LPA and the country's Wage Committee. The latter determined that the daily minimum wage must be between 313 and 336 THB (10-12 USD). Complying with the campaign or the LPA would push an employer to violate one another. This contradiction has led to the ineffectiveness of the incentive for employers to hire older employees, particularly during rush hour.

In this theme, Participants 1-3 highlighted these conflicts between the LPA and relative laws, regulations, and older employment campaigns to the Thai government with the intent of improving the relevant laws and regulations. However, the issue was likely unresolved, and a practical solution awaits.

Theme 3: Inevitable intersection of age discrimination and organizational culture

One of the potential concerns of employers when employing older individuals in the workplace is age discrimination. Age discrimination can have a detrimental effect on older workers, leading to feelings of devaluation, disrespect, and undervaluation in the workplace. This theme was developed from an effort that succeeded in preventing age discrimination in the participant's workplace. While Participants 1-5 considered this issue and implemented various policies that foster interaction between different generations, Participant 5 highlighted a company-wide initiative that encourages younger workers to engage with their older colleagues and to listen to their experiences;

“Opening the floor to allow older workers to share their experiences with younger coworkers, particularly concerning life course management and expectation, was one of our strategies to create social inclusivity for all employees in our company. We found that these strategies were effective as it opened up an opportunity for conversation between the two generations.”

(Participant 5)

This point of view emphasized the importance of having a supportive organizational culture that values the experience of older workers, creating a welcoming environment for their inclusion into the team. Participants 3-5 further highlighted that organizational strategies focusing on integrating older and younger generations can be significantly cost-effective and honoring the cultural respect for the older in Thailand. All that was needed was a platform or space for them to have opportunities for conversation. The combined talents of the generations can help develop more effective strategies, create innovative solutions, and foster greater understanding between the age groups. Businesses can benefit from a variety of perspectives and skills. Additionally, including older generations can create a sense of continuity and stability and provide a valuable connection to the past.

Specifically, it was suggested that a sense of ownership from older workers has also been shown to reduce negative attitudes and stereotyping perceptions from younger workers, as expressed by:

“When older workers exhibit a strong sense of ownership in their work, it can help to reduce negative ageism and stereotyping perceptions from younger workers. This sense included taking pride in one's work, feeling

a sense of responsibility for the success of the company or team, and actively contributing to decision-making processes. This motivated them to immensely demonstrate their value and competence. For example, older workers who had a strong sense of ownership often brought a wealth of experience and expertise to the table to solve organizational problems, which can lead to increased efficiency and productivity. This would reduce negative attitudes from their colleagues or the younger generation, especially the common perceptions of older workers as a burden on the organization."

(Participant 1)

This theme shows how organizations can foster a more inclusive culture that discourages age discrimination by embracing the unique perspectives and experiences of older workers and providing them with opportunities to take ownership of their work. This approach will create a more positive work environment, and companies can benefit from the broader range of skills and ideas that older workers possess, ultimately leading to improved productivity, innovation, and creativity.

Discussion

Build a welcoming environment for older workers

The aging population of Thailand presents significant challenges to the country's economy, particularly the need for post-retirement-age workers to continue or rejoin the workforce. Addressing these challenges requires a focus on the well-being of older workers. Evidence has shown several difficulties, including employability and decent work and an incomplete legal landscape that impedes the employment of older individuals.

Taking employability and decent work into consideration, as individuals grow older, their abilities to learn new things decrease (Baltes et al., 2012). This has posed a difficult transition for older workers. As a result, many choose to stay in their current positions once they are offered continuous employment after retirement (Wong & Tetrick, 2017). Familiar and routine tasks can provide extra comfort and stability while also allowing them to remain engaged and productive (Wong & Tetrick, 2017). On the other hand, older workers who returned to the workforce were more open to assuming roles distinct from what they did before retiring. These workers did not usually have concerns over financial insecurity and just wanted to contribute their knowledge and experiences to new positions after retiring from their past careers (Asavanirandorn et al., 2022; Musich et al., 2018; Sewdas et al., 2017). They highly value flexibility in their work hours to accommodate physical or health limitations (Principi et al., 2020; Sewdas et al., 2017).

In Thailand, the employability of older adults was often hindered by job mismatches, resulting from the lack of an up-to-date database suitable for older workers, making it difficult for them to find employment well-suited to their skills and experience. This issue was not unique to Thailand; it was a common challenge faced by older adults worldwide (UNFPA & HelpAge International, 2012). The underlying causes were likely difficulty connecting employers with the value of older employment (Mazumdar et al., 2018) and the lack of technological recognition in older adults (Karaoglu et al., 2022). In contrast, older individuals who view

work as a form of recreation often prefer to utilize their knowledge and experience rather than take on labor-intensive tasks when they reenter the workforce.

In Thailand, existing studies show that this group of older workers is prevalent in service sectors. According to Asavanirandorn et al. (2022), the study found that these older workers demonstrate high productivity in roles requiring intensive communication and coordination, attributing this to their emotional stability and rationality. This situation underscores the urgent need for targeted HR interventions to address these challenges. Organizations should implement supportive measures such as tailored training programs to help older workers update their skills and become proficient with digital tools. Additionally, creating job-matching systems that consider older workers' unique needs and strengths can help prevent mismatches and ensure they are placed in roles where they can contribute effectively.

Meanwhile, the lack of a conclusive and coherent legal framework challenges policymakers in building welcoming environments for older workers. The main reason is the existence of conflicting laws and regulations regarding social protection for older people in Thailand. One specific example is the disagreement between the Labor Protection Act, which made it possible for older adults to work hourly, and the Social Security Act, which did not cover these workers. Furthermore, the Social Security Fund, the fundamental assistance employees should get, was out of reach for many older workers because of the uncovered benefits. As a result, social protection for these workers cannot be optimized unless the government has a clear direction. One can infer that there was no effective collaboration among respective agencies to introduce social policy tailored to older workers (Carney, 2015; Chhotray & Stoker, 2009; Head, 2008; Innes & Booher, 2010; Kim & Kreps, 2020; Spencer, 2013), likely because of insufficient communication between these agencies (Head, 2008; Kim & Kreps, 2020).

Welfare at work can be introduced by either the public or private sector. However, in practice, private enterprises often neglect social protection measures. The reliance on private ownership for social protection creates challenges in the claims-making process, especially in the context of economic competition. Since providing additional welfare benefits increases production costs for private enterprises, employers are generally reluctant to offer benefits beyond what labor laws mandate (De Haan & Schreiner, 2018). Consequently, in developing countries like Thailand, the government introduced most welfare benefits rather than private companies, resulting in limited protection for older workers from the private sector (Pechdin & Assavanirandorn, 2023). As a result, the role of the government in enhancing workplace social protection continues to grow.

It is commendable that individual private companies have been taking steps to ensure the successful re-entry of older individuals into the workplace. One found that valuing a culture of respect might help prevent age discrimination and create a more welcoming environment for the older workforce (Appannah & Biggs, 2015). In our case, most businesses in Thailand had a strong cultural respect for older individuals, which helped create a more inclusive and respectful environment. It was understood that although younger workers may perform with greater vigor and dexterity than older ones, those of more advanced age had more experience that was immensely valuable in a working environment (Harris et al., 2017). Furthermore, the majority of Thai employers have emphasized the older employees' advantages, which could induce a positive attitude among younger workers toward their older colleagues, consistent with several previous studies (Fasbender & Wang, 2017; Harris et al., 2017). This helps eliminate the perception of unequal employee treatment, which could negatively impact morale, productivity, and overall organizational performance (Freeman, 2010).

Policy discussion for social protection

A social protection system is essential for creating an inviting and equitable environment for older workers. Our research in Thailand suggests that the success of creating a workplace welcoming to older adults likely depends on factors including access to decent job opportunities, an inclusive legal framework, and a culture that promotes inclusivity and fair treatment of all people. This emphasizes the need for social policymakers to incorporate these components in national social protection policies to ensure the safety and security of people of older ages as they reenter the workforce:

Creating a comprehensive database of older workers

To ensure older workers can find suitable employment opportunities, social policymakers should encourage relevant public agencies, particularly those under the Ministry of Labor, to create a comprehensive online database tailored to the needs of this population. In countries like Australia, Bolivia, and Japan, databases have been developed to match older workers' skills with appropriate job opportunities to help mitigate job mismatches and prevent them from being unfairly labeled as less productive, thereby protecting them from potential discrimination (UNFPA & HelpAge International, 2012). To increase its utilization, the database should be designed to be user-friendly for older adults. It should have features to assess their physical and mental abilities (van Dalen & Henkens, 2019), experience and skills (Sewdas et al., 2017), and preferred working times (Principi et al., 2020) to determine which tasks they are best suited for and help employers conduct a comprehensive job analysis and assessment (UNFPA & HelpAge International, 2012). However, there might be concerns about fairness, bias, and privacy in designing a database that assesses older workers' abilities, skills, and preferences. Therefore, to ensure assessments are conducted fairly and without bias, the database should use standardized and validated assessment tools to minimize age-related biases.

These tools should focus on objective criteria relevant to the job, such as skills, experience, and work preferences, rather than subjective measures that could reinforce stereotypes about older workers. Including diverse inputs in the design process, such as feedback from HR professionals, older workers, and experts in age-inclusive practices, can also help create more balanced assessment tools. By utilizing this database, employers can be confident that older adults are placed in positions where they can succeed. Simultaneously, policymakers should emphasize the importance of implementing policies to support training programs for older workers using digital technology and online resources for job postings, such as resume writing and online platforms. These can be direct, such as organizing the training, or indirect, such as offering free or discounted access to third-party training programs.

Crafting national legal protection specific for older workers

In most countries, the primary source of legal protection for older workers is the employment laws regulating recruitment, dismissal, and other aspects of employment. Most of these laws are too broad and do not specifically address the needs of older workers (Carney, 2015; Spencer, 2013). Social policymakers must devise a legal framework to protect older workers. Such a system could be implemented by ensuring that older workers are adequately represented in the decision-making process when formulating the policies. The establishment of Ad-hoc or task-force committees to monitor the progress of older employees may be considered. This measure would help address the particular needs of this age group.

Intensifying measures against workplace discrimination

Discrimination against older workers is becoming a more serious issue that is not fair or ethical and can cause a drop in productivity and an increase in turnover (Freeman, 2010). Employers must proactively ensure that all workers are treated equally and respectfully regardless of age (Moen et al., 2016). Social policymakers can help by introducing financial incentives, like tax reductions, to employers who commit to preventing age-based discrimination (Appannah & Biggs, 2015; Moen et al., 2016). Tax reductions may support activities, such as revising recruitment processes, providing age diversity training, and developing supportive work arrangements for older employees. These incentives can mitigate perceived costs associated with maintaining a more diverse workforce, such as training or workplace infrastructure adjustments, thereby reducing employers' resistance.

Furthermore, a legislative approach should also be considered, where laws are established to prohibit age-based discrimination, and employers who break these laws face penalties. Some studies suggest that enhancing and clarifying age discrimination in employment by improving current labor legislation and establishing penalties for violations can reduce age-based discrimination and protect older workers' rights (Neumark, 2022). This consequence means that older workers will be protected against discrimination by collective bargaining agreements and union representation (Harris, 2020). This will increase employment rates for older workers and improve their well-being.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that implementing social protection measures for older workers can be successful if the necessary factors are considered. The implications of the social protection system for fostering an equitable environment for older workers are significant and multifaceted. These include the availability of decent work, a supportive legal framework, and a culture that values inclusivity and fair treatment of all people, regardless of their age. Access to decent job opportunities is crucial. Without robust job opportunities that cater to the skills and experiences of older workers, their ability to remain actively employed and contribute meaningfully to the workforce is severely limited. In addition, an inclusive legal framework is essential. Such a framework should protect against age discrimination, ensure fair employment practices, and facilitate equal access to career advancement opportunities. A well-structured legal environment can help mitigate biases and create a level playing field for older workers. Lastly, cultivating a workplace culture that values inclusivity and fair treatment is imperative. This involves implementing policies that support older workers and fostering an organizational culture that genuinely respects and values their contributions. Promoting a culture of inclusivity requires ongoing efforts to challenge ageist attitudes and practices and to encourage a more nuanced understanding of the diverse strengths that older workers bring.

To ensure these measures are successful, we recommend the creation of a comprehensive database for older workers, the ad hoc committee, which includes representatives from older demographics in crafting national protection laws specific to older workers, and the intensification of measures against workplace discrimination. By taking these steps, it can be ensured that older adults are protected and have access to decent work opportunities. Not only will this protect the rights of older workers, but it will also promote inclusivity and fair treatment of all people, regardless of their age.

This study's exploration undoubtedly sheds light on an essential aspect of workforce dynamics, particularly in the context of larger private sectors that participated in the Thailand government's campaign. However, a notable limitation of this topic is its potential oversight of the diverse employment landscape in small and medium-sized companies in Thailand. These enterprises may serve as significant hosts for older workers, yet their distinct characteristics and challenges might not be adequately addressed in the current study.

The research emphasis on larger corporations may result in a lack of comprehensive insights into the nuanced needs and experiences of older employees in smaller establishments. Future studies should, therefore, strive for a more inclusive approach, considering the unique dynamics and social protection policies required for older workers in various business sizes. By broadening the scope to encompass the entire spectrum of companies, researchers can offer more holistic recommendations that cater to the diverse needs of older workers across the entire employment landscape in Thailand.

Ethical considerations

The study was conducted per the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of The Research Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Research Participants Group 1, Chulalongkorn University, with the ethical certification No.049/2563.

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