



# Myths about age and lack of dialogue hinder late-career wellbeing

**Recognizing and clearly communicating the experienced employee's importance to the organization can boost late-career wellbeing and delay the desire to retire.**

*By Kristine Seest*

In just five years, the number of employees over the age of 67 has increased by more than 30 percent – from 66,388 in April 2019 to 89,233 in April 2024 – according to Jobindsats, the Danish Agency for Labour Market and Recruitment's databank. An aging population, better health, work flexibility and favourable financial incentives may be part of the explanation for the increase. But while more people keep on working after reaching state pension age, a parallel trend shows an increase in the number of Danes choosing to retire before reaching state pension age.

Labour shortages are a challenge for many companies, and at the same time there may be a widespread desire to retain the most experienced employees. This is an opportunity to look within the organization and assess what the company can do to support the wellbeing of late-career employees – and to prevent them from wanting to leave the workforce before retirement age.

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**Maria Ebbesen**  
Senior Specialist, WTW

»When working to improve employee wellbeing in an organization, it always creates value when initiatives are developed with an eye for employee differences. This can be differences in terms of job function, but it can also be differences in terms of age, experience and life stages. Attention to employee differences is necessary to create an inclusive workplace where all employees in the organization can thrive, grow and collaborate,« says Senior Specialist Maria Ebbesen from WTW Corporate Health & Wellbeing.

Corporate Health & Wellbeing facilitates WTW's Network on Strategic Health and Wellbeing and had invited Aske Juul Lassen to speak at the latest network meeting in May. Aske Juul Lassen is

Associate Professor of Ethnology and Ageing at the Copenhagen Centre for Health Research in the Humanities at the University of Copenhagen. His main message at the network meeting was that there is a need to dispel prejudices, myths and fear of age if workplaces are to become more attractive to the most experienced employees and if their teams are to become more productive and dynamic.

## Dispelling myths and highlighting skills

In his presentation, Aske Juul Lassen referred to the study 'Evaluating Six Common Stereotypes About Older Workers with Meta-Analytical Data', which has uncovered correlations between stereotypical perceptions of senior workers and the reality. The study debunks common myths about older workers – myths that seniors are less productive, less adaptable and in poorer health. These myths do not match the factual knowledge about human development nor the skills that are developed with age.

»I think the myths that Aske Juul Lassen mentions arise because there is no good dialogue. We meet senior employees at our senior seminars, and I hear that they miss the dialogue at their workplace. They simply do not know if they are valued and what opportunities they have in the final part of their career, « says Senior Consultant Helle Guldager, who is responsible for WTW's senior counselling concept and organizes more than 30 senior seminars a year.

## Do not be afraid to act

At the University of Copenhagen, Aske Juul Lassen heads the development and research project 'Senior Practice', which examines what it takes to create better opportunities for senior employees – and to promote a longer and healthier working life. He highlights three things that are key to retaining senior employees' desire to stay in the workplace: good health, job satisfaction and the opportunity to influence

their late career. And to achieve this, managers need to let go of their fear of engaging in dialogue with employees when they reach a certain age. According to Aske Juul Lassen, this anxiety is expressed through managers' fear of being ageist or initiating a dialogue that could make the employee feel old or unwanted and pressured to retire.

In order to avoid the fear of addressing the topic of age, it can be a good idea to base the dialogue on the skills that Aske Juul Lassen highlights as special for seniors. These are skills that, over the course of your working life, allow you to gain an overview, learn, see things from different angles, have emotional control and provide professional care, among other things.

»It is important that age and the importance of the individual employee to the workplace is articulated.

Of course, there is a need for some guidelines, but I find that there is a particular need to support managers so they can conduct a good and constructive senior talks. It is about clarifying what it takes for the employee to have a good late career and a good transition to retirement. Many people want changes to their working conditions and working hours, and instead of referring to the HR department, it is important that the manager takes responsibility and talks to the employee about the possibilities in their particular department and in the specific job function. In this way, it becomes relevant and personal, so the senior employee knows what is actually possible, « says Helle Guldager.

WTW's senior concept is aimed at senior employees and helps them plan their pension finances and create a good transition to retirement. In addition, WTW specialists work with HR to facilitate programs for managers, focusing on highlighting the company's attitudes and opportunities for late-career employees and equipping managers to conduct good senior talks.

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Inclusion in the workplace and wellbeing at different stages of life is a recurring topic at WTW's Network on Strategic Health and Wellbeing, where HR Managers from different companies meet three times a year to discuss and share new ways of working strategically with health and wellbeing.