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THERE IS A MATCH: OLDER WORKERS HAVE THE COMPETENCIES VALUED BY EMPLOYERS

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Abstract:

Population ageing is widely recognised. This research intends to demystify age-based stereotypes and discrimination faced by older workers in the labour-market by analysing competencies held by these workers. We conducted an exploratory study, using a questionnaire addressed to Portuguese workers. We analysed data from 606 subjects using descriptive statistical analyses and ANOVA's. Results showed that older workers hold the competencies most valued by employers. Significant differences were identified in the competencies when comparing several demographic variables and with younger workers. Results suggest intervention clues thus contributing to breaking stereotypes and promoting human resources management policies, which in turn may help to their maintenance in the labour-market in a period of talent shortage. It contributes to the literature by challenging age discrimination and by adding knowledge of the main competencies held by older workers.

Keywords: Aging population; Competencies; Human resources management; Labour market; Older workers.

• **Introduction**

Population ageing is broadly recognised and investigated in literature (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Hedge *et al.*, 2006; Pinto, 2015; Pinto *et al.*, 2015; Winkelmann-Gleed, 2011). It is estimated that in 2080 one in eight people in the European Union will be over 80 years old (Eurostat, 2015). In 2018, nearly one fifth (19 %) of the EU population was aged 65 and more and the share of people aged 80 years, or more, should more than double by 2100 to reach 14.6 % of the whole population (Eurostat, 2020). This ageing population pierces to the labour market, and we can foresee several impacts on the Portuguese workforce (Hedge *et al.*, 2006; Pinto, 2015; Pinto *et al.*, 2015). These range from the predicted labour shortage to the adjustment of the organisational world to this new reality of an ageing population. This framework promotes a growing dependency of organisations on senior workers to ensure their performance (Beatty & Visser, 2005; Shea & Haasen, 2006). Therefore, management and retention of the older workforce have been a concern of both governments and human resources management [HRM] (ArmstrongStassen, 2008; Barroca *et al.*, 2014; Pinto *et al.*, 2015; WinkelmannGleed, 2011).

Despite the knowledge and progress made, these workers continue to face several challenges in the labour market related to age-based stereotypes and discrimination (Jenkins & Poulston, 2014). These challenges impact on older workers, psychological well-being and promote their willingness or facility to leave the working life (Hedge *et al.*, 2006).

Statistics show that older workers have the ability and desire to work until later in life. However, both older and younger workers are treated differently (Hedge *et al.*, 2006), one reason being their age (Ciutiene & Railaite, 2014).

This discrimination is intrinsically related to the perceived competency of older workers. Nonetheless, the literature does not offer information on the competencies held by the older workers and the importance of these competencies to employers.

Regarding the identification of older worker's competencies, the literature is scarce. In a study on productivity, skills and age, Turek and Perek-Bialas (2013) concluded that older workers are valued more for soft skills (for example, loyalty, trust) and younger workers for hard skills (e.g., flexibility, technology). Wiktorowicz (2016) assessed (self-assessment by the respondents) the competencies of people in late productive age (50+ years), in Poland, using exploratory factor analysis. The author found that older workers assess their soft competencies better than their hard competencies. Interpersonal competencies have the highest score. Specifically, interpersonal and self-organisation competencies have the highest median (Wiktorowicz, 2016). Other positively assessed competencies were independent decision making and timely completion of planned actions (Wiktorowicz, 2016), as well as the competencies part of the Availability and technical competencies factor. In contrast, computer competencies have the lowest scores: only half of the sample considered them to be at least average, and only 20% assessed them as good or very good (Wiktorowicz, 2016). To analyse the competencies held by older workers, see Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of competencies of older workers (50+) among the sub-scales

Factor	Competency	Median
Soft Competencies	Creativity	3
	Entrepreneurship and showing initiative	3
	Being communicative and sharing ideas clearly	4
	Independent decision making	4
	Ease in establishing contacts with colleagues and/or clients	4
	Coordination of work of other staff	3
	Logical thinking, analysis of facts	3
	Timely completion of planned actions	4
	Cooperation within the group	4
	Solving conflicts between people	3
	Disciplining other staff – taking them to task	3
	Continuous learning of new things	3
	Performing simple calculations	3
	Quick summarising of large volumes of text	3
	Organising and running office work	3
	Resilience to stress	3
	Performing advanced mathematical computations	2
	Physical fitness	3
	Artistic and creative skills	2
Computers skills	Knowledge of specialist software, ability to write applications and author websites	1
	Basic knowledge of MS Office-type package	2
Availability and technical competencies	Readiness to travel frequently	3
	Flexible working hours (no fixed slots)	3
	Operating, assembling, and repairing devices	3

Source: Adapted from Wiktorowicz (2016, p. 56)

The Hays Group (2016) identified the 27 competencies most valued by employers, to understand what kind of competencies employers are looking for in Portugal, and to what extent they are in line with what professionals can offer. Another study with graduates and employers, Vieira and Marques (2014) also attempted to understand which competencies were most valued by employers in the next five years. The competencies identified in both studies are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Competencies most valued by employers (%)

Hays (2016)		Vieira and Marques (2014)	
Competency	%	Competency	%
Technical competencies	62%	Problem solving and analysis	51%
Proactivity	57%	Creativity and innovation	47%
Workability	55%	Adaptability and flexibility	45%
Ability to teamwork	53%	Planning and organisation	40%
Ethics/values	50%	Motivation for excellence	33%
Goal orientation	49%	Technical skills of the specific area of	31%
Experience	47%	knowledge	
Customer orientation	42%	personal relationships and conflict	29%
Adaptability	41%	management	
Growth potential	38%	Domain of foreign languages	28%
Autonomy	35%	Teamwork	27%
Planning and organisation	33%	Information and Communication	25%
Multifunctionality	32%	technologies	
Emotional intelligence	31%	Time management	21%
Training	31%	Leadership	19%
Knowledge of languages	30%	Decision Making	19%
Sector/ industry Knowledge	29%	Lifelong learning	14%
Resilience	28%	Risk-taking	10%
Loyalty	26%	Ethics and social responsibility	9%
Flexible schedule/ hours	21%	Diversity, multiculturality	7%
Leadership profile	21%	Oral expression	6%
Creativity	16%	Ability to conceptualise	6%
Availability to travel	13%	Written communication	4%
Attention to detail	13%	Active listening	4%
Negotiation ability	12%		
International experience	6%		
Diplomacy	4%		

Source: Adapted from Hays (2016, p. 31) and Vieira and Marques (2014, p. 242)

Since competencies are more comprehensive and flexible, adaptable across contexts, therefore more adequate to current dynamic macroeconomic landscape (Fleury & Fleury, 2004). The current macro-structural context has driven a greater appreciation of human capital in organisations, where enterprises perceive competencies increasingly as a differentiating factor that can guarantee competitiveness (Ceitil, 2010). Also, the competencies focus on the link to the individual, rather than to a function (Hashim & Wok, 2014). Framing older workers in this reality is essential for understanding their value in the labour market and promoting their retention on organisations.

The concept of competence has been extensively studied and has taken on several spheres of application. Although there is still no theoretical consensus or conceptual stability, there has been an increasing amplitude of the concept that has been embracing new dimensions. Fleury and Fleury (2001: 188) define a competency as “A responsible and recognised act of knowing, that involves mobilising, integrating, transferring knowledge, resources and skills, which add economic value to the organisation and social value to the individual.” The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] (2005: 4) adds that competency is not just knowledge and skills; instead, it “involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilising psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context.” More recently competencies have adopted a more behavioural dimension. For example, Cascão (2014) defines competency as behaviour, that happens in actions and deeds, therefore being inseparable from the activity, that is related to the performance and results achieved, observable, recognisable and evaluable, and linked to specific situations.

Executives and specialists are constantly challenged with the threat of disqualification and reduced quality of acquired competencies, due to the rapid technical and organisational changes, (Kroll, 2003). In this sense, the problem becomes the obsolescence of competencies and not the age of the individual itself (Kroll, 2003). However, on a large scale, due to stereotyped perceptions, older workers participate less in training (Armstrong-Stassen & Templer, 2005; Kroll, 2003).

Young (2013) in an investigation conducted by Opinion Matters found that 92% of British chief executives do not invest in training and development of employees over 60, therefore failing to promote their competencies and expand their knowledge.

Shea and Hassen's (2006) view is that older people are currently more demanding of their own abilities and talents, pursuing new levels of education and new skills. Indeed, the authors explain that their lifelong learning, maintenance of intellectual flexibility, social skills and strong ethics and values, make them a unique asset and advantage to any organisation (Shea & Haasen, 2006). As a valuable resource, we must understand and appreciate the worth older worker (Shea & Haasen, 2006).

It is required a change in the human resource [HR] managers mindset, as far as older workers are concerned, so that they are seen with a new lens, as a resource to be cultivated (Shea & Haasen, 2006).

- **Methods**

This paper aims to identify the competencies held by older workers, investigate differences between competencies held by younger and older workers and, finally, compare the competencies that older workers have with the ones that employers are looking for in their employees. In this sense, based on the literature reviewed, we established the following hypothesis: *Older workers hold the competencies most valued by employers*. To achieve our goals, we conducted an exploratory study addressed to all the individuals' active in the Portuguese labour market. Based on these criteria, we used a non-probabilistic sampling technique – criterion sampling, that is, the selection of segments of the population based on pre-defined criteria (Coutinho, 2015). Data was collected using a website which presented the research team, the study and the instruments to be filled. Professional bar and associations, unions, universities and several private companies invited their associates to participate in this study.

- **Sample**

The sample of workers is composed of 606 subjects, with a mean age of 50,87 years old, with a standard deviation of 8,887, mostly female ($n=379$, 62,5%). The majority of the sample is married/ living with a partner ($n=404$, 66,7%), 97 are single (16,0%), 84 are divorced (13,9%) and 21 are widowed (3,5%). The sample is characterized, regarding qualification with 6,1% ($n=37$), primary education, 16,3% ($n=99$) secondary education, 5,1% ($n=31$) a professional course, 52,6% ($n=329$) with bachelor degree, 18,3% ($n=111$) holds a master's degree and, finally, 1,5% ($n=9$) holds a PhD. Subjects of the sample have carried out their function on average for 23,13 years ($SD=10,607$), and work mainly in the public sector (69,3%, $n=420$), 27,1% ($n=164$) from the private sector, and the remaining 3, 6% ($n=22$) of the public-private sector. Finally, regarding the size of the enterprise, the majority, of the workers work in large firms (48,2%, $n=292$), 30,9% ($n=187$) work in medium sized firms, 12,0% ($n=73$) in small firms and, finally, 8,9% ($n = 54$) in micro-firms or start-up's.

- **Measures**

To evaluate competencies, we used both the Hays Group (2016) research that identifies the 27 most valued competencies by employers in Portugal, and the Vieira and Marques (2014) research that identified the 21 most valued competencies in the labour market for the next five years. From the joint analysis of these studies, resulting in a final version of 40 competencies most valued in the Portuguese labour market. To fill this questionnaire, subjects had to select from this set of competencies 10 that they considered having.

To characterise the sample, the sociodemographic and organisational variables included: the individual's age, sex, marital status, literacy, years performing the same function, enterprise sector, and type (size).

- **General procedures and data analysis**

A database was created using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences [SPSS].

The questionnaire was online and had validation assumptions that made the response mandatory, so the absence of one answer means that the participant was not considered. Therefore, incomplete questionnaires were disregarded from the study, and there are no missing values. There were no outliers.

Due to the large sample, no normality analysis was conducted, assuming the data approaches a normal distribution (Pestana & Gageiro, 2008; Coutinho, 2015).

Considering data variables decisions, after verifying that the category *public-private* of the variable *sector* (*public*, *private* and *public-private*), had only 11 observations, a new *sector* variable was created, changing it to be composed of two categories, specifically, *public* and *private and public-private*.

Descriptive statistics and frequencies analyses were carried out, as well as ANOVA tests to compare means, seeking to clarify answers to the hypothesis under study. All statistical tests data were compared to sociodemographic and organisational data variables.

- **Results**

In this chapter, we present the results and discuss them with the scarcely available literature. We display the descriptive analysis of the data gathered (competencies held by older workers and their analysis by demographic variables) and then test the hypothesis.

- **Outcome 1 – Competencies held by older workers**

Considering self-attributed competencies held by older workers, we highlighted the top 10, and the lowest 3 (Table 3).

The competency most detained by the older workers is *work ability* (69,6%), followed by *technical skills of the specific area of knowledge* (68,0%), *experience* (67,7%), *ethics and social responsibility* (62,7%) and *autonomy* (50,7%). These competencies are identified by more than half of our sample. Also, in the top 10 competencies held by these workers are *ability to teamwork* (47,2%), *planning and organisation* (43,5%), *adaptability and flexibility* (37,8%), *lifelong learning* (36,4%), and *loyalty* (36,2%). Over one-third of the sample of older workers hold these competencies. The three least identified competencies by these workers were: *international experience* (2,1%), *risk taking* (3,0%) and *growth potential* (3,9%).

Table 3: Competencies held by older workers (n=434)

Competency	n	%
Work ability	302	69,6
Technical skills of the specific area of knowledge	295	68,0
Experience	294	67,7
Ethics and social responsibility	272	62,7
Autonomy	220	50,7
Ability to teamwork	205	47,2
Planning and organisation	189	43,5
Adaptability and flexibility	164	37,8
Lifelong learning	158	36,4
Loyalty	157	36,2
Sector/ industry Knowledge	155	35,7
Training	142	32,7
Multifunctionality	132	30,4
Interpersonal relationships and conflict management	128	29,5
Proactivity	115	26,5
Problem solving and analysis	114	26,3
Goal orientation	95	21,9
Customer orientation	95	21,9
Resilience	89	20,5
Creativity and innovation	86	19,8
Emotional intelligence	82	18,9
Decision Making	81	18,7
Time management	74	17,1
Attention to detail	73	16,8
Information and Communication Technologies	69	15,9
Oral expression	69	15,9
Flexible schedule/ hours	68	15,7
Leadership profile	59	13,6

Active listening	59	13,6
Written communication	56	12,9
Motivation for excellence	49	11,3
Domain of foreign languages	42	9,7
Negotiation ability	30	6,9
Diversity, multiculturality	24	5,5
Diplomacy	22	5,1
Ability to conceptualise	19	4,4
Availability to travel	18	4,1
Growth potential	17	3,9
Risk-taking	13	3,0
International experience	9	2,1

• **Outcome 2 – Competencies held by older workers versus younger workers**

Only eight competencies (≤ 49 years old) shown statistically significant differences when compared by younger and older workers (50+ years old) (Table 4).

Regarding these statistically different competencies, *adaptability and flexibility* ($p=0,018$; $\leq 49=48,3\%$; $50+=37,8\%$), *attention to detail* ($p=0,046$; $\leq 49=23,8\%$; $50+=16,8\%$), *oral expression* ($p=0,014$; $\leq 49=24,4\%$; $50+=15,9\%$), *proactivity* ($p=0,000$; $\leq 49=42,4\%$; $50+=26,5\%$) and *growth potential* ($p=0,000$; $\leq 49=12,2\%$; $50+=3,9\%$) were higher in younger workers. On the other hand, *experience* ($p=0,000$; $\leq 49=42,4\%$; $50+=67,7\%$), *sector/ industry knowledge* ($p=0,000$; $\leq 49=16,9\%$; $50+=35,7\%$), and, followed by *customer orientation* ($p=0,001$; $\leq 49=10,5\%$; $50+=21,9\%$) were higher in the older workers.

Table 4: Comparative analysis of competencies held by older workers according to age (n=606)

Competency	Age ≤ 49 (n=172)		Age 50+ (n=434)		F	p
	n	%	n	%		
Work ability	112	65,1	302	69,6	1,135	0,287
Technical skills of the specific area of knowledge	109	63,4	295	68,0	1,171	0,280
Experience	73	42,4	294	67,7	34,799	0,000
Ethics and social responsibility	104	60,5	272	62,7	0,254	0,614
Autonomy	92	53,5	220	50,7	0,385	0,535
Ability to teamwork	90	52,3	205	47,2	1,276	0,259
Planning and organization	67	39,0	189	43,5	1,064	0,303
Adaptability and flexibility	83	48,3	164	37,8	5,623	0,018
Lifelong learning	61	35,5	158	36,4	0,047	0,828
Loyalty	54	31,4	157	36,2	1,238	0,266
Sector/ industry Knowledge	29	16,9	155	35,7	21,371	0,000
Training	58	33,7	142	32,7	0,056	0,0813
Multifunctionality	52	30,2	132	30,4	0,002	0,965
Interpersonal relationships and conflict management	56	32,6	128	29,5	0,546	0,460
Proactivity	73	42,4	115	26,5	14,947	0,000
Problem solving and analysis	49	28,5	114	26,3	0,308	0,579
Goal orientation	27	15,7	95	21,9	2,942	0,087
Customer orientation	18	10,5	95	21,9	10,751	0,001
Resilience	29	16,9	89	20,5	1,043	0,308
Creativity and innovation	40	23,3	86	19,8	0,884	0,348

Emotional intelligence	44	25,6	82	18,9	3,352	0,068
Decision Making	24	14,0	81	18,7	1,907	0,168
Time management	32	18,6	74	17,1	0,205	0,650
Attention to detail	41	23,8	73	16,8	3,984	0,046
Information and Communication Technologies	36	20,9	69	15,9	2,178	0,141
Oral expression	42	24,4	69	15,9	6,016	0,014
Flexible schedule/ hours	31	18,0	68	15,7	0,499	0,480
Leadership profile	25	14,5	59	13,6	0,091	0,763
Active listening	22	12,8	59	13,6	0,069	0,794
Written communication	28	16,3	56	12,9	1,174	0,279
Motivation for excellence	21	12,2	49	11,3	0,102	0,750
Domain of foreign languages	22	12,8	42	9,7	1,262	0,262
Negotiation ability	9	5,2	30	6,9	0,576	0,448
Diversity, multiculturalism	13	7,6	24	5,5	0,882	0,348
Diplomacy	9	5,2	22	5,1	0,007	0,935
Ability to conceptualize	5	2,9	19	4,4	0,699	0,403
Availability to travel	11	6,4	18	4,1	1,365	0,243
Growth potential	21	12,2	17	3,9	14,714	0,000
Risk taking	7	4,1	13	3,0	0,444	0,505
International experience	1	0,6	9	2,1	1,689	0,194

• **Outcome 3 – Competencies held by workers versus competencies valued by employers**

Table 5 displays the comparison of the competencies held by older and younger workers with the competencies identified in the literature as the most valued by employers.

Results indicate that, in general, both younger and older workers hold competencies equally below and above the values identified by employers in most competencies. However, eight competencies have different results in both studies, when compared to this study.

Ability to teamwork, presents a discrepancy in the employers' values (Hays=53%; Vieira and Marques=27%), in this sense both groups (younger and older workers) would be over the expected by Vieira and Marques (2014) research, and both below the Hays Group (2016) research. However, younger workers have a comparable value to the one identified by this research ($\leq 49=52,3\%$). The same problem arises in the *creativity and innovation*, and *planning and organisation* competencies where the workers present values superior to ones identified by Hays Group (2016) research and inferior to the ones mentioned in the Vieira and Marques (2014) research.

Concerning the competency *decision making*, both groups are below the employers' value, although the 50+ workers group present a closer percentage to the one required (employers=19%; 50+=18,7%).

The remaining four competencies that are important to stress are the ones that are different between groups, meaning that one group surpasses the valued competencies by employers and the other group underachieves. Regarding these competencies both *experience* (employers=47%; $\leq 49=42,4$; 50+=67,7%) and *sector/ industry knowledge* (employers=29%; $\leq 49=16,9\%$; 50+=35,7 are higher in the older workers group than required by employers, and both *adaptability and flexibility* (employers=41% and 45%; $\leq 49=48,3\%$; 50+=37,8%) and *diversity, multiculturalism* (employers=7%; $\leq 49=7,6\%$; 50+=5,5%) are higher in the younger workers group than required by employers.

Table 5: Comparative analysis of the competencies held by older workers and workers under 50 years of age, with the competencies valued by employers (%)

Competency	Held by workers		Valued by employers	
	(n=172) <=49	(n=434) 50+	Hays (2016)	Vieira and Marques (2014)
Technical skills of the specific area of knowledge	63,4	68,0	62	31
Goal orientation	15,7	21,9	59	-
Proactivity	42,4	26,5	57	-
Work ability	65,1	69,6	55	-
Ability to teamwork	52,3	47,2	53	27
Problem solving and analysis	28,5	26,3	-	51
Ethics and social responsibility	60,5	62,7	50	9
Experience	42,4	67,7	47	-
Creativity and innovation	23,3	19,8	16	47
Adaptability and flexibility	48,3	37,8	41	45
Customer orientation	10,5	21,9	42	-
Planning and organization	39,0	43,5	33	40
Growth potential	12,2	3,9	38	-
Autonomy	53,5	50,7	35	-
Motivation for excellence	12,2	11,3	-	33
Multifunctionality	30,2	30,4	32	-
Emotional intelligence	25,6	18,9	31	-
Training	33,7	32,7	31	-
Domain of foreign languages	12,8	9,7	30	28
Sector/ industry Knowledge	16,9	35,7	29	-
Interpersonal relationships and conflict management	32,6	29,5	-	29
Resilience	16,9	20,5	28	-
Loyalty	31,4	36,2	26	-
Information and Communication Technologies	20,9	15,9	-	25
Time management	18,6	17,1	-	21
Flexible schedule/ hours	18,0	15,7	21	-
Leadership profile	15,5	13,6	21	19
Decision Making	14,0	18,7	-	19
Lifelong learning	35,5	36,4	-	14
Availability to travel	6,4	4,1	13	-
Attention to detail	23,8	16,8	13	-
Negotiation ability	5,2	6,9	12	-
Risk taking	4,1	3,0	-	10
Diversity, multiculturality	7,6	5,5	-	7
Oral expression	24,4	15,9	-	6
Ability to conceptualize	2,9	4,4	-	6
International experience	0,6	2,1	6	-
Written communication	16,3	12,9	-	4
Active listening	12,8	13,6	-	4
Diplomacy	5,2	5,1	4	-

Considering the top competencies most valued by employers, we compared younger and older workers to check for new information (Figure 1).

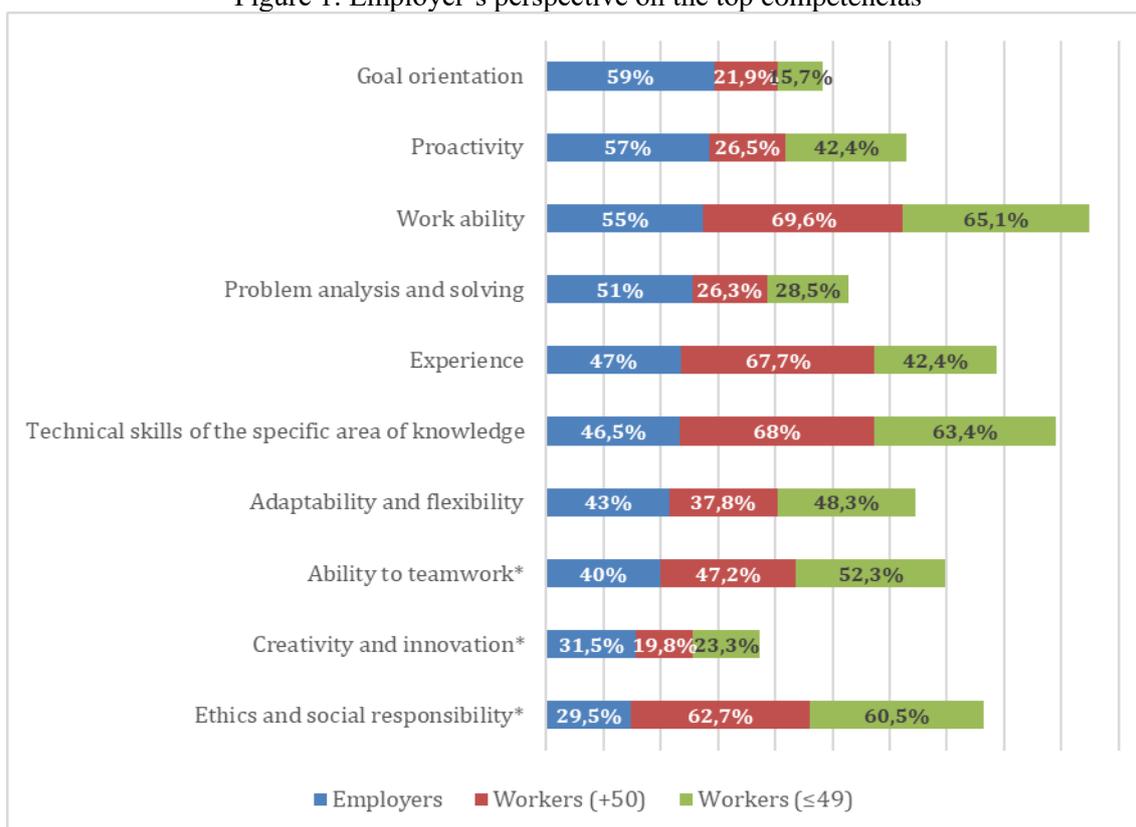
This figure allows us to confirm the hypothesis: *Older workers hold the competencies most valued by companies.*

Older workers overachieve the employer's evaluation of the competencies: *work ability, experience, technical skills of the specific area of knowledge, ability to teamwork and ethics and social responsibility.*

On the other hand, they underachieve the evaluation made by employers in the following competencies: *goal orientation, proactivity, problem-solving and analysis, adaptability and flexibility* and *creativity and innovation*. Of these competencies where older workers report a low value of that pointed as necessary by employers, only in one competency, *goal orientation*, older workers show superior frequency than younger workers.

These results lead us to assume that our hypothesis that older workers hold the competencies most valued by employers, is to some extent verified: older workers have all the top competencies most valued by employers. According to the needs presented by employers, more senior workers overachieve those needs in five of the nine competencies.

Figure 1: Employer’s perspective on the top competencias



Note: Employer’s perspective is the mean value between Vieira and Marques (2014) and Hays (2016).

Source: Own elaboration.

• **Discussion**

Findings of this study tend to support that a competency-based approach to accessing organisational human capital needs is better when compared to the more traditional job-analytic methods (Hayton & Kelley, 2006).

Regarding outcome 1, the top 10 competencies held by older workers in this study are *work ability, technical skills of the specific area of knowledge, experience, ethics and social responsibility, autonomy, ability to teamwork, planning and organisation, adaptability and flexibility, lifelong learning, and loyalty*. Our findings are congruent with McIntosh (2001) whose research concluded that older workers are flexible and open to change, have up-to-date skills and hold interest in both learning new tasks and taking on challenging tasks. Results of our study are also congruent with the positive stereotypes of higher loyalty (Gursoy, Maier & Chi, 2008; O’Connor, 2012) and flexibility (Arrowsmith & McGoldrick, 1997), both found in the top 10 competencies held by older workers. Concerning the lowest three competencies held by these workers, our results identify *growth potential, risk-taking* and *international experience*. Older workers may consider their *Growth potential* as low because, being in the final path of their careers, they may not consider themselves to have the potential to grow and/or they are probably on top of the career path. Following the same idea, *risk-taking* and *international experience* are probably not considered by these workers.

Concerning outcome 2, competencies held by older workers (50+ years old) *versus* younger workers (<=49 years old), results suggest that *adaptability and flexibility, proactivity, attention to detail, oral expression, and growth potential* were higher in younger workers than in older workers. Our findings are similar to those described by Posthuma and Campion (2009). These authors performed a literature analysis, and verified stereotypes associated with older workers are lower adaptability, flexibility, resistance to change and lower energy when compared to younger workers.

Competencies as *experience, sector/ industry knowledge, and customer orientation* were higher in the older workers of our study. These results are also congruent with O'Connor's (2012) study, who points out that in comparison to younger workers, older people are more loyal, trustworthy, safer, and with more realistic expectations of work. In contrast, younger workers are seen as more flexible and easier to relocate (O'Connor, 2012). Still concerning this study, O'Connor (2012) found that there are 29% of their participants who are not able to choose if young or older people hold work-related competences, which is a good sign concerning ageing stereotyping (O'Connor, 2012).

Finally, Outcome 3 results show that competencies held by workers *versus* competencies valued by employers, statistically differ in only four competencies. Specifically, *experience and sector/ industry knowledge*, older workers present higher values than those required by employers. Competencies as *adaptability and flexibility, and diversity, multiculturalism* are higher in the younger workers group.

When solely considering the top competencies valued by employers, we were able to confirm this study's hypothesis: *Older workers hold the competencies most valued by companies.*

In this regard, we saw that they overachieve the employer's evaluation of the competencies: *technical skills of the specific area of knowledge, work ability, ability to teamwork, ethics and social responsibility, and experience.*

Additionally, although underachieving the evaluation made by employers in the competencies of *goal orientation, proactivity, problem-solving and analysis, adaptability and flexibility and creativity and innovation*, it is important to highlight that in *goal orientation* they have a higher percentage than younger workers.

Many benefits derive from a competency-based approach, mainly, the broader characteristic of competencies (Hayton & Kelley, 2006). Therefore, it is important to review the idea that concerning older workers competence, the problem is mainly the obsolescence of competencies and not the age of the individual itself (Kroll, 2003). Mcintosh (2001) also adds on by suggesting that instead of allowing older workers skills and jobs to become stagnant, enterprises should focus on providing up-to-date training and retraining programs tailored to the needs and talents of their employees. In this regard, the author focuses on the importance of including all employees in diversity training programs, so that older workers can achieve respect. As older workers already have some technical training, they do not need as much of this type of training as their younger counterparts. Therefore, tailored training programs may answer some of the organisational issues (Mcintosh, 2001).

Back to the stereotyped idea that older workers have some kind of lower value to an organisation, our findings, alongside with the literature, show that, overall, older workers feel competent to remain in the labour market. In some cases, older workers don't have a positive idea of their competences, so they should have feedback on that, or what is happening in organisations is discrimination.

Age discrimination is a reality, as reported by Redman and Snape (2002). These authors state that age discrimination happens throughout the entire spectrum of the HRM cycle from the moment they compete for employment, and at the entry moment to exit of employees. Discrimination against older workers has the potential to accentuate the reduction of the available trained workforce (Jenkins & Poulston, 2014) since it blocks their willingness to remain active (Brooke & Taylor, 2005; OECD, 2006)

Additionally, Hedge *et al.* (2006) state that these age-related myths are also embedded in organisational cultures and reinforced by their policies and practices, influencing attitudes toward older workers. These myths and prejudices result in underutilisation of human resources and affect their self-esteem (Hedge *et al.*, 2006).

The perspective on older workers is not entirely negative or positive. Rather there is stereotyping when compared to younger workers, which is a core of the discrimination in the work context (Van Dalen, Henkens, & Schippers, 2010).

Robson *et al.* (2006) argue that discussions about positive and negative perceptions of the ageing workforce should consider the heterogeneous nature of this group as these workers have different needs, competencies and health levels.

Regardless, considering that this age group will have to stay working for a long time, this negative stereotyping trend should be contradicted, and organisations should empower and motivate these workers to benefit from them as a resource (Young, 2013).

Age discrimination, in practice, is difficult to combat because it is, on a large scale, hidden and indirect (Hedge *et al.*, 2006; Walker, 2005). This discrimination influences the perception of older workers' managers (Jenkins & Poulston, 2014) and manifests itself in recruitment, training and promotion practices (Fabisiak & Prokurat, 2012; Walker, 2005), as well as encouraging older workers to early retirement (Villosio *et al.*, 2008). In this sense, Claes and Heymans (2008) suggest that respect for the laws of age discrimination and equal opportunities makes the continuation of active life more attractive to these employees than early retirement since it transforms negative attitudes and recognises the contribution of these workers.

• Conclusions

Age discrimination is a reality that needs urgent attention. It is our understanding that HR managers should tackle this issue, working towards positive discrimination and investing in older workers development. Instead of focusing on age to manage people, the focus should be on competencies. However, in the context of accelerated technological and structural change, the internal diffusion of innovation is essential (Kroll, 2003). This internal diffusion of innovation depends, to a great extent, on the competencies of the employees and the structuring of the organisation's competencies (Kroll, 2003).

Competencies are more comprehensive and flexible (Fleury & Fleury, 2004), linked to the individual, rather than to a function (Hashim & Wok, 2014) and a differentiating factor that can guarantee competitiveness (Ceitil, 2010). Due to this, framing older workers in this reality is essential for understanding their value and promoting their retention, as well as helping organisations succeed in the labour market talent shortage.

With this paper, we aimed to identify the competencies held by older workers, investigate if there are differences with the competencies held by younger workers, and compare the competencies that older workers have with the ones that employers are looking for in their employees. We conducted an exploratory study, based in an online questionnaire, directed to Portuguese workers. Our findings suggest that the top 10 competencies held by older workers are, as follows: *work ability, technical skills of the specific area of knowledge, experience, ethics and social responsibility, autonomy, ability to teamwork, planning and organisation, adaptability and flexibility, lifelong learning, and loyalty*. The lowest competencies held by these workers are *growth potential, risk-taking and international experience*. When compared to younger workers, results suggest that *experience, sector/ industry knowledge, and customer orientation* were higher in the older workers. The competencies *adaptability and flexibility, proactivity, attention to detail, oral expression, and growth potential* were higher in younger workers. Finally, concerning the competencies valued by employers, our findings suggest that older workers present higher values than those required by employers in *experience and sector/ industry knowledge*. Competencies such as *adaptability and flexibility and diversity, multiculturalism* are higher than required in the younger workers group. This data confirms the hypothesis of this study: *Older workers hold the competencies most valued by companies*, by considering the top 10 competencies valued by employers and comparing them to the values presented by both young and older workers. In this regard, we verified that older workers fulfil the employer's evaluation of the competency's *technical skills of the specific area of knowledge, work ability, ability to teamwork, ethics and social responsibility, and experience*. Also, although older workers underachieve the needs evaluation made by employers in the competencies of *goal orientation, proactivity, problem-solving and analysis, adaptability and flexibility and creativity and innovation*, regarding *goal orientation* they present a superior percentage than younger workers.

This study contributes to the literature filling the gap of the identification of competencies held by older workers. Literature is scarce on this topic. We add on literature by suggesting a methodology to be used to identify the most required competencies by employers' in a country or geographic region. This research is also significant because it addresses the population ageing challenge and offers new insight on how to manage the older workers active in the workforce. To our knowledge, the competencies-based people management approach has never been applied to this population.

We suggest that focusing on competencies could be a better strategy to use on recruitment and selection, which enlarges the candidates' population, and in training and development as a strategy to retain older workers in the labour market by maintaining their skills and, thus, their competitiveness and companies competitiveness. By verifying that these workers hold the competencies most valued by employers, we are contributing to demystifying the myths and stereotypes associated with older workers.

As limitations, we point out the non-probabilistic sampling technique and the specificity of the sample itself, which does not allow the generalisation of the data herein. Also, competencies were self-attributed and, therefore, we cannot be sure that older workers do hold the mentioned competencies, but rather they perceive that they do.

There are many paths to pursue in the future for this topic. It would be interesting to study and compare competencies' perception of the older workers' and their employers. An analysis of the competencies across professions would also be of interest. Investigating the influence of discrimination and stereotypes, from the perspective of the employer and the worker, is worth academia and labour market attention. A longitudinal study analysing competencies evolution, as well as how training influences the competencies of these workers.

In conclusion, it is unanimous in the literature that, because of all they have to offer, senior workers should have equal opportunities for progression and skill development (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Ciutiene & Railaite, 2015; Claes & Heymans 2008; Young, 2013). Companies will underperform their potential if they do not use this competitive advantage that is an abundant resource, often internal, that is loyal and experienced: their older workers.

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