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Are Older Workers Recognised as Talent? Evidence on Silver Talent Management

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Abstract

The rapid ageing of the global workforce, often described as the “silver tsunami,” is reshaping organisational talent dynamics as experienced employees exit at retirement. While the notion of productive ageing reframes retirement as a potential second-stage career, organisations continue to face uncertainty in how to engage and manage older workers within existing talent systems. This creates an opportunity for organisations to develop talent management strategies that identify, attract, develop, and retain senior employees while promoting age inclusiveness. Although prior literature highlights both the opportunities and challenges associated with an ageing workforce, there remains limited empirical insight into how employers interpret and operationalise these dynamics in practice. Against this backdrop, this study examines how organisations perceive and manage older workers as a source of talent. Drawing on qualitative evidence from business organisations in Sri Lanka, the paper explores approaches to identifying, attracting, developing, and retaining older employees, with attention to the extent to which these practices reflect age-inclusive intent. The findings reveal largely informal and reactive practices, where older workers are valued but not systematically integrated into talent management systems. The study contributes by bridging the gap between the strategic importance of aging workforces and the limited institutionalization of age-inclusive talent practices, providing a basis for future research and practice in Silver Talent Management.

Keywords: Silver Talent, Productive Ageing, Silver Talent Management, Age-inclusive Strategies, Sri Lanka

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Introduction

The global population age structure is undergoing significant changes characterised by increasing life expectancy, declining fertility, and mortality rates (Brydsten et al., 2023). By 2050, the global adult population aged 60 and above is projected to grow by 120 percent, reaching 1.55 billion (Brydsten et al., 2023). As a result of a rapidly aging population, the phenomenon known as the ‘Silver Tsunami’ is occurring where the pool of retirees is overflowing, and the number of retirees leaving the workforce, along with their wealth of knowledge and talent, will create a significant talent gap in organizations. These demographic shifts in population impacts transformative shift in workforce (Brydsten et al., 2023). However, older workers are willing and eager to be retained in the workforce through delayed retirement, bridge employment, or continued participation beyond traditional retirement, thereby remaining economically active (Maxin & Deller, 2010; Riekhoff, 2024; van Dam et al., 2017)

Talent management is the function through which the organisation identifies, attracts, develops, and retains strategically important employees who are required for organisational performance and continuity. As organisations increasingly rely on experienced employees to sustain operational knowledge, industry expertise, and workplace capability, workforce aging surfaces as a critical talent management concern rather than a mere demographic issue. According to prior research, older workers often possess accumulated experience and organisational knowledge that can support continuity, mentoring, and knowledge transfer within organisations (Burmeister et al., 2020; Schulte et al., 2018; Tauro, 2021). However, despite these potential contributions, talent management systems have historically been associated with identifying high-potential, future-oriented employees, often implicitly privileging younger workforce groups (Harris & Foster, 2010). As a result, older workers are frequently viewed as experienced employees but not necessarily prioritise as “talent” within formal organisational talent systems (Harris & Foster, 2010; Mulders et al., 2018).

Existing research highlights a notable tension in how older workers are positioned within organisations. On the one hand, older employees are commonly associated with experience, reliability, commitment, and accumulated organisational knowledge (Rui & Ju, 2022; Schulte et al., 2018). Such attributes suggest they may represent an important source of organisational capability, particularly in contexts

where continuity, mentoring, and knowledge retention are valued. On the other hand, research also suggests that older workers are frequently overlooked in recruitment, development opportunities, and formal talent programs, whereas younger employees are often implicitly preferred (Harris & Foster, 2010; Mulders et al., 2018). Therefore, current talent management practices reflect exclusionary assumptions regarding “talent” within organizations (Harris & Foster, 2010). Consequently, while prior studies on the ageing workforce have extensively researched retirement, ageism, and extended working lives, there is a dearth of knowledge in the current literature regarding how employers interpret and manage older workers within organisational talent management systems. The relationship between workforce ageing and talent management therefore remains empirically underexplored.

The limited understanding of older workers within talent management systems is further complicated by ongoing conceptual ambiguity surrounding the definition of “talent” itself. Talent management has long been criticised for its lack of conceptual clarity and the inconsistency in identifying and defining ‘talent’ (Meyers et al., 2017, 2020). Although organisations increasingly promote diversity and inclusion as strategic priorities, it remains unclear whether talent management practices genuinely accommodate workforce diversity, including age diversity (Harris & Foster, 2010). Existing studies pinpoint that older workers are often positioned outside mainstream talent categories rather than being recognised as experienced and capable contributors (Foster & Harris, 2005). At the same time, the majority of research (Eversole et al., 2012; Sieber et al., 2025; Woolf, 2023) conducted on ageing workforce has focused predominantly on retirement transitions, age discrimination, employability, or policy-level responses, with comparatively limited attention given to how employers operationalise older workers within talent management systems. Thus, empirical evidence published on these issues from the employer perspective remains particularly limited in emerging economy contexts, where demographic transitions and organisational responses may differ substantially from those observed in Western settings. Accordingly, it is evident that there is limited understanding of whether organizations have meaningfully incorporated older workers into talent management practices or continue to manage them using implicit, age-neutral approaches.

Given this backdrop, this study examines how employers perceive and manage older workers as a source of talent within organisational talent management systems. The study is situated in Sri Lanka, home to one of the fastest-ageing societies in

South and Southeast Asia, where demographic transitions are rapidly reshaping labour market dynamics. Drawing on qualitative evidence from employers across multiple sectors, the study explores organisational practices related to identifying, attracting, developing, and retaining older workers. In particular, it examines whether older employees are explicitly recognised and managed as organisational talent or remain outside formal talent management systems. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research question: How do employers perceive and manage older workers as a source of talent within organisational talent management systems? Based on the findings, this paper introduces the concept of Silver Talent Management (STM) as an age-inclusive approach to understanding how organisations engage with older workers within talent management practice. Through this investigation, the study contributes to emerging discussions on age-inclusive talent management by providing empirical insights into the relationship between workforce ageing and organisational talent systems in an emerging-economy context.

Talent and Talent Management

The concept of talent has gained significant prominence within human resource management and organisational studies, particularly following the emergence of the “war for talent” discourse introduced by consulting and management literature in the late 1990s (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001). Since then, talent has increasingly been positioned as a strategic organisational resource linked to competitive advantage, organisational sustainability, and long-term performance (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Swailes, 2016). However, despite its popularity, the talent literature remains conceptually fragmented, with no universally accepted definition of what constitutes talent or who should be considered as talent (Lewis & Heckman, 2006; Meyers et al., 2017). Existing literature conceptualises talent through multiple lenses, including talent as human capital, giftedness, mastery, high performance, high potential, and contextual fit (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). Consequently, talent is not an objective or a fixed category, rather a socially and organisationally constructed phenomenon shaped by managerial assumptions, organisational priorities, and contextual realities (Wiblen & McDonnell, 2020).

Within talent management literature, organisations have traditionally adopted an exclusive approach to talent, focusing organisational investments on a relatively small group of employees perceived as high-performing or strategically valuable (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). Such approaches often prioritise future potential,

leadership capability, mobility, and long-term career progression, thereby privileging employees who fit dominant organisational expectations of growth and advancement (Thunnissen, 2016; Thunnissen et al., 2013). Scholars have therefore questioned whether talent management systems genuinely promote diversity and inclusion, or whether they reproduce existing organisational biases and inequalities (Harris & Foster, 2010). Empirical research further suggests that managerial perceptions significantly influence who is recognised as talent within organisations, reinforcing the idea that talent identification is shaped as much by organisational interpretation as by individual capability (Meyers et al., 2017; Wiblen & McDonnell, 2020). In this context, understanding how organisations perceive and categorise older workers within talent systems becomes particularly important, as talent recognition may not necessarily extend equally across different age groups.

At the same time, demographic and labour market changes have increasingly drawn organisational attention towards older workers and extended working lives. Contemporary perspectives such as successful ageing at work and lifespan development approaches challenge traditional decline-oriented assumptions of ageing by emphasising continued capability, adaptation, and contribution across the lifespan (Kooij et al., 2020). Similarly, age-inclusive HRM perspectives argue that older employees could continue to represent strategically valuable human capital when organisations create supportive and inclusive work environments (Boehm et al., 2021). Existing research refers to older workers with accumulated tacit knowledge, organisational memory, mentoring capability, professional networks, and industry-specific expertise developed over long careers (Burmeister, 2016; Burmeister et al., 2018; Schulte et al., 2018). Thus, retaining and engaging experienced employees is increasingly viewed as a potential strategy for facilitating knowledge continuity, sustaining organisational capability, and addressing labour shortages (Rui & Ju, 2022). However, despite these potential advantages, older workers continue to occupy an ambiguous position within organisations, where they may simultaneously be valued for their experience while also being perceived through concerns relating to adaptability, technological competence, succession planning, and future investment potential (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). These tensions raise important questions regarding whether and how older workers become recognised as organisational talent within existing talent management systems.

Silver Talents

The growing ageing workforce has increasingly challenged organisations to reconsider who is recognised as “talent” within organisational systems. Traditional talent management literature has largely positioned talent as a scarce source of competitive advantage associated with high performance, strategic capability, and future organisational value (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Swailes, 2016). However, such assumptions have historically privileged younger, high-potential employees while overlooking the accumulated expertise and experiential knowledge of older workers (Harris & Foster, 2010; Mulders et al., 2018). At the same time, lifespan and successful ageing at work perspectives suggest that ageing does not necessarily imply declining contribution, but rather changing forms of capability, motivation, and work participation across the life course (Kooij et al., 2020).

Within this study, silver talents refer to older employees, particularly those with substantial organisational, technical, or managerial experience, who continue to possess valuable expertise and remain willing or capable of contributing beyond conventional retirement expectations. However, most notably, silver talent is not restricted solely to senior managerial employees. Rather, it encompasses experienced workers across professional, technical, operational, and service roles whose accumulated tacit knowledge, organisational understanding, mentoring capability, and relational networks contribute strategic value to organisations. This broader conceptualisation recognises that talent identification is shaped by organisational context and managerial interpretation rather than hierarchical status alone (Wiblen & McDonnell, 2020).

Conceptualising Silver Talent Management

Despite these developments, traditional talent management systems often remain narrowly oriented towards younger “high-potential” employees and future leadership pipelines (Festing & Schäfer, 2014). This creates tension between organisational diversity aspirations and exclusive talent categorisation processes which may unintentionally marginalise older workers (Harris & Foster, 2010). In response, this paper introduces the concept of Silver Talent Management (STM) as an age-inclusive extension of talent management. STM positions experienced employees as a strategic talent resource whose expertise, organisational knowledge, mentoring capacity, and professional maturity can contribute to organisational continuity and capability renewal.

Accordingly, STM refers to the systematic organisational practices directed towards identifying, attracting, developing, engaging, and retaining experienced older workers who continue to possess strategically valuable capabilities and remain willing to contribute beyond traditional retirement expectations. Unlike conventional talent management approaches that predominantly emphasise future potential, STM places greater emphasis on leveraging accumulated experience, supporting knowledge continuity, and fostering intergenerational capability development within age-inclusive work environments. At the same time, STM does not assume that all older workers constitute strategic talent equally. Rather, the strategic value of silver talent remains contingent upon organisational context, role requirements, adaptability, and the continued relevance of employees' knowledge and capabilities (Allen, 2019; Wilckens et al., 2021). STM, therefore, extends traditional talent management by explicitly incorporating age inclusivity and leveraging post-retirement capabilities into organizational talent strategies.

Drawing from mainstream talent management and age-inclusive literature, this study conceptualises Silver Talent Management through four interconnected dimensions including identifying, attracting, developing, and retaining talent (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). These dimensions provide a framework for examining whether organisations explicitly integrate older workers into talent management systems or whether age-related practices remain fragmented and informal. In doing so, the study contributes to extending talent management discussions beyond traditional high-potential frameworks by examining how ageing workforce realities intersect with organisational talent practices.

Methodology

In this study, a purposively selected sample of 24 participants from 16 Sri Lankan private-sector organisations was used, and data were collected through interviews. Fifty percent of the interviews were conducted in the apparel and retail sectors, which employ relatively large numbers of workers. The remaining interviews were spread across five broader sectors: IT, tourism and leisure, education, and construction, to ensure coverage across the wider economy. Within each sector, organisations of different sizes were included. Annexure 1 includes the details on the interview profile.

The study ensured that selected employers were eligible to participate only if they had recent experience with workers aged 50 and above. However, the majority

of the organisations had relatively small shares of older workers, which limited their direct experience. Individuals who are responsible for recruitment, retention, and training within the organization participated in the interviews. In medium and large-scale firms, HR managers or directors participated in the interviews, while in smaller firms, the owner or the manager was interviewed. In some organisations, an additional interview was conducted with a line manager to identify different views related to ageing talents. This approach allowed the study to compare perspectives between HR-level and line-management-level staff. Data collection was carried out through face-to-face individual interviews, each lasting approximately an hour. Fieldwork was executed between January-February 2025. During the interviews, the researcher ensured the discussion focused on the older workforce as a source of talent within the organization. The interview guide covered the workforce profile of the organisation, including its age composition, and interviews explored whether employers track the age profile of their employees and whether any actions had been in place to adjust this profile. Furthermore, interviews were directed towards exploring strategies used to attract, develop, utilise, and retain older talent. It examined perceived advantages and disadvantages of employing older workers, as well as organisational processes for understanding plans and aspirations of older workers. The data were analysed using thematic analysis following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which followed deductive coding, theme development, and refinement.

Findings

Employer Perception of Silver Talent

The findings often revealed ambivalent positioning of older workers within the organizational talent system. The majority of employers consistently associated older workers with experience, reliability, loyalty, and organizational knowledge.

Employers frequently emphasised the importance of maintaining a balanced age composition within the workforce, suggesting that different age groups contribute complementary skill sets. As one manager noted, older engineers were viewed as stronger in analog systems, while younger employees were viewed as more digitally oriented, indicating perceived intergenerational complementarity. This reflects an implicit form of age-based functional differentiation rather than an integrated age-inclusive talent strategy.

“Really, we need a bit of everything. So, some of my older engineers tend to be better at analog electronics, and the younger ones tend to be better at IT skills. So, there is a benefit in having a range of ages in the skills and experience among staff.”

Further, Older workers were repeatedly associated with experiential depth and interpersonal maturity. Employers linked life experiences with improved judgment, people management capability, and task execution.

“It is experience, isn’t it...life experience and being able to handle people and being able to do the job they are employed to do... that’s what it’s all about ...”

However, this framing also reveals how “talent” in older workers is interpreted differently against dominant assumptions in talent management. Rather than future potential or promotability, older workers were primarily valued for accumulated experience and behavioural stability.

Moreover, employers frequently described older workers as more stable, loyal, committed, and conscientious. These perceptions often implicitly contrast with those of younger cohorts, who are perceived as more mobile and money-driven. Thus, stability was positioned as a key organisational advantage, particularly in roles requiring continuity and reduced employee turnover.

“There is stability... a different level of loyalty... younger people will move elsewhere for more money.”

This suggests that older workers are not necessarily excluded from talent narratives but are positioned within a different evaluative logic, one based on retention value and reliability rather than developmental potential. Importantly, this indicates a duality in perceptions of talent: older workers are valued operationally but remain peripheral in strategic talent pipelines.

In addition, employers also linked older workers to reduced absenteeism and fewer external family-related disruptions, reinforcing perceptions of reliability. In customer-facing sectors, older workers were preferred on some occasions due to perceived relational maturity and alignment with client demographics.

“When people are older, they tend to be more stable... it takes a lot to get everybody used to new people.”

However, this positive framing seems to coexist with underlying assumptions regarding physical capability and health limitations. Concerns were more pronounced in physically demanding roles such as manufacturing, retail, and construction. Notably, these concerns were often speculative rather than based on direct organisational experience, suggesting that perceptions may be shaped by broader age-related assumptions rather than empirical workplace evidence.

Employer Approaches to Silver Talent Management

The findings of the study indicate that STM is not formally institutionalised within organisational systems. Although HR policies are generally framed as age-neutral, managerial interpretations and decisions reveal subtle age-related assumptions that shape how older workers are positioned across recruitment, development, and retention practices. As a result, STM emerges not as a structured framework but as a set of informal and reactive practices embedded within general HR operations.

Identifying Silver Talent

As per participants' responses, there is no formal system for identifying older workers as a distinct talent category. Workforce analytics and talent mapping do not incorporate age as a structural variable, and recruitment decisions are made predominantly based on immediate role requirements, skills, and perceived fit.

“We don't monitor age. It's more about whether the person can do the job and fit in.”

Thus, experience is implicitly valued; however, it is not systematically captured in talent identification systems. Instead, recognition of older workers is based on informal visibility, reputation, and performance history. This indicates that talent identification is largely emergent rather than designed.

“We have generally relied heavily on website advertising, and we want to move slightly away from that because we feel like we miss a generation...”

“A bad back really limits what you can do....”

Nevertheless, claims of neutrality and implicit assumptions about health, longevity, and physical capability occasionally influence managerial judgment, particularly in physically demanding roles. This suggests a tension between formal HR neutrality and informal age-based reasoning in decision-making processes. These

narratives indicate that age-related considerations remain embedded in organisational thinking, even in the absence of formal age-based policies.

Attracting Silver Talent

The findings of this study did not demonstrate any evidence of targeted recruitment strategies for older workers. Recruitment channels such as online platforms and digital job portals tend to attract younger applicants, which indirectly shapes workforce composition.

“The younger generation is more likely to use IT solutions to find their jobs than older people.”

The analysis revealed that some of the organizations attempted informal adjustments, such as physical advertisements or wording aimed at mature applicants. However, these remain isolated practices rather than intentional, strategic employer-branding initiatives.

“We advertise on all our front gates and on a big sign outside, and we quite often get walk-ins...”

Some employers also experimented with wording aimed at older applicants:

“Position would ideally suit a mature, committed person, for example, someone looking for a career change or to return to work after raising a family.”

Based on the above views of managers, it can be said that the attraction of older workers appears incidental rather than intentional, suggesting that STM is not embedded within recruitment strategy design.

Developing Silver Talent

The study found that training and development practices are formally age-neutral, yet in practice, older workers have a low tendency to participate in training activities. Employers consistently stated that training needs are identified through employee appraisals or informal discussions with no specific reference to age. However, older workers were often perceived as having fewer training needs due to experience.

“Older workers don’t like training at all... especially online training, they really don’t like it.”

This reflects an implicit assumption that experience has been substituted for development investment. In some cases, employers questioned the return on investment of training older workers due to perceived shorter remaining tenure.

“Once you’ve trained them, how long are they going to be there?”

However, isolated examples demonstrate that development is possible when aligned with operational necessity and demonstrated capability. This indicates that development decisions are heavily contingent rather than systematic.

Importantly, this reveals a dissonance: older workers are simultaneously seen as experienced, so development needs are minimal; they are also approaching limited organizational tenure, making them less worthy of investment.

Retaining Silver Talent

Retention practices aimed at older workers were primarily based on flexible working arrangements, although these are applied informally and on a case-by-case basis. Employers recognised flexibility as important, but it has not been systematically embedded in organisational policy.

“We could not have a totally flexible situation... but we could work around it.”

Health and caring responsibilities also seemed to influence retention decisions. Employers described practices of adjusting working arrangements in response to health conditions or family responsibilities, but mainly on a short-term or informal basis. However, concerns about long-term capability and health risks were also evident in decision-making. Some employers reported that the removal of the default retirement age increased uncertainty about when employees might retire, making succession planning and recruitment for replacements more difficult.

“People might stay beyond 65 or even 70... succession planning has become difficult”

Despite these concerns, employers consistently recognised the value of older workers in terms of experience, reliability, and workplace knowledge. Yet this recognition does not translate into structured retention strategies.

Across all four dimensions of identifying, attracting, developing, and retaining silver talent, the evidence shows a consistent pattern of informal and reactive management. Older workers are valued for their experience and reliability, but they

are not managed through dedicated systems or age-specific HR strategies. Thus, the overall approach can be characterized as passive silver talent management, where the identification is implicit rather than structured, and attraction is non-targeted and channel-dependent. When development is considered, it is uneven and often constrained by perceptions of return on investment. Finally, retention seems to rely on flexible but informal arrangements. These findings reveal that while employers do not exclude older workers, they also do not actively and exclusively position them within strategic talent management systems.

Table 1 – Synthesis of Silver Talent Management Practices in Sri Lanka

Dimensions	Key Priorities (Actual Organisational Focus)	Current Practice (How Silver Talent is Actually Managed)
Identifying Silver Talent	Operational fitness, role experience, and immediate job requirements	No age-based talent mapping or profiling; older workers are recognised informally through performance visibility and experience; decisions remain case-based and manager-dependent
Attracting Silver Talent	Skills-based hiring and operational staffing needs	Recruitment channels (online portals, agencies) indirectly favour younger applicants; occasional use of general wording such as “mature applicants welcome”; attraction of older workers is incidental rather than planned
Developing Silver Talent	Skill gaps, operational training needs, and compliance training	Older workers are perceived as having limited training needs due to experience; reluctance towards training (especially digital learning); investment decisions influenced by perceived shorter employment horizon; development occurs mainly when role change or health issues require adjustment
Retaining Silver Talent	Workforce continuity, operational coverage, and short-term problem solving	Flexible work arrangements offered on an ad hoc basis; retention shaped by individual negotiation; adjustments made for health or family needs; despite recognition of experience and reliability, no formal retention strategy for older workers

Discussion and Implications

Building on the synthesis presented in Table 1, this study contributes to emerging scholarship on workforce ageing, age-inclusive HRM, and talent management by examining how employers in Sri Lanka perceive and manage older workers within organisational talent systems. While prior literature increasingly recognises the strategic importance of experienced employees in ageing labour markets (Boehm et al., 2021; Wilckens et al., 2021), the findings of this study suggest that older workers occupy an ambiguous position within organisational practice. Employers consistently value older employees for their reliability, organizational knowledge, stability, and interpersonal maturity, yet these attributes are rarely reflected in formal talent recognition or systematic talent management practices. This reveals an important distinction between being operationally valued and being strategically positioned as organisational talent.

Empirical evidence from the Sri Lankan context further deepens this interpretation. Many employers described workforce management practices that were highly informal, relationship-oriented, and operationally driven rather than strategically systematised. Consequently, age-related HR practices emerged through managerial discretion and practical accommodation rather than through formalised age-inclusive HR policies. This may explain why employers expressed generally positive attitudes towards older workers while simultaneously lacking structured mechanisms to identify, develop, or retain them as talent. Rather than deliberate exclusion, the findings highlight the prevalence of passive or implicit STM, in which older workers are accommodated when operationally valuable but rarely incorporated into long-term strategic workforce planning.

The findings also reflect tensions highlighted in the lifespan development and successful ageing at work perspectives. These perspectives argue that ageing should not be viewed solely through decline-based assumptions but through changing patterns of capability, motivation, and contribution across the lifespan (Kooij et al., 2020). Employers in this study frequently acknowledged the value of accumulated expertise, mentoring capability, and professional maturity among older workers. However, such recognition coexisted with concerns about health limitations, digital adaptability, training return on investment, and succession uncertainty. This suggests that organisations simultaneously construct older workers as both valuable assets and potential organisational risks. The coexistence of these competing assumptions helps

explain why employers may support retaining experienced workers operationally while hesitating to invest in them strategically through formal talent systems.

Across the four STM dimensions, the findings reveal important patterns. First, identifying silver talent remained highly informal and experience-based, with no evidence of systematic age-aware workforce analytics or talent segmentation. Older workers became visible primarily through accumulated organisational experience and performance reputation rather than through structured talent identification systems. Second, attraction practices demonstrated how apparently age-neutral recruitment systems may unintentionally privilege younger applicants. Heavy reliance on digital recruitment platforms, online applications, and conventional employer branding appeared to limit accessibility for some older workers, even though employers did not explicitly exclude them.

Third, development practices revealed one of the clearest tensions within organisational assumptions about ageing. Although employers recognised that older workers continued to contribute valuable expertise, training investments were often evaluated against perceived shorter employment horizons and assumptions regarding lower adaptability. This reflects broader age-related stereotypes identified in prior research (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). Importantly, the findings also revealed that older workers were capable of reskilling and role transition when organisations perceived operational necessity and capability alignment. Thus, limited development opportunities appeared less associated with inability and more with managerial investment logic and organisational expectations surrounding late-career work.

Finally, retention practices further reinforced the reactive nature of STM within the organisations studied. Flexible working arrangements and role adjustments were often provided, but largely through informal negotiation rather than embedded policy structures. While such flexibility enabled some older workers to remain economically active, reliance on managerial discretion also created inconsistency and uneven access across organisational levels and occupational groups. Hence, in practice, retention functioned more as an operational accommodation than as a strategic retention architecture.

On a holistic note, the study extends existing discussions on age-inclusive HRM by distinguishing STM from broader age-management practices. Age-inclusive HRM primarily focuses on reducing age discrimination and creating equitable work

environments across age groups (Boehm et al., 2014). In contrast, STM specifically positions experienced older workers as a strategically valuable talent resource within organisational capability systems. Thus, STM is not simply about retaining older employees; rather, it concerns how organisations identify, attract, develop, and retain experience-based human capital as part of broader talent management processes. The findings of the study suggest that while elements of age-inclusive practices may exist informally within Sri Lankan organizations, these practices have not yet evolved into coherent talent management architectures that explicitly recognise older workers as strategic talent pools.

Conclusion

This study examined how employers perceive and manage older workers within organisational talent systems in the Sri Lankan context. The findings indicate that employers generally value older employees for their experience, reliability, organisational knowledge, loyalty, and workplace stability. Older workers were frequently associated with stronger interpersonal capability, operational maturity, and continuity within organisations. However, despite this positive recognition, such attributes were rarely translated into formal or strategically integrated talent management practices.

The study suggests that older workers currently occupy a somewhat ambiguous position within organisational practice. While employers often appreciate the contributions of experienced employees at the operational level, age-related workforce considerations are not systematically embedded in talent identification, attraction, development, or retention systems. Instead, practices associated with managing older workers appear largely informal, reactive, and dependent on managerial discretion. This reflects a broader pattern where organisations rely primarily on age-neutral HR approaches without explicitly incorporating ageing workforce realities into talent management architectures.

The findings further indicate that organisational perceptions of older workers remain shaped by competing assumptions. On the one hand, employers recognised the value of accumulated experience, organisational memory, mentoring capability, and workforce stability. On the other hand, concerns regarding health, adaptability, technological capability, training investment returns, and succession-planning uncertainty continued to influence managerial decision-making. These tensions help

explain why older workers may be operationally valued while remaining less visible within formal talent systems.

Rather than concluding that Sri Lankan organisations have neglected ageing workforce issues entirely, the findings suggest that population ageing has not yet become a strongly institutionalised talent management priority across the organisations studied. Workforce ageing appears to be interpreted more as an operational issue to be accommodated incrementally rather than as a strategic workforce transformation requiring a systematic organisational response. Consequently, what this study conceptualises as STM currently appears to exist in a relatively emergent and underdeveloped form within practice.

The study contributes to the literature by extending discussions on age-inclusive HRM and talent management through the introduction of STM as a conceptual lens for examining how organisations position experienced older workers within talent systems. Importantly, the study does not present STM as a fully established or universally defined framework. Rather, STM should be understood as an emerging conceptual perspective requiring further theoretical refinement and empirical validation across different organisational and national contexts.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that Sri Lankan organisations may benefit from developing more deliberate approaches to managing experienced employees, particularly in relation to knowledge continuity, late-career development, flexible work arrangements, and intergenerational capability transfer. The findings also highlight the importance of strengthening managerial capability to handle age-diverse workforces and reducing reliance on purely informal approaches to managing older workers.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied solely on employer perspectives and therefore does not capture how older workers themselves interpret organisational practices, opportunities, or barriers. Second, the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study limits broad generalisation across all sectors and organisational contexts in Sri Lanka. Third, organisational practices discussed by participants may partly reflect perceptions, assumptions, or hypothetical considerations rather than consistently implemented policies.

Accordingly, future research could extend this work by incorporating the perspectives of older workers themselves, conducting sector-specific comparisons,

and examining how organisational size, industry characteristics, or ownership structures influence silver talent practices. Further studies may also help refine and theoretically validate the STM concept by more clearly distinguishing it from broader age-inclusive HRM and traditional talent management approaches. Overall, the study highlights the growing importance of understanding how ageing workforce realities intersect with organisational talent systems within emerging economy contexts.

Annexure 1- Details of the Study Participants

Sector	Number of businesses	Number of interviews conducted	Participant profile
Apparel	4	6	HR Managers (02) Directors (02) Line Managers (02)
Retail	4	6	HR Managers (4) Line Managers (02)
IT	2	3	HR Managers (02) Line Managers (01)
Tourism and Leisure	2	3	HR Managers (02) Operations/ Line Managers (01)
Education	2	3	HR/Administrative Heads (02); Line Managers (01)
Construction	2	3	Owners/Managers (02); Site/ Line Managers (01)
Total	16	24	

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