Abstract

A refinement of the construct of age, specifically ‘older’ is recognised as a critical measurement concern for experts in both ageing research and policy formation. In this context, we set out to both chronologically define an ‘older worker’, and to identify on what basis the age of ‘older’ is determined. In doing so, we draw on open-ended survey data (collected in 2011) from a sample of 407 organisational decision makers across all industries in Ireland. Our focus was specifically on the perspective of organisational decision makers, since these individuals will be instrumental in facing the challenges associated with workforce ageing. The results show that workers are considered as ‘older’ at a younger age than might be expected, and that decision-makers conceptualise workers as ‘older’ using various approaches in the organisational context. Our findings contribute to the literature in three ways: firstly by providing an important empirically derived understanding of the term ‘older worker’; secondly, by empirically examining previously suggested ‘possible’ indicators of age; and thirdly, by demonstrating that these indicators are conceptually and empirically distinct, advancing theory on the concept of age in the workplace.

Keywords: age, older workers, age identity, ageism, age stereotypes, decision makers
Workforce ageing has been labelled the defining social issue of the 21st century (Pitt-Catsouphes, 2007). As ‘older workers’ become a dominant demographic group in the workplace, finding solutions to the economic and social pressures arising from ageing populations through increasing the labour market participation of these ‘older workers’ is a persistent and pressing policy concern (OECD, 2005; Phillipson and Smith, 2005; Riach, 2009). The study of ageing at work with a particular focus on ‘older workers’ is thus at the forefront of the research agenda internationally, and yet, there remains little consensus on the age or ages at which an ‘older worker’ is defined (Charness, Czaja and Sharit, 2007; Finkelstein, 2011). Shalk et al. (2010) draw attention to the need for a better conceptualisation of age in the workplace than currently exists, since the specific age at which an employee is identified as ‘older’ can have important, often negative, outcomes for them (Snape and Redman, 2003; Visser, Henkens and Schippers, 2003; Wood, Wilkinson and Harcourt, 2008).

Despite repeated calls for the refinement of the construct of age in the workplace (cf. Finkelstein, 2011; Kooij, De Lange, Jansen, and Dikkers, 2008; Schalk et al. 2010), the current lack of a priori consensus on the term ‘older worker’ presents a problem not only for ageing and work researchers, but also for policy makers and decision makers alike (Truxillo, Zaniboni, Fracaroli and Rineer, 2012) since, as Gonyea (2009) suggests, any attempt to determine the current and future number of older workers must start with a definition of who ‘older workers’ are. More specifically, understanding older worker bias is made more difficult “if we do not
know what we are talking about when we use the word old” (Finkelstein and Farrell, 2007:10).

This paper offers an empirical investigation of the construct of age in the workplace, and addresses repeated calls for greater empirical evidence at the level of the organisation on the conceptualisation of age at work. We contribute to the literature in three particular ways. Our first contribution in this paper is to empirically explore at what age, and why, a worker is considered ‘older’ by decision makers in organisations. We do this by offering empirical evidence from 407 managers and supervisors on the age at which they consider a worker to be ‘older’, as well as their rationale as to why they conceptualise a worker to be ‘older’ at this age. We found no published empirical evidence of this nature in our search of the extant literature to date, yet, the centrality of this stakeholder group in understanding and managing age diversity is increasingly recognised. We argue that any evidence that helps us to better understand how this group conceptualises age in the workplace offers progress in this field.

We identify a decision maker as any manager or supervisor who has direct responsibility for making decisions relating to the hiring, training, development, promotion or dismissal (by way or redundancy) of employees in their organisation. We believe that decision makers’ views of who constitutes an older worker are critical, since these managers and supervisors determine entry/re-entry to employment, identification of talent for promotion, access to training and development opportunities at work, and retention prospects for all workers. We know from successive studies over many years that age bias remains a persistent problem in the workplace. Hirsch et al. (2000) point to evidence of outright and pervasive age
discrimination in the workplace and successive meta-analyses of age discrimination research by Finkelstein et al. (1995), Kite and Johnson (1988) and of age stereotypes by Ng and Feldman (2008) consistently indicate an overall negative bias against ‘older workers’. These negative stereotypes become ingrained in organisational norms and incorporated into HR systems (Farr et al. 1998) unless actively challenged. In point of fact, Hedge and Kehoe (2009) stress that there are probably more policies and decisions which are implicitly age-biased than those that are explicitly so, while Adler and Hibler (2009) note that employer practices regarding hiring, layoffs, workplace environment, and employee benefits structure all play an important role in determining an older worker’s ability to work. McCann and Giles (2002:167) further caution that where negative perceptions of older people in general are extrapolated into the workplace context, those generalisations can play a part in stereotypical expectations by management which may serve as a harbinger to ageist communication and discriminatory practices towards older workers. Both Leisink and Knies (2011) and Hedge (2009) identify a central role for managers in this respect, since their role provides them with the potential to influence cultural values and position their organisation as one that supports age-neutral policies and practices. Together, we can see that the manner in which ‘older workers’ are considered by managers is likely to have a significant impact on the treatment of this category of worker, a point which Shalk et al. (2010) suggest is likely to be determined by certain underlying conceptualisations of ageing.

Kite and Wagner (2004) argued that age-based ratings cannot be easily categorised or captured since it matters whom you ask and what you ask about. While a number of models have offered important conceptual approaches to how workers
can be categorised as ‘older’, i.e. (Sterns and Doverspike, 1989; Cleveland and Shore, 1992, and Pitt-Catsouphes, Matz-Costa and Brown 2010), to-date these models have not been empirically examined in an organisational context. Our second contribution, therefore, is to empirically examine the utility of Sterns and Doverspike’s Conceptualisation of Age (1989) framework for understanding age in an organisational context – to our knowledge; this has not been completed, or certainly published to date. We show that previously suggested ‘possible’ conceptualisations of ageing are conceptually and empirically distinct, particularly in the context of work. Our third contribution proposes an extension of Sterns & Doverspike’s (1989) framework, building on recent work by Shalk et al. (2010), which we believe resonates with practitioners, and which provide avenues for fruitful debate in terms of policy development.

In attempting a clear categorisation in this paper, we are asking organisational decision-makers about who they consider an ‘older worker’ to be, and why they consider such a worker to be ‘older’. Our core argument in this paper centres around this: if we are to progress to a stage where we can influence decisions about older worker longevity in the workplace, we need first to know at what age a worker is identified as an ‘older worker’, and more specifically, we need to understand what influences this concept of ‘older’ in an organisational context.

This paper is organised around the following sections. First, we discuss the difficulties related to defining the ‘older worker’ and explore existing conceptualisations used to define age in the workplace, with a particular focus on Sterns and Doverspike’s (1989) seminal contribution. Next, we describe our study
sample and explain how we collected the data. We then present our analysis and findings, and discuss the contributions and implications of our study.

**Conceptualising an ‘Older Worker’**

One cannot escape the global interest in the issues surrounding an ageing workforce, and ‘older workers’ more specifically (for example, Phillipson, 2013; Vendramin et al. 2012). However, specifying who is (and who is not) an “older worker remains elusive” (Pitt-Catsouphes and Smyer, 2006:2). Internationally, public policies on workforce ageing typically describe older workers using the cut-off age markers of either 55 years of age, or 65 years of age depending on the policy context. For example, discussions about the labour force participation of older workers tend to focus on those aged over 55 (AARP, 2010; DELSA, 2005). Kooij et al. (2008) reason that this age marker is chosen because declines in labour market participation are particularly apparent among workers aged over 55 in many countries; the so-called ‘tide of early exit’ (Loretto and White, 2006). Debates about pension reforms and retirement, on the other hand, tend to place an emphasis on those aged 65 years and over (Evans, Ekerdt, and Bosse, 1995; OECD, 2005), which largely coincides with statutory pension provisions taking effect at this age in several countries. Researchers variously use the threshold of 55 or 65 years of age as a definition (Rupp et al. 2005), or sometimes use as low as 45 years of age to define older at work (Pitt-Catsouphes and Smyer, 2006).

Somewhat surprisingly, much of the existing research does not actually offer any explicit definition of an older worker. Where it does, it tends to rely on the dominant policy age markers referred to above, or references protective employment
legislation in the respective country context of the research. This is problematic, not least because, as highlighted by both Charness et al. (2007) and Finkelstein and Farrell (2007), there remains no established chronological age at which to define an ‘older worker’. What we are left with is an age range for older workers that extends from as low as 40 years old through to statutory retirement ages of between 65 and 68 (Pitt-Catosuphes and Smyer, 2006; Stein and Rocco, 2001). Kite and Wagner (2004) suggest that the specific age used to delineate an age-based category may matter less than other factors (such as context, or physical manifestations of ageing). We agree with this as a general point, however, we argue that the specific age used to denote older is highly significant in the workplace context. Having a broad age range is both unhelpful and also, in our view, potentially dangerous. Assuming that older workers are somehow an homogenous group can have serious consequences for the individual and organisation alike. It is unrealistic to assume that a 40 year old worker will have similar work values, attributes and expectations than will a 65 year old. It is similarly dangerous to conceive that managers would or should ascribe similar work values, attitudes and expectations to workers aged between 40 and 68 and make work based decisions about them accordingly (relating especially to their employment, development or retention). This sets the context for our first research question as follows:

Research Question 1: At what chronological age will decision makers in organisations define a worker as an ‘older worker’?
There is growing evidence that our social definitions of what constitutes ‘old’ or ‘older’ are starting to shift. Moulaert and Biggs (2013) point to increasing life expectancies and a greater ability to lead more active and productive lifestyles throughout the ageing process as some of the key factors challenging our conceptions of what older constitutes today. Cleveland and Lim (2007:110) note that an ‘older worker’ may be difficult to capture in a single chronological age measure, because “ageing is viewed as a multidimensional process” that includes changes that occur in biological, psychological and social activity over time. Thus, individuals with the same chronological age may be affected differently by the ageing process, and at different stages (Kooij et al. 2008). Thus, whilst acknowledging the value of the chronological perspective on age, increasingly researchers are moving towards more contextualised approaches to defining age in the work setting.

Sterns and Doverspike’s (1989) conceptualisations of age model is perhaps the best cited work that offers a differentiated understanding of how age may be considered in the workplace, and this forms the conceptual framework for our paper here. They identify five conceptualisations of age: chronological, functional, psychosocial, organisational and life-span age. **Chronological age** simply refers to the actual calendar age an individual is; **functional age** is viewed in terms of biological changes (physical and mental) that occur in line with increases in age and which may impact work i.e. health and wellness, physical ability to perform tasks and cognitive ability; **psycho-social age** considers both other peoples’ perceptions of the age a worker is considered to be, and a subjective assessment of how old or young the individual worker perceives him/herself to be. Older could thus relate to how someone feels, thinks or acts, or how others view him/her reflecting perhaps
learned/assumed social norms and dominant stereotypes about how old s/he is;

- **organisational age** refers to perceptions of workers’ ages based on both the length of time (tenure) that the individual has been with the organisation, his/her career to date, or the age norms within the organisation, while **life-span age** takes into account individuals’ changes in behaviour at different stages across the life cycle, according to dominant interests and preferences, or personal circumstances such as changes in family or socio-economic status. Sterns and Doverspike’s work has been revisited in the intervening years. For example, Cleveland and Shore (1992) proposed that their conceptualisation of workers’ age model could be separated into person-based age measures that capture the individual’s perception of self (chronological, functional and subjective age), and context-based age measures which involve a specific comparison with others or with a group (organisational age and social age), while Pitt-Catosuphes et al. (2010) suggested that age conceptualisation in the workplace could include generational age; tenure age; and career-stage age perspectives.

Shalk et al. (2010) provide a very useful depiction of Sterns and Doverspike’s (1989) categorisations (as shown in Figure 1), and suggest a number of possible indicators for each age category, ranging from age as an individual personal characteristic on the one hand through to age as an embedded characteristic of the environment on the other. They note that while a number of studies have explored both the interrelationships between Sterns and Doverspike’s (1998) conceptualisations, and the relationship between these and individual work related outcomes such as job satisfaction, motivation, commitment and well-being for example (Cleveland and Shore, 2002; DeLange et al. 2006; Kooij et al. 2008), there remains a dearth of empirical evidence at the organisational level. We similarly
remarked this growing literature from the individual employees perspective, but could find no evidence from the managerial stakeholder perspective in organisations. Shalk et al. (2010:79) further note that much of the existing work suggests only ‘possible’ indicators of how age is conceptualised in the workplace, while Kooji et al. (2008:385) call for greater attention to be given to the operationalisation of these conceptualisations, since psychometric studies on the (relations between) indicators of the different approaches to measure ageing at work are still lacking.

In an effort to address this empirical deficit, our second research question explores how age is conceptualised in the workplace, by asking organisational decision makers to explain what factors prompted them to consider someone an ‘older worker’.

Research Question 2: How will decision makers in organisations conceptualise ‘older workers’?

Our objective here is to determine whether decision makers’ responses can be encapsulated within the existing conceptualisations identified by Sterns and Dovespike, or whether any additional conceptualisations are in evidence.

**Method**

A sample of 1200 organisational decision makers was drawn from small, medium, and large organisations across all NACE (Statistical Classification of Economic Activities in the European Community)-listed industry sectors in Ireland. Organisational decision makers are defined in our study as managers and supervisors with responsibility for making decisions relating to the recruitment, selection, promotion, training, development and retention of workers in their organisations. The
participants were invited via e-mail to partake in the study by filling out an online questionnaire. To ensure that all participants met our definition of decision maker, a list of filters was included at the outset. Our final sample included completed responses from $N=407$ organisational decision makers which represents an overall response rate of 34 percent. Table 1 presents an overview of the key characteristics of our sample according to their managerial position, chronological age range (for illustrative purposes and for ease of comparison, we collapsed the respondent ages into 35 years and younger, 36-50 and 51-70), gender, tenure and industry sector in which they are employed (for ease of comparison we split this into manufacturing and services).

Insert Table 1 about here

Since the goal of this research was to chronologically define an ‘older worker’, and to explore the rationale underpinning this chronological age marker, two particular questions were asked. The first question simply asked decision makers to state the age (in years) at which they considered a worker to be an ‘older worker’. Of the 407 decision-makers in our study, 358 (88 percent) of the respondents answered this question. The second question was completely open and asked respondents to explain why they chose that particular chronological age to define a worker as an ‘older worker’. A total of 311 (76 percent) answered this second question.

We used an extensive code-based, thematic analysis of the open responses which combined elements of both content analysis (Ryan and Bernard, 2000) and concept mapping (Jackson and Trochim, 2002) and which were completed in a number of sequential stages. We first created units of analysis from the text, which are sentences or phrases containing only one concept. Respondents’ answers were, on
average, a short paragraph of between one and three sentences describing why they defined a worker as an ‘older worker’ at the chronological age that they had already identified. Each answer was then broken down into separate statements containing one idea about conceptualising an ‘older worker’. The majority of respondents’ statements provided just one reason or idea, though there were a small number (n=14) who provided 2 separate reasons, while 2 respondents listed 3 reasons. We included all responses separately, although we noted that those second or third reasons were similar in overall approach to each other. For example, one decision maker defined an ‘older worker’ as having “reached a plateau in their career, it has probably peaked by now and slowing, and they begin planning for retirement”. As advised by Jackson and Trochim (2002) this statement was separated into two separate units of ideas - career stage and retirement planning. What emerged was a total of 335 units ready for coding. The next step in our coding schema involved re-sorting each unit of analysis into sets of similar statements. We started this stage by utilising Sterns and Doverspike’s (1989) established conceptualisation of age framework of ‘functional’, ‘psychosocial’, ‘organisational’, and ‘life-span’ to categorise the statements. We created one additional set which we termed ‘other’ for all responses that did not fit within this framework.

The researchers made all unitising decisions separately, and then performed an inter-rater reliability check to confirm the utility of Sterns and Doverspike’s framework. A large majority of the statements (n=298) were accommodated easily within the framework. The remaining ‘other’ set was once again re-sorted by organising into sub-sets of similar statements. Again, these steps were performed separately, and were followed by an inter-rater reliability check. It became apparent at
this stage that this category contained responses from decision makers who did not appear to be able to identify a specific reason for the “older worker” age marker they had indicated in their answer to the first question. The most typical comments here included “I don’t know really”, “that’s just how I feel”, or “that to me is an older worker”. Rather than group these with the non-respondents to the question, we labelled them as a separate ‘No Specific Reason Provided’ category. All sets were then given a code and inputted into our data file for analysis.

**Results**

As might be expected, responses to the first question asking at what chronological age decision makers consider a worker to be an ‘older worker’ varied considerably. Participant decision makers reported that the age at which a worker is considered ‘older’ ranged from 28 to 75 years of age, with a median of 55 years of age. Specifically, the mean age at which a worker is perceived as older by decision makers in our sample is 52.40 years (SD=7.4, 95% CI [51.75, 53.26]). An examination of the results, shown in Figure 2, indicates a bimodal distribution, with the most common indicators of ‘older worker’ being 50 and 55, followed by another spike at 60.

Insert Figure 2 about here

We then explored whether individual decision-maker’s demographics, namely chronological age, gender, job position, organisational tenure, or the industry in which they were employed, had any relationship with their chronological identification of an ‘older worker’. We used a one-way analysis of variance to explore the impact of age
on chronological definitions of an ‘older worker’. There was a significant and positive correlation between decision-maker chronological age (re-categorised into three groups of 35 years and under, 36-50 years and 51+ years) and the perceived age of an ‘older worker’ such that decision makers aged 35 years and under were statistically more likely to categorise a worker as ‘older’ at a relatively younger age (mean = 50.91) than did decision makers over 35 years (mean = 53.11), or those over 50 years (mean = 53.46). The data show that decision makers’ chronological definitions of age change gradually as they themselves chronologically age at work. Decision-maker gender, position organisational tenure, and industry type were not significant when correlated with the identified chronological age of an ‘older worker’ age variable.

**Rationale for Determining the Age one becomes ‘Older’**

Research Question 2 sought explanations for how decision makers conceptualised older workers in their organisation. Of the 407 individual respondents, a total of 90 failed to answer this question at all, however, and as indicated earlier in the methods section, since 14 decision makers provided two reasons, and a further 2 decision makers provided 3 reasons, the total number of recorded reasons for this question is 335. Table 2 presents the pattern of responses in order of frequency cited.

**Organisational Age:** A clear majority of statements (N= 206/61.6 per cent) reflected an organisational age approach to defining a worker as an ‘older worker’.

We identified five distinct within-theme categories here as follows: (1) ‘planning for

Planning for Retirement. A quarter of decision makers in our sample (25.4 per cent) conceptualised the age of an ‘older worker’ as being representative of the age at which employees begin to prepare for retirement, as evidenced in the following statements:

‘The focus for them changes at this stage as they then start to prepare for retirement and financial security for retirement occupies the mind a bit more…the final phase before retirement’

‘Retirement is around this time and often people have made plans to retire’.

‘This is the typical age for earliest retirement planning in our organisation’.

‘Lots of experience, up to 30+ years, a whole lifetime of working really, and they start planning to retire’.

‘Older workers are those with 15 years to retirement age’.

‘Older is within 10 years of traditional retirement age’.

Career-Stage. A total of 38 (11.3 per cent) decision makers indicated that they considered a worker as ‘older’ because they have either reached the last phase of their careers, are nearing the end of their careers, or are not seen to be career active. The following statement are illustrative here:

‘There are three career phases (assuming college attendance): phase 1 = 22 to 35; phase 2 = 36 to 54; phase 3 = 55+, so 55+ is older’.

‘They're in the last third of the typical career’.

‘They are no longer interested in career advancement’.

‘At 55, chances of career change or job move decline’.

‘...by 50 a career path has been well formed if not exhausted and so opportunities become more limited’.
'Up to that age an employee is thinking of the future and career prospects, after 50 the focus is more on exit strategy’.

‘Their career has peaked and is tapering off at this age’.

‘This seems to be the age when career progress stalls for most employees (except those staying the course for 'the few' promotion opportunities still available)’.

**Organisational Age Norms.** Here some 32 (9.6 per cent) of the statements reflected that ‘older workers’ are identifiable relative to the age of their co-workers in the organisation. The following comments are indicative here:

‘…because at this age, they are older than the working group in the company’.

‘Ahem, good question. Very difficult to answer. I originally put down 60+, but I changed it when I considered the organisation in which I work’.

‘It depends on the individual, their role, their experience, their outlook. It is very hard to say what is an older employee…but I think it really relates to the comparative ages of colleagues’.

‘The average age in this company is approx. 35, so older than that is old’

‘Relative to other employees’.

**Tenure Age.** A total of 31 decision makers (9 per cent) conceptualised “older” as associated with the length of service, or tenure, that a worker holds within the organisation, for example:

‘Usually they would have completed long service within the organisation’.

‘It’s due to having approx. 30yrs experience in the organisation’.

‘This is somewhat arbitrary, but old enough to have more than 20 years work experience’.

‘They’re older because they have been in the company a long time at this age’.
Industry Age Norms. A final 21 statements (6.3 percent) reflected age norms within the industry (as distinct from the organisation) as a defining feature of the conceptualisation of an “older worker”. Here decision-makers noted that workers of a certain age could be defined as ‘older’ because the nature of work in their industry is perceived to be more ‘suited’ to those who are younger than this age. This perception was especially prevalent in responses from the retail and hospitality service industries in our study. The following comments are indicative here:

‘The hotel industry is ideally geared towards a younger employee’.

‘This is based on my opinion that in the catering industry I would say that it is more predominantly young people that are working in the sector’.

‘Nature of the retail industry, it’s normally very young’.

‘This is a reflection of the industry I am in - pub work I feel is suited to a younger age group and is often just a stepping stone to further employment - those who are seeking these positions at an older age, I view as having little ambition’.

‘Fashion retail is trend led and changes from season to season. It is more directed at younger people and is therefore more suited to younger employees’.

Psychosocial approach: A total of 42 decision makers (12.5 per cent) made reference to the influence of psychosocial variables in their conceptualisation of an older worker. Here, respondents believed the age of an ‘older worker’ was mainly a ‘reflection of society’, or other culturally established norm, as evidence in the following statements:

‘In my mind up to 40 is young, 40 to 55 is middle age and 55+ is older’

‘In society, the age of over 50 is considered older’.
‘It seems about where the cultural norm sits when one is 40+ oneself!’

‘Because I am currently 51, and I am as motivated as I have been in my 30s and 40s. I suspect I would like to slow down a little bit in about another 10 years - maybe! In my experience, colleagues I have worked with have tended to slow down and work less as they approach 60’

‘I was that age when I started working in this institution and I felt ancient!’

**Functional Age:** Conceptualising an “older worker” in terms of functional (physical or mental) ability was evident in just 26 statements (7.8 per cent). Two particular features are worth highlighting here – some statements referred specifically to workers’ physical age, while others remarked simply on workers’ age appearance. The following statements are reflective here:

‘They are physically slower’

‘It’s the biological ageing process; workers get older and can’t perform to the same standards as younger workers’

‘In our business physical fitness is a big role, driving jobs get harder at this age’

‘they actually look older physically’

‘grey hair, means you’re older at work’.

**Life-stage age:** A total of 24 statements (7.2 per cent) define workers as ‘older workers’ from a life-stage age perspective. Some statements conceptualised an ‘older worker’ according to their transitions in and out of life roles:

‘Job/company remains the same but they have different priorities (personal) in what they want to achieve from working e.g. looking for work life balance etc.’
‘It’s all downhill from 50 - time to start relaxing and enjoying their experiences’

‘40 really is the start of a new phase in life for most people, with families tending to be older’

‘At this stage work ambitions may be superseded by home and personal ambitions’

We then conducted a one-way between-groups analysis of variance to explore the relationship between these conceptualisations of age and the chronological age earlier provided to define an ‘older worker’. While the mean ages identified for each of the four broad categorisations of functional, psycho-social, organisational and life-stage were not significant, we did find a statistically significant difference between a number of the within-theme conceptualisations delineated earlier: $F(11, 298) = 8.975, p<.001$. Since our stated objective in this paper is to better understand organisational age, we draw attention to the significant findings with respect to this conceptualisation here. Our analysis shows that the mean chronological age identified by those who defined an “older worker” in terms of physical age was statistically different from the within-theme organisational age conceptualisations of career-stage age, organisational age norms, tenure age, and industry age norms. The social age approach was statistically different from the functional age, retirement planning age, and industry age norms. Within the organisational age conceptualisation, the retirement planning approach was found to be different from the career, organisational age norms, industry age norms and tenure age approaches.

In an effort to identify any pattern among the individual decision makers with respect to their descriptions of “older worker”, we explored whether decision maker
position, age, gender, tenure or industry held explanatory power. The only variable that showed a statistical significance was decision-maker position.

We collapsed the various categories of decision-maker position into strategic, functional and supervisory roles to facilitate pattern identification. There was no significant difference in the conceptualisation of age identified by each category. While there was evidence of all four approaches to conceptualising age being used, the organisational age approach, and particularly retirement planning was most highly referenced across all three categories of decision-maker.

**Discussion & Implications**

It is clear that organisations and policy makers alike are focusing more attention on developing and implementing strategies to foster continued utilisation of older employees. Morris and Venkatesh (2000) caution however, that management strategies that treat the workforce as a monolithic entity are likely to fail – and our evidence here suggests that this is particularly the case for ‘older worker’ cohorts. The results presented in this study represent an important empirically derived understanding of the chronological term ‘older worker’ from the perspective of organisational decision-makers. Much of the existing research that focuses on ‘older workers’ either pre-defines a specific calendar age for an older worker, varying from 40 to 75 years of age (Stein and Rocco, 2001), or, in the absence of a definition, appears to infer that ‘older workers’ represent a rather homogenous grouping. The findings of this study clearly illustrate that this is not the case. While the results here
indicate some peaking at 55 and again at 60 years, decision makers in this study clearly identify an ‘older worker’ as an employee who has reached the age of 52 years (mean age of 52.4 years). The results further highlight a sliding scale of ‘older’ from 28 to 75 years of age, which is a much wider range for ‘older worker’ than the variations of between 40 to 75 years of age used to define an ‘older worker’ in previous studies (Pitt-Catsouphes and Smyer, 2006). This suggests to us that workers are being considered ‘older’ at an increasingly younger age than we might have assumed, and at a considerably younger chronological age than even social norms might indicate. This is important since it calls into question the usefulness of existing social cut-offs of 55 years of age and older that are used to define older workers in many labour force participation policies (AARP, 2010; DELSA, 2006), and the more distant legal age cut-offs of 65 years of age used to define older workers in discussions about retirement and pension reforms (OECD, 2005). It is important to note that the identification of a chronological age for an ‘older worker’ was found to differ according to the chronological age of the decision-maker such that managers and supervisors over the age of 35 were statistically more likely to identify a worker as older at a slightly older chronological age than did those under the age of 35. This potentially lends credence to Hassell and Perrewe’s (1995) and Chiu et al.’s (2001) findings that (chronologically) ‘older’ employers hold more positive stereotypes toward older workers than (chronologically) ‘younger’ employers. At the very least, we know that employees of different ages conceptualise ‘older’ in different ways.

Turning to the reasons provided for considering a worker to be older at 52, we can see that decision-makers overwhelmingly adopt a strong organisational age approach to describing an ‘older worker’. Here managers and supervisors primarily
rationalise ‘older’ in terms of their perceiving employees at this age to be planning for retirement, to have reached the pinnacle of their career, or for simply being older than the prevailing organisational or industry norm. The fact that that individual workers are assumed to have reached their career potential at the age of 52, or are preoccupied with organisational exit at least 15 years prior to statutory retirement age (in Ireland at least) has implications for policy makers and managers alike, as it calls for a revised look at how we support longevity in organisations and a reconsideration of the prevailing assumptions that are held about the needs and motivations of workers as they age in an organisation. It also calls into question our assumptions about prevailing stereotypes about older workers. For example, McEvoy and Blahna’s (2001) contention that managers hold negative stereotypes about older workers involving seeing them as high cost, inflexible, out-of-date liabilities, takes on additional significance if one substitutes the term ‘older worker’ for ‘a 52 year old worker’. Billett et al. (2011) have recently argued for a de-emphasis of the term ‘older worker’ altogether if we are to move to develop policies and practices to retain and sustain workers beyond even the age of 45.

The reflected pre-occupation with retirement and/or assumption that workers of a certain age are planning for retirement in this study should not be overly surprising to us. While Pasupathi and Löckenhoff (2002:207) have noted that mandatory retirement laws are perhaps the most glaring example of discrimination based on age that currently exist in the workplace, Phillipson (2013) has reflected that the ending of work at 60 or 65 (or even earlier) has become embedded in human resource policies throughout the past two decades or more. Walker (2006) cautions that the expansion of early retirement and early exit has had a number of particular
consequences, not least of which has been the devaluing of the role of older people in
the labour market to the extent that older workers are perceived as an economic
‘burden’, and thereby exacerbating age discrimination in the workplace. Hedge
(2009) argues that it is important to continue to challenge myths, stereotypes and age
norms which are detrimental to facilitating a more age diverse workplace. Stein and
Rocco (2001) suggest that an overhaul of current thinking about the ageing worker
and services to ameliorate barriers to employment are vital, while Liebig (1988) calls
for managers to be trained to recognise the potential for bias (within themselves, as
well as in others), and how to prevent it before it impacts decisions. Our evidence
here suggests that the consideration of ‘older’ at 52 may give added credence to this
call.

From a theoretical perspective, our evidence in this study extends Sterns and
Doverspike’s (1989) conceptualisation of age framework in two particular ways. Our
data suggest that, while organisational decision-makers reflect a number of often
overlapping perspectives in their identification of a worker as ‘older’, the
organisational age approach is confirmed as by far the most common approach
utilised. In addition, the data clearly show a larger, conceptually and empirically
distinct range of organisational perspectives than were identified in the original
framework. So, while the data support the existence of tenure, career stage and
organisational norms, we further found clear evidence of the dominance of retirement
planning and industry norms in determining an ‘older worker’. This may suggest that
managers and supervisors in this study are reflecting shared beliefs about age rather
than responding to actual ages. This may also account for the discrepancy between

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describing someone as ‘older’ at 52, and explaining this in terms of their planning for retirement.

Building on Shalk et al.’s (2010) detailed depiction of Sterns and Doverspike’s (1989) existing age conceptualisations, we offer an empirically derived extension of approaches to conceptualising age in the workplace (Figure 3).

Insert Figure 3 about here.

Turning to implications for policy and practice arising from our research, we offer a number of suggestions. Brewer et al. (1981) earlier noted that that “elder persons” may be too large a category to capture attitudes towards older adults accurately, and, based on our results here, we suggest that the ‘older worker’ categorisation may be likewise too broad to accurately capture this heterogeneous work cohort. Specifically, we suggest that measurement of attitudes towards this group is hampered by existing overly-broad or loosely defined conceptualisations, and so are likely to yield contradictory findings since respondents will think of different subgroups while making any assessments. If we look to the reasons proffered for describing someone as an ‘older worker’ here, we can readily see that contextual issues associated with work (such as pre-retirement, career stage, organisation or industry norms), rather than actual chronological age, represent a more meaningful way of understanding age in the workplace. This requires organisational managers to reconsider what they identify as significant age markers in terms of organisational career, since this will clearly impact decisions relating to development, work allocation and promotion. There is also the possibility that, even unwittingly, discriminatory age bias influences important decisions in this respect. Leisink and Knies (2011) underline the essential role that front-line managers play in human
resource practices for older workers. Midtsundstad (2011) argues that active ageing policies are associated with organisations with a demonstrated focus on HRM to combat early retirement cultures. Further, the creation of ‘age aware’ policies, practices and training that challenge latent negative conceptualisations and prevent them from affecting decision about older workers is recommended.

Moore (1996) noted that older workers face considerable challenges in remaining in work and finding new employment when displaced, which Golub et al. (2002) suggest is reflective of a dominant paradigm whereby comparisons between young and old are perceived as decrements rather than simply as differences. Moulaert and Biggs (2013) suggest that this social construction of old age inevitably excludes older people (i.e. through compulsory retirement) and thereby condemns them to poverty and institutionalisation. Hedge (2009:106) similarly notes that that myths and stereotypes about ageing workers are often so ingrained in an organisation’s psyche that a strong commitment and follow-through from management is critical to any effort to dislodge them. While macro level policies and legislation can serve to persuade or even mandate particular organisational policies, they cannot compel positive attitudes and behaviour towards older workers, or ensure the valuing of what Dess and Shaw (2001) term as the extensive human and social capital held by older workers. The human resource management challenge lies in finding ways of recognising and using this extensive capital for the mutual benefit of worker and organisation alike.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research
First, one of the limitations of this study is its cross-sectional design, and while appropriate and illuminative in the context of this research, longitudinal research would allow a detailed exploration of the concept of age in the workplace over time. Given our findings here, that decision makers aged under 35 differed significantly from those aged between 36 and 50 in terms of their chronological definition of an ‘older worker’, one particularly interesting avenue, we believe, would be to consider whether, and more importantly, why decision makers conceptualisations of age change as they age themselves, chronologically, at work. Second, 90 respondents in our sample did not provide a reason for choosing the chronological age at which they defined a worker as ‘older’, while a further 37 were unable to articulate their reason other than comments such as “that’s old to me”, “it’s a fact” or “that is my perception of an older worker”. We suggest that in-depth case study research that takes into account the specific policies and practices in organisations may further facilitate our understanding of the older worker concept. Third, while not significant, our findings do demonstrate some differences in how strategic level decision makers (in this case, CEO’s) define ‘older workers’ when compared with decision makers in the HR function. Future research should further explore if, and why, decision makers at various levels of the organisation conceptualise workers differently according to their age. Additionally, research that makes comparisons across national contexts may be particularly helpful, especially considering whether differences in conceptualisations of age at work may be attributed to cultural norms and values. Finally, while our focus on the definition of ‘older workers’ here is exceptionally important in today’s workplace, exploring how ‘younger workers’ and indeed, ‘middle-aged’ workers are defined and conceptualised will be important in facilitating an age diverse workforce.
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Figure 1 Schalk et al. (2010) Extension of Sterns and Doverspike (1989) Age Model
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