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► **To cite this version:**

Stéphane Bellini. The over-fifties: victims of anthropological screening?. EURAM, 2007, Paris, France. hal-02143528

HAL Id: hal-02143528

<https://hal.science/hal-02143528v1>

Submitted on 29 May 2019

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THE OVER-FIFTIES: VICTIMS OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL SCREENING?

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EURAM – Paris 2007

ABSTRACT

France has one of the lowest employment rates for the over-fifties in Europe. Several surveys have confirmed that strategies for managing the over-fifties in French companies share a common characteristic: the search for ways to remove them. In this paper, we shall be investigating the reasoning behind the ousting of the over-fifties. We shall look closely at the explanations that purportedly show that these decisions are objectively based and apparently impartial, before going on to investigate just how rational these practices are. Our desire is to show that such widespread practices are based on widely shared schemes of thought. We use anthropological screening to refer to the process of using an implicit model of the individual at work as a criterion for selection and promotion. While formerly anthropomorphic¹ in nature, this screening now centres on types of skills, relationships and performance at work, the ability to fit into an organisation and psychological predispositions. How a person *behaves* matters as much as what he or she *does*.

INTRODUCTION

In contrast to restructuring operations that take place in a media frenzy as they focus on one particular time and place, the departure of the oldest employees is often greeted with silence or even approval when it takes the form of early retirements. The reasons for the departure of staff are obscured when it happens in a thousand different places. Nevertheless, although they may not happen at one particular time and place, these silent reorganisations share one

¹ Ford was looking for workers of the “highest quality”, capable of maintaining an intensive rhythm of work.

common element: they involve older employees: the “*over-fifties*”, who, it is widely believed, are incapable of adapting to modern demands (see Volkoff, 2005; Guillemard, 2003).

The results of this are well known: France has one of the lowest employment rates for the over-fifties in Europe². Several surveys have confirmed that strategies for managing the over-fifties in French companies share a common characteristic: the search for ways to remove them. Only a minority of companies endeavour to improve working conditions, implement end of career management strategies and transfer the experience of older employees (Minni & Topiol, 2002, 2004; Falcoz, 2004). On the other hand, policies targeting the number of over-fifties in work are more common, i.e. general measures that focus on one medium-term goal. More often than not, these involve organising early retirements or restructuring operations designed to exclude the oldest employees (Bellini, Duyck *et al*, 2006). The departure of the over-fifties thus results in micro-restructuring operations at the workshop or office level. This type of practice conforms to the French tradition of ousting older employees (Poilpot-Rocaboy, 1996), whose pensioning off has traditionally been decided by the different actors in the organisation: namely, the HR manager, staff representatives and the employees themselves.

There is nothing new in this low level of employment, or in the absence of observable practices. What has changed is the amount of media attention given to the over-fifties since pension reforms and the Council of Europe highlighted them as a French anomaly in need of rectification. At present, the use of early retirement is starting to be perceived as less of a social shock-absorber and more of an economic anomaly.

² According to the Le Monde/Eurostat social indicator, the employment rate for the 55-64 year-olds in France stands at 38% at the end of 2006.

In this paper, we shall be investigating the reasoning behind the ousting of the over-fifties and why they are a priority target for job cuts³. First, we shall look closely at the explanations that purportedly show that these decisions are objectively based and apparently impartial, before going on to investigate just how rational these practices are. Our desire is to show that such widespread practices are based on widely shared schemes of thought. The stakes are high for older employees because in no way does the disappearance of age policies mean an end to the ousting of the over-fifties; it simply means that this operation will no longer be paid for by the State. Without a reorientation of the schemes of thought concerning the over-fifties population, the costs of the lay-offs will be borne by the companies themselves or by national solidarity organisations (unemployment insurance, health insurance or income support depending on the situation).

Our analysis is based upon three complementary investigative approaches, all of which share the use of qualitative methodologies designed to obtain contextualised information and understand the reasoning used to justify these practices. At different levels, each of the following surveys has helped to improve our understanding of the reasons for the ousting of the over-fifties:

- An initial survey carried out in around fifteen medium and large companies (120 to 160 employees) led to the identification of management practices used for employees over the age of fifty. This was performed at the request of ARACT Poitou-Charentes⁴, which is itself involved in the *A tout Age* (At Any Age) European project. On this

³ In the recent announcement concerning the Airbus job reduction plan, age-related measures were the first to be announced.

⁴ *Association Régionale pour l'Amélioration des Conditions de Travail* (Regional Association for the Improvement of Working Conditions). The ARACT Poitou-Charentes agency belongs to the network of the *Association Nationale pour Amélioration des Conditions de Travail* (National Association for the Improvement of Working Conditions).

occasion, we carried out in-depth interviews with HR managers and combined this information with interviews with occupational doctors and/or nurses where possible, along with observations from a tour of the company itself. In addition to identifying management practices, this survey helped us to understand the reasons for their implementation or absence

- An awareness-raising mission concerning the GPEC⁵ approach in around 20 small companies in the Poitiers urban area (with fewer than 20 employees). In the framework of this action, we carried out a series of three interviews with the heads of each company. This strategy gave us an insight into how these managers accounted for their population of over-fifties when planning for the future
- A participant observation on VAE (Validation of Acquired Experience) assessment panels. The aim was to understand the processes involved in the evaluation of professional experience. In the first two surveys, this quality was perceived to be the key asset of the over-fifties, even when the intention was to lay them off. By observing how experience is assessed in proceedings that are dedicated to this issue, we learnt more about a process which is designed to increase its standing.

THE EXPRESSION OF A FORM OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL SCREENING

Certain arguments are used to point to the weaknesses of the over-fifties at work: physical problems, outdated technical skills, lost motivation, resistance to change in general and ICT in particular, being more costly to employ than young people, etc. These arguments are used to

⁵ *Gestion Prévisionnelle des Emplois et Compétences* (Predictive Management of Jobs and Skills)

justify the ousting of the over-fifties. However, each of these points needs to be discussed, qualified and put into perspective, primarily because any age category, whether young or old, encompasses a population which is heterogeneous in many respects. More than reflecting an accurate view of reality, the arguments which we shall discuss later on in this paper seem to reveal the existence of an implicit norm to which workers are supposed to conform and that the over-fifties are seen in an unfavourable light when compared to this norm. On the grounds of their supposed failure to conform to a model, certain individuals within a population are excluded from employment or looked upon in a poor light. This applies to the over-fifties but also to young people, women and anyone who is “*different*”. The very terminology for these groups is based on the existence of this model because, to state the obvious, one is only different in relation to a given model.

The phenomena of excessive generalisation, the homogenisation of a heterogeneous population (Duyck and Guérin, 2005) and the attribution of specific traits to everyone within a particular group without distinction does not just happen to the over-fifties in the world of work. This is also a problem that affects the over-fifties in other walks of life. Society as a whole portrays the over 50s as being completely different to young people, who are lauded for their modern technical skills and their supposed capabilities (Guillemard, 2003). One can see it in action: the typecasting of the over-fifties both creates and reflects an image of employees who do not conform to an implicit reference model that is used as a gauge.

We use anthropological screening to refer to the process of using an implicit model of the individual at work as a criterion for selection and promotion. While formerly anthropomorphic⁶ in nature, this screening now centres on types of skills, relationships and

⁶ Ford was looking for workers of the “highest quality”, capable of maintaining an intensive rhythm of work.

performance at work, the ability to fit into an organisation and psychological predispositions. How a person *behaves* matters as much as what he or she *does*.

This screening may be implicit, but its consequences, on the other hand, are very real. Thus, on the subject we are dealing with here, it results in the exclusion of the oldest employees from training, a preference for other staff to handle important projects and the ousting of older staff from organisations⁷. Furthermore, according to the principle of self-fulfilling predictions, a negative attitude towards older employees creates a diagnosis that serves as a justification: an absence of training, reaching a dead end in one's career and being given unrewarding projects results in the creation of wait-and-see behaviours and a reluctance to look to the future... finally justifying the typecasting of older employees who end up internalising such images of themselves.

The physiological argument

The physiological argument is frequently used to justify encouraging older employees to leave their posts. The latter are indeed more prone to occupational illnesses than other age groups (Vauclin and Thamain, 2005) and a number of HR managers mention the difficulty of reassigning employees who have become unfit for work. This is therefore handled on a case by case basis; however, so-called "back-room" or "soft" jobs are rare and are often contracted out if they do not belong to the company's core business activities. According to a report written by Volkoff, Molinié and Jolivet (2000), the ageing process is accompanied by an increase in certain pathologies such as articular problems and reduces the ability to withstand alternating day/night shift patterns. However, neither physical strength nor cognitive functions

⁷ The headline of the monthly publication "*Liaisons Sociales*" in October 2005 concerned finishing one's career at 45 years old!

change significantly in people of working age (Greller and Simpson, 1999). On this last point, neurobiological research has shown that older employees mobilise different cerebral capacities than younger colleagues for certain tasks, particularly those involving memorisation, thus performing a “neuronal reorganisation” which allows them to compensate for performance deficits (Grady in Falkenstein and Sommer, 2006). They develop a “crystallised intelligence”, i.e. a mode of reasoning that mobilises the memory and knowledge of the past in order to solve a problem (Kanfer and Ackerman, 2004).

Furthermore, the problems in mainly tertiary economies are not expressed in the same ways as in predominantly industrial economies. This is not a question of minimising the sometimes pathological consequences of a lifetime spent working in difficult conditions; it is about stating that the argument cannot be valid for an entire population (Greller & Stroh, 1995). Finally and above all, the ageing of people at work is a combination of natural biological ageing processes and the ageing that results from a number of environmental factors including the working environment in particular (Teiger, 1989). The implementation of career management practices and measures to improve working conditions and develop versatility has a major influence on the consequences of ageing. The over-fifties compensate for any decline in performance by employing adaptation strategies such as the economy of actions and movement, provided that they are allowed to do so by their work organisation (Volkoff *et al, ibid.*).

Our research into the strategies used for managing the over-fifties shows that few companies have implemented preventive reforms in order to facilitate work. More often than not, the management of incapacity is curative. On this subject, the HR manager of Flaco⁸, a

⁸ In the interests of confidentiality, the names of the companies mentioned have been changed.

manufacturing site for glass bottles, states that *“Today we’re paying for years of putting up with difficult working conditions: employees sought to negotiate bonuses in compensation for the difficulty of the work and personnel departments had very little interest in the subject”*.

The economic argument

The economic argument is also worthy of examination. In accordance with collective agreements, seniority is one of the criteria for wage increases. It might be imagined that the productivity of employees is adversely affected with age; however, Gauthier (2004) has shown that the productivity of employees who remain in employment does not, on average, seem to decline with age, thus confirming the findings of other studies (Greller & Simpson, 1999). In fact, the decline in performance depends on a complex combination of variables (individual and situational) that cannot be simply attributed to the single factor of age. Another study concludes in a similar fashion by showing that employees over the age of 55 are most commonly found in older companies and are often assigned to posts lacking the latest equipment that would offer the best productivity (Aubert and Crépon, 2004). Ascribing declining productivity to the age factor alone would therefore seem to be an oversimplification of more complex phenomena.

The psychological argument

The psychological argument, especially the widely-held view concerning the *“loss of motivation”* in the over-fifties, also serves to justify the ousting of older employees. For the

most part, our interviewees used two elements as the basis for identifying a loss of motivation.

The first relates to the demands of certain employees. Indeed, many of the HR managers interviewed reported that age policies have ended up creating an expectation amongst employees. The words of the HR manager at Avionics (maintenance of flying instruments for the aeronautical industry) are representative of a widely held point of view: *“At 57 or 58 years old, I get people coming into my office and asking me: “Can you do anything for me?” To put it plainly, they want us to find a way to get them early retirement. And they’re right. We’ve been doing it for so long, why not for them too?”* Another HR manager plainly states that *“we mustn’t close our eyes to redundancy negotiated two or three years before retirement age: it exists and it’s to everyone’s advantage”*. Requests from employees to quit the world of work prematurely certainly exist. Should we take them to be a sign of a loss of motivation or more simply, the opportunity to benefit from existing provisions favoured by management and unions for many years? From our standpoint, much more than being the manifestation of supposed psychological predispositions, these requests reveal a social representation of the place of the over-fifties which, historically in France, has been created by a succession of provisions designed to help them leave the workplace. To us, their desire to stop working does not seem to represent an age-related psychological detachment from their employer. We see it as the negative effect of an apparently well-meaning measure, which reinforces the idea in everyone’s minds that what the over-fifties rightly aspire to do is leave their employment.

A loss of motivation is also identified by visible manifestations of ways of working: a lack of enthusiasm, the expression of a certain nostalgia or the challenging of certain decisions. This raises the question of what we mean by a *“loss of motivation”*. If we look at the levels of

interest that might be aroused by different sources of motivation, it is certainly true that the same sources do not trigger the same reactions in everyone. Does a lack of desire for promotion in one's career really mean a lack of motivation? Is a lack of enthusiasm for innovation (or something that claims to be innovative) truly synonymous with giving up? During the course of a study carried out on behalf of a company which focused precisely on the loss of motivation in the over-fifties, it was apparent that they did not feel "*demotivated*", but that they had different desires to younger employees. In our experience, the influence of anthropological screening extends as far as the definition of a correct way to express a motivation.

For Kanfer and Ackerman (2004), the view that motivation declines with age is not supported by scientific evidence. Although a certain weariness might exist, we cannot ascribe an individual process to a phenomenon whose causes are partly organisational. Marbot clearly shows that the feeling of arriving at the end of one's professional life is as much an organisational process as a psychological one, as it is founded on a lack of support for the motivation process (2004). Conversely, a positive view of ageing employees can lead to the use of their experience in the framework of a tutorial system, a training role or consultancy tasks. A simpler way of showing them that their qualities are appreciated would be to maintain their allocation of resources.

TRUNCATED KNOWLEDGE OF PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

It is normal to consider experience to be the major asset of senior staff. In the words of one of the HR managers we met, this acceptance could even be viewed as "*trivial*", due to the extent

that “*the received wisdom about experience is recurrently a message of success*” (Astier, 2004, p. 34).

However, what do we do with this treasure that experience is supposed to represent? How is it promoted and accounted for in skills transmission processes? Our survey of management strategies for the over-fifties points to the rarity of measures taken to ensure the transfer of skills acquired by experienced staff, since only two companies out of the fifteen studied use such practices and none of the companies visited promotes the Validation of Acquired Experience⁹. Let us also remember that in our study, the most commonly observed management strategies for the over-fifties aim to encourage these employees to leave their companies: a phenomenon that can also be observed at the national level through early retirement policies. These policies have not been slowed down by the fear of losing skills acquired through experience.

Experience, an undervalued asset

The most detailed study of the thinking concerning experience in the over-fifties indicates that a combination of several factors is undermining its value. Firstly, technological developments may render some of the oldest employees’ skills obsolete. In some of the situations that we were told about, the youngest employees are being used as tutors for the oldest because they have a better knowledge of recent technologies than their older counterparts. Take Electronis, for example. This company manufactures electromechanical and electronic appliances (keyboards and special indicator lights designed for industry, beacon columns and safety light curtains). The manufacture of electromechanical appliances is declining in favour of electronic equipment, which offers greater added value. In the latter category, young

⁹ Since the French law enacted in 2002, professional experience can be validated as a requirement for all or part of a diploma.

graduates possess the qualifications needed for the manufacture of these products. Older employees with extensive experience in manufacturing electromechanical products are seeing a sharp downturn in their business. Eventually, there is a danger of it disappearing from the site altogether, with manufacturing being transferred to countries with lower salary costs. The HR manager is not replacing employees who retire and has launched a training plan designed to allow older employees to switch over to the more profitable electronics side. The youngest employees are therefore responsible for transferring skills to the oldest.

In other situations, automation is simplifying work and causing older employees to lose the benefits they might otherwise have gained from their experience. Char provides a good illustration of this phenomenon. This factory manufactures forklift trucks and has increased both its production and its workforce. While 350 employees were manufacturing 3,500 forklifts per year in 1984, the annual figure had risen to 25,000 forklifts for 600 employees in 2004. In twenty years, the company has progressed from a ratio of 10 trucks per person to 41 trucks per person. This rise in productivity can be mainly put down to designing products that are simpler to manufacture, requiring fewer operations and devising an assembly operation that is easier to carry out. Each new model of forklift truck is an opportunity to increase productivity.

By seeking to formalise, standardise and transmit expertise or develop versatility, contemporary management practices strip the most experienced employees of their knowledge in order to transmit it to others, even when these older employees have a wealth of valuable experience to offer. Thus, the HR manager at Davia has sought to identify the company's key employees: those with a monopoly of skills. The departure of these employees, who are deemed to be strategically important, is prepared approximately six

months before they leave. However, it has become apparent that, on account of the company's skills development policy, few people are in sole possession of certain skills. Within the company, the adoption of the ISO 9001 standard (2002 version) has required the formalisation of skills as well as the creation of written procedures and instructions sheets. Standardisation and practices relating to *Knowledge Management*¹⁰ are two contemporary managerial trends sharing the common aims of formalising and transmitting working procedures.

Paradoxically, policies designed to broaden or enrich work and organise career development internally could also end up undermining the skills of certain employees, as these skills become shared by everyone. In this respect, the management modes that we have identified, i.e. the tutorial system, conservation of memory and multiple skills development, which might be thought of as being beneficial, also have the unfortunate side-effect of depriving the over-fifties of their status as holders of skills that are deemed to be strategically important.

Finally, the study of other situations shows that seniority does not guarantee the acquisition of expertise. To demonstrate this, the HR manager of Cendrillon cites the example of a young welder, recently recruited by the company, who was quick to understand the procedures and acquire expertise. Moreover, he discovered tricks of the trade that the older employees had not picked up on, because they had been happy to repeat the same tasks without questioning the efficiency of their actions. This example is a good illustration that experience is not a "*by-product of the activity*" (Vincens, 2001, p. 22). The acquisition of experience requires workers to distance themselves from what they are doing, which has nothing to do with age. Thus, having "*twenty years' experience*" reveals little about the experience acquired by doing the work. This repeated observation questions the notion of professional experience.

¹⁰ Knowledge Management: a concept encompassing various practices concerning the formalisation of procedures and working methods in order to facilitate their transmission.

The invisible dimension of hidden experience

From what HR managers say, experience is represented as being the sum of the expertise relating to the work prescribed by the organisation, i.e. of learning experiences that are, on the whole, codifiable. However, we believe this notion to be incomplete because it does not include certain elements of acquired experience that are harder to quantify because they are invisible. Numerous authors refer to this experience, albeit in different terms and from slightly different perspectives. Grasser and Rosé consider that experience consists partly of expertise and partly of specific and tacit knowledge of the production process (2000). Aubret and Gilbert (2003) distinguish between the practices, i.e. “*what is observable and verifiable*”, and their effects, which might “*just as easily relate to spontaneous consciousness or perception as to the results of an analysis or an interpretation*”. Rouby and Thomas make a similar distinction, between “*codifiable knowledge*” and “*tacit knowledge*”, which is harder to codify (2004). Mallet and Vernières also mention both of these dimensions. They believe that experience consists of a technical dimension and a social dimension (1981). The first dimension covers mastering the expertise acquired by performing a job, while the second focuses on integration into the environment, the appropriation of specific language, the development of professional “reflexes” and the learning of informal codes of behaviour. Whether it is tacit, social or analytical in nature, little attention is paid to the invisible dimension of experience, even though this may be a major asset for the over-fifties. For example, this experience might be expressed by the appropriation of operating rules, the internalisation of certain rules of behaviour such as safety rules, the ability to form part of an informal internal network, the remembrance of previous procedures or tests and the recollection of how specific cases were handled in the past.

Professional experience is not only an individual attribute. It is also, as several authors agree, the result of a person's analysis of the way in which he or she carries out his or her work (Astier, 2004; Schwartz, 2004; Vincens, 2001; Grasser and Rosé, 2000). This introspection can be encouraged by organisational measures. For example, certain participative measures such as quality circles might encourage teams to embark on a strategy of reflection which might otherwise not come naturally. Finally, the nature of jobs themselves provides opportunities to acquire varying degrees of experience. Not only do repetitive jobs offer few opportunities to learn when working, they also give few opportunities to consider or challenge working practices, whereas functional mobility and professional development do.

The value attributed to professional experience also relates back to the anthropological screening mentioned earlier in the paper. By studying the Validation of Acquired Experience (VAE), carried out by judging panels responsible for awarding DUTs (undergraduate diplomas in technology) and vocational bachelor's degrees, we have identified that VAE judging panels establish reference points in response to the unusual exercise of transforming experience into a form of entitlement to all or part of a diploma. They look for proof of technical skills (tasks, activities, posts, tools, etc.) and for indications of cognitive and social skills that are deemed to be essential in terms of eligibility for university diplomas. On this less tangible point, the judging panels perform a meta-analysis of the presentation, i.e. they focus their questions on the technical skills learnt on the job and assign values to the cognitive skills that have been acquired. By doing this, they are looking for indications of the candidates' cognitive abilities in how they talk and in the words they use in order to compare them to an informal reference standard. In the absence of an assessment tool, these

comparisons act as decision-making criteria, both for the knowledge and know-how that are deemed to be useful, and for the candidate's modes of reasoning.

This detour into VAE is useful as it shows that estimating the value of someone's professional experience is also the product of gauging their acquired cognitive and social skills. Experience is never assessed in itself but in relation to a reference model. When this model has traits inspired by youth ("dynamism", "capacity for change", "familiarity with information technology", etc. are all associated with young people – Guillemard, *ibid.*), this, rightly or wrongly, serves to diminish the value of the experience possessed by the over-fifties.

FOCUSING THE PROBLEMS OF THE OVER-FIFTIES AT WORK ON INDIVIDUALS

The received wisdom about the over-fifties at work, which underlies their exclusion from the workplace, is focused on individuals. The rarity of practices designed to enhance their value or transfer their experience, the absence of career development- except for managerial staff, the inadequacies of targeted training schemes and the limited number of measures aimed at improving working conditions are representative of organisations which, up to now, have shown little interest in the over-fifties population and which have thus helped to create the phenomenon they lament today.

Whether it is a question of physical problems caused by working in difficult conditions or of diminished motivation, the explanations for these phenomena can be reversed: not only could changing the focus of the explanation from the individual to the organisation help to improve our understanding of the deep-rooted causes of the problems, be they physical or supposedly

psychological, it could also give the organisation more room for manoeuvre. This opens up the possibility of implementing measures designed to help keep the over-fifties in employment, while giving them favourable conditions in which to express their abilities.

The strategy of the Condor company shows the benefits of taking action before problems start to appear, as their research into the management of ageing dates back to 1990. A working group was established at the start of this process involving members of staff representative organisations including the Health, Safety and Working Conditions Committee, the planning department and supervisors. Condor manufactures rubber boots and its thinking focused on certain work stations at which conditions were very difficult (standing stations with repetitive movements). This brainstorming led to the introduction of flexibility (employees now change stations every two hours), reducing postural fatigue and improving remuneration via the interaction of different job categories. Another consequence was to act upon the rhythms of work, as the employees themselves now set the tempo for the conveyors carrying the boots, thus allowing them to regulate their rates, whereas this was previously set by the conveyor. Finally, a U-shaped chain has replaced the linear chain in order to allow the employees to communicate and offer advice to their less experienced colleagues. No reductions in productivity have been observed, but the quality of products has improved and there is a greater feeling of working in better conditions.

CONCLUSION

The key message about the over-fifties shows that they do not correspond to the standard employee model. Victims of anthropological screening, they are ousted from their companies when the aim is to cut jobs and filtered out when they try to find new ones.

The management of the over-fifties by cutting their jobs is based on a vision centred on the individual employee. For each example, we have shown that the criticisms levelled at the over-fifties are also a result of their interactions with the employer. The same applies to health problems in the workplace. These are undeniably linked to natural ageing processes but their effects can be accelerated or reduced according to the company's practices. And the same can be said for "loss of motivation", which is not a foregone conclusion provided that appropriate measures are put into practice.

By switching from an interpretation of the behaviour of the "over-fifties" that is centred on the individual employee to one which is focused on the employee-employer relationship, we can open up the possibility of transforming our knowledge into action. Much more than the disappearance of age policies or the introduction of the "over-fifties" contract, neither of which have caused a revolution from an organisational point of view, the development of practices that are lacking today could prompt employers to consider the over-fifties in all of their variety and to evaluate them in terms of what they *do* and not on the basis of what we think they *should be*. For only by gaining recognition for the benefits of their experience and expertise, perfected over time, will the over fifties cease to represent the human face of restructuring operations.

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