

CEO Style and Hiring Decisions for Management Committees in Spain

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1. PROBLEM, AIMS, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Spain's ageing index reached a historic 148% in 2026 (INE, 2026a): workers aged 50+ represent 30% of all unemployed and over half are out of work for more than a year (Fundación Endesa, 2026). This structural exclusion persists even at the executive level. This study locates the key decision-maker in the CEO (the individual whose approach determines who sits at the executive table) and asks how CEO leadership style shapes decisions to hire (or not hire) highly qualified professionals over 50 into management committees. Three research questions guide the inquiry: (RQ1, descriptive) What leadership styles characterize Spanish CEOs in these hiring decisions? (RQ2, explanatory–how) How do those styles influence whether professionals over 50 are incorporated? (RQ3, explanatory–why) Why do certain styles lead some CEOs to include senior talent while others do not?

2. JUSTIFICATION

Age discrimination is among the most socially tolerated forms of prejudice (Butler, 1969), yet older workers deliver comparable or superior performance across key dimensions (Ng & Feldman, 2008; Rudolph & Zacher, 2021). Correspondence studies across Europe confirm that equivalent CVs receive systematically fewer responses when age cues signal a candidate is over 50, with the most pronounced effect in senior roles (Neumark et al., 2019; Lippens et al., 2023). Existing research documents this exclusion but rarely examine the decision-maker responsible for it. This study matters to organizations building inclusive leadership pipelines, to CEOs seeking to

understand their own evaluative biases, and to policymakers designing senior employment strategies.

3. THEORETICAL BASIS

Leadership Styles Theory (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Goleman, 1998): transformational leaders prioritize development potential over immediate fit; emotional intelligence shapes how biases are recognised and managed.

Upper Echelons Theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Withers et al., 2024): strategic decisions reflect leaders' values and cognitive frameworks; this study examines how CEOs experience and give meaning to their hiring decisions.

Ageism and Cognitive Bias (Fiske et al., 2002; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995): age stereotypes operate implicitly, generating warmth but not selection; they can be interrupted by leaders equipped to recognise them (Fasbender & Wang, 2017).

Social Capital and Relational Leadership (Bourdieu, 1986; Granovetter, 1973; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995): leaders with diverse networks have direct experience of high-performing senior professionals, the most effective antidote to stereotyping.

Central proposition: all CEOs face the same cognitive mechanisms when evaluating senior candidates; what varies is the capacity to recognise and manage them, a function of leadership style.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design within the constructivist paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A comparative logic is built in: the sample deliberately includes CEOs who have and have not incorporated senior talent, enabling identification of the mechanisms that explain the difference and avoiding survivorship bias. Data collection combines: (1) in-depth semi-structured

interviews (60-90 min, GDPR-compliant); and (2) documentary review for triangulation (Yin, 2018). Analysis uses open and axial coding in NVivo (Charmaz, 2014) contrasted against the theoretical framework. Validity is ensured through source triangulation, member checking, rich contextual description, and peer review (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A reflexive diary manages the researcher's 30+ years of executive search experience as an interpretive asset.

5. DATA SAMPLE

Target: 15–20 Spanish CEOs who have conducted at least one executive recruitment process during their tenure, selected through intentional sampling for diversity of professional trajectory, sector, and experience with senior hiring. The sample ensures the study captures the full range of decision-making patterns rather than only those already favorable to senior talent. Access to participants is facilitated by the researcher's extensive professional network in the Spanish executive sphere, following a purposive sampling strategy (Flick, 2024). All participants provide written informed consent; interviews are anonymized and data handled in compliance with GDPR. The final sample size will be determined by theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2014). Gender is treated as an interpretive variable: the study will seek to include female CEOs and will examine whether and how gender intersects with leadership style in shaping hiring decisions towards senior talent.

6. RELEVANCE AND PRACTICAL IMPORTANCE

This study makes two theoretical contributions: it examines the experiential dimension of CEO hiring decisions (how leaders live and interpret them) and integrates ageism scholarship into executive leadership research, a connection that remains underexplored. Practically, the structured interview is itself a valuable reflective exercise for participating CEOs. For organizations, the key question is not whether a CEO discriminates but what conditions make inclusive decisions more

likely. For policymakers, the study provides evidence where senior exclusion has the most visible consequences: productive careers cut short and irreplaceable experience forgone.

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