European Commission’s Employment in Europe 2007 report paints a generally positive picture on the progress made towards the Stockholm target, pointing to an increase in the employment rate of older people by seven percentage points in the EU25 since 2000. This finding is particularly encouraging in the light of a rise of 2.3 percentage points for the working age population as a whole. However, to maintain this progress, it is crucial to create the necessary conditions to encourage older workers to stay in their jobs longer and to offer them advantageous employment opportunities.

Similarly, the European Employment Strategy – a key component of the overall Lisbon Strategy – highlights the importance of promoting access to employment throughout the working life. European policymakers seem to be agreed on the necessity of ensuring job quality and sustainability over the life cycle in order to retain people in employment longer. In the light of the above, it is clear that the monitoring and better understanding of working conditions will contribute to more informed and effective employment and ageing-related policies.

Key findings

It is important to note at the outset that the findings based on the fourth European Working Conditions Survey capture the working conditions of persons in employment only. Older workers, who may have suffered from more arduous working conditions, are likely to have already withdrawn from the labour market and therefore do not appear in the survey sample. Despite this limitation, the data analysis nevertheless gives a useful insight into the working conditions of older workers.
The research provides a valuable insight into age and working conditions in the EU and highlights to what extent age is an important factor when examining job quality and employment issues. Job quality is a key aspect in ensuring the integration and retention of older workers in the labour market.

Older workers are well represented among part-time workers and to a certain extent among temporary agency workers (especially women). The majority of low-educated workers and self-employed persons are in the older age category also.

While there is a trend towards a reduction in exposure to physical risks with increasing age, a deterioration in working conditions is detected in the 45–55 age group: such workers report higher exposure to risks associated with physical position, repetitive movements and heavy workloads. In addition to musculoskeletal disorders, older workers aged over 55 are particularly susceptible to heart diseases, respiratory difficulties and sleeping problems, all of them closely correlated with ageing.

In the course of the last decade, the percentage of workers who believe their health or safety are at risk because of their work conditions has significantly reduced among the over 55 age group, and among women in particular.

Workers aged over 55 years have a high level of job autonomy and comparatively low levels of work intensity. However, older workers receive less training than younger workers and have a lower degree of involvement in High Performance Work Organisation (HPWO), a work organisation characterised by horizontal hierarchical structures, task rotation, teamwork and active involvement of the workers, including unskilled ones, in decision-making processes.

The proportion of workers who report having some control over working time arrangements increases with age. This is not surprising, since a high level of control over working time arrangements is often associated with seniority. However, long working hours as well as Sunday work increase as workers age, in part due to the fact that a substantial proportion of older workers are self-employed and employed in the agricultural sector.

While older workers do not seem to carry as heavy a burden in terms of family responsibilities compared with workers of middle age, and are less likely to be caring for children, they have a higher likelihood of caring for an elderly or disabled relative compared with other age groups.

The findings suggest that workers at retirement age with difficult or poor working conditions are more likely to exit the labour market early.

**Policy recommendations**

- An increased uptake of part-time work among older workers could create greater opportunities for a more phased transition to retirement and in general enhance the employability of older workers.

- As older workers often have substantial caring duties, introducing more flexible working time arrangements may encourage them to fulfil their responsibilities while continuing to work longer.

- In order to prolong the working life of all workers, it is important to devise ways to promote a more widespread involvement of older workers in High Performance Work Organisation (HPWO).

- There is a need to monitor the level of exposure to physical risks of workers approaching retirement age (45 to 54 years), as well as that of younger workers, in order to ascertain the possible risk of future deterioration of work capacity.

- Older people should have the same opportunities for training as younger workers, and it should be ensured that their experience is preserved and passed on to younger colleagues.

- Improving working conditions has been proven to lead to better job sustainability over the lifecycle, which in turn can prevent early exit from the labour market and encourage high participation rates among older workers.

- The possibility of staying in the labour market until or beyond the official retirement age depends largely on health status, well-being and work environment. For this reason, the workplace should be adapted to the needs of an ageing workforce (for example, introducing working time arrangements designed to meet the requirements of older workers).

**Further information**

The report on *Working conditions of an ageing workforce* is available at [http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef0817.htm](http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef0817.htm)


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