



Sustainable work and the ageing workforce

Executive summary

Introduction

What are the conditions that make work sustainable over a lifetime and are therefore likely to promote a longer working life? The concept of work sustainability takes into account the simultaneous – and partly contradictory – evolution of working conditions and of the demography of the active population. It builds not only on research on job quality for older workers, but also on research examining how job quality affects all age groups. This study, which is based on an analysis of the fifth European Working Conditions Survey, considers five dimensions of work that have proved essential to the understanding of work sustainability:

- working conditions;
- physical and psychological health;
- the expressive dimension of work;
- reconciliation of working and non-working time;
- socioeconomic conditions.

Policy context

Active ageing in employment has been a long-standing issue in European policy, notably within the European employment strategies, and is a central issue within the recent Europe 2020 strategy. It has been one of the three pillars of the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations 2012. The need to increase the employment rate of older workers has been translated into quantitative objectives intended to keep those aged 55–64 in work and to raise their average age of exit from the labour market. There is, however, a consensus that these objectives cannot be achieved without a significant improvement in working conditions.

Key findings

Exposure to selected characteristics of work

Working conditions: Night work and shift work decrease with age, as does the proportion of workers working at very high speed. There is little difference among age groups in terms of exposure to physical strain at work (including painful positions and a stressful work environment).

Reconciliation of working and non-working time: Difficulties achieving work–life balance decrease with age, particularly at 50 and beyond. For women, there is a sharp decrease in regular work schedule changes and difficulty in taking time off to deal with personal matters; for men, there is a sharper decrease in poor balance between work and private life.

Expressive dimension of work: Workers over 50 report fewer opportunities for learning and access to training and less support from colleagues and managers. Men particularly report a decline in career prospects. However, older workers also report more job latitude and being able to apply their own ideas.

Socioeconomic conditions: Around 40% of women and 10% of men aged 55–59 work part time, a slightly higher number than among those aged 50–54. Among those over 50, 10% of men and 15% of women have fixed-term contracts, and a quarter have less than five years' seniority in their current organisation. Feelings of job insecurity increase among women during their 40s and among men between 45–49 and 50–54.

Eight key indicators for job sustainability are suggested by statistical analysis: shift or night work; tiring or painful positions; working to tight deadlines; poor fit between work and other commitments; weak latitude at work; weak social support at work; bad career prospects; and job insecurity.

Health, well-being and satisfaction

- Indicators of health problems, such as backache or sleeping difficulties, increase in the two decades between ages 40 and 60, but decrease for those still at work after 60 (although this is probably because those in poor health have left the labour market).
- Dissatisfaction with working conditions peaks in the 45–54 age group and is higher in low-skilled occupations and mid-skilled manual occupations.
- Certain work characteristics are statistically linked to the trend in workers' deteriorating general health between the ages of 40 and 60: poor fit between working hours and other commitments, painful positions, poor career prospects, and weak social support (particularly for men).
- In the 50–59 age group, self-evaluated health is particularly poor among mid-skilled manual workers and low-skilled workers. The main factors linked to physical and psychological ill health are painful positions, unsatisfactory working hours, tight deadlines and poor career prospects.

Attitudes to working beyond the age of 50

- The number of men and women who say work puts their health at risk is highest in the 50–54 age group. These numbers are particularly high among managers and professionals in the 50–54 and 55–59 age groups, and among women in these occupations.
- Painful positions, shift or night work and poor work–life balance are the main factors explaining why workers aged 50–59 feel that work puts their health at risk and negatively affects health.
- One-third of employees aged 50–54 feel they will not be able to work until they are 60 or wouldn't want to do the same job until then. This perception is more common among women in mid-skilled manual occupations (55%) and in low-skilled occupations (54%), contrasting with male managers and professionals (17%) and intermediate professionals in general (25%).
- Painful positions, poor work–life balance, perceived job insecurity and poor prospects for career advancement are the main reasons given for not being able to do the same job until age 60.

- About 29% of employees aged 50–59 would prefer to work fewer hours than they currently do, and the percentage is higher among high-skilled than low-skilled occupations.
- Poor work–life balance, weak social support at work and painful positions are the main reasons given for the wish to reduce working hours.

Comparisons between countries

- Country comparisons indicate that some countries share a set of working conditions perceived as not sustainable by older workers. In these countries, employment rates decrease significantly from 45 to 49, workers over 50 more often report dissatisfaction with working conditions, and working conditions are found to be more difficult than elsewhere.

Policy pointers

Some mechanisms that once protected older workers from exposure to painful working conditions are apparently being eroded by demographic evolution and changes in work organisation. This raises the challenge of addressing work organisation in the context of an ageing workforce.

Painful positions, poor work–life balance and bad career prospects are recurrent factors explaining work unsustainability for ageing workers. The first raises challenges in the areas of health and safety regulation, ergonomics and task distribution, while the other two are matters for human resource management, company organisation and flexibility.

Work sustainability differs between occupational groups. The study highlights factors influencing unsustainability, not only for low-skilled occupations and mid-skilled manual occupations, but also for high-skilled occupations. Particularly affected are women managers and professionals. The wide range of affected occupations suggests a differentiated policy approach is needed.

Motivation to remain at work not only depends on the variables considered in this study, but also on various characteristics of national socio-political and institutional models such as income distribution, and pension and tax regime.

Further information

The report, *Sustainable work and the ageing workforce*, is available at www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef1266.htm

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