

Safer and healthier work at any age – Final overall analysis report

Focusing on occupational safety and health (OSH) challenges arising from Europe's ageing workforce, the 3-year pilot project 'Safer and healthier work at any age' was initiated by the European Parliament and directed by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA). The objectives of the project were the following:

1. to improve knowledge of existing policies and initiatives addressing the ageing of the workforce and how they have been implemented in the 28 Member States and four European Free Trade Association countries;
2. to provide reliable information and analysis for policy development in the area of OSH, including rehabilitation and return to work;
3. to facilitate the exchange of good practice;

The present information sheet provides a summary of the findings from the preceding analysis reports¹.

Setting the scene

Since the 1960s, life expectancy has been increasing throughout Europe; at the same time birth rates have remained low. As a consequence, Europe's population is ageing, and by 2040 over-65s are expected to account for nearly 27 % of the population². As may be expected, the European workforce is also ageing and the proportion of older workers (55-64 years) is increasing.

Although life expectancy is increasing, the extra years of life are not necessarily spent in good health, and the incidence of chronic diseases — such as cancers, musculoskeletal disorders, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and depression, etc. — increases with age.

Implications of the ageing workforce

An older population with an ageing workforce will have implications for socioeconomic systems, putting pressure on pension systems and health care costs.

Many Member States have been raising the official retirement age; however, prolonging working life poses its own challenges:

- an age-diverse workforce, as the proportion of older people in the workforce is growing;
- longer, cumulative exposure to workplace hazards and risks;
- increased prevalence of chronic conditions among workers.

¹ <https://osha.europa.eu/en/themes/osh-management-context-ageing-workforce/ep-osh-project>

² Eurostat, 'Population projections, main scenario — Population on 1 January by sex and single year age' [proj_13npms], last updated on 1 April 2014. Retrieved on 17 June 2014 from <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/population-demography-migration-projections/statistics-illustrated>.

Prolonging working life presents opportunities to change working conditions for the better for everyone through the application of the following measures:

- good OSH management that includes risk prevention and workplace adaptations can prevent chronic illness and disability;
- human resources management that places special focus on age management;
- adoption of age-sensitive risk assessment;
- integration of OSH and workplace health promotion;
- working conditions that are adapted to the workers' needs;
- implementation of rehabilitation and return-to-work systems to avoid long-term sickness absence and prevent an early exit from work;
- provision of structures for vocational training and lifelong learning.

Existing policy frameworks

Over the past 20 years European countries have established a variety of policies, programmes and initiatives in the fields of employment, public health, social justice, social policy and vocational education to address the challenges of an ageing workforce. Most governments have introduced socioeconomic measures, such as pension system reforms including raising the official retirement age and limiting access to early retirement.

The project undertaken by EU-OSHA identified a number of Member States that have developed integrated policy frameworks that bring together measures from different policy areas with the objective of creating healthy working environments for all and maintaining work ability and employability throughout the life course.

Policy-relevant findings

National governments have a key role in creating an environment supportive to age management and active and healthy ageing. Population and workforce ageing is a cross-policy issue and the challenges can be addressed in an efficient way by integrating the concept of active ageing into all relevant policy areas. This includes:

- flexible retirement policies;
- promoting equal treatment in employment;
- improving access for adult education, vocational training and lifelong learning;
- creating systems and services for vocational rehabilitation and return-to-work support;
- promoting work-life balance;
- strengthening occupational health care and introducing periodic health examinations for workers over 45 to allow for early interventions;
- focusing efforts to reduce health inequalities in the most problematic sectors and occupations;

- training occupational healthcare personnel, labour inspectors and OSH experts in issues relating to ageing and work;
- strengthening health education and health promotion to shift the focus to preventive actions;
- promoting solidarity between generations and making efforts to change attitudes towards older people.

Rehabilitation and return to work

After accidents or long-term sickness absence, services providing vocational rehabilitation and return-to-work systems play an integral part in helping workers recover and maintain work ability. Rehabilitation and return-to-work systems are an integral part of any strategy to maintain work ability and employability and to extend working life.

All Member States provide some form of rehabilitation support to people with a recognised disability, many countries have general provisions on workplace adaptations and a smaller number of countries have increased employers' responsibilities in the reintegration of workers following sickness absence.

A handful of countries have developed a comprehensive policy and legal framework with the primary objective to retain people at work. They are based on a number of common principles, including an approach tailored to individual needs, early intervention and interdisciplinary measures, inclusive systems covering all workers and the development of a case management approach.

Policy-relevant findings in the area of rehabilitation and return to work

- The scope of the system should be broad, covering all workers.
- Rehabilitation and return-to-work systems should be part of an integrated policy framework for sustainable working life which requires coordination across policy areas.
- Coordinated systems require combined action of different actors, at system and workplace levels.
- Joined-up budgeting might increase resource efficiency at the system level.
- Financial and technical support for micro- and small enterprises to develop individual reintegration plans and workplace adaptations are needed to foster action.

Workplace measures: drivers and success factors

The project looked at a number of case studies to determine possible drivers and success factors of the measures and programmes that have been put in place to address the challenges of an ageing workforce. Although these findings cannot be generalised, owing to the limited number of case studies, some general patterns did emerge.

The concerns at company level that serve as drives for initiating programmes or measures include concerns about absenteeism, i.e. the costs of sickness absence and early retirement, more employees with health problems, chronic diseases, avoiding losing older workers' expertise, knowledge transfer, shortage of skilled workforce, maintaining productivity, the health and well-being of employees and improving corporate image.

Drivers from outside the organisation include national policies and legislation and the provision of financial and technical support by governmental and interdisciplinary organisations.

The following measures at workplace level have been identified as key to promoting sustainable working lives:

- taking a life course approach to prevent ill health from the early stages of a career;
- using a holistic approach, taking into account factors beyond OSH that have an impact on OSH;
- implementation of workplace health promotion measures;
- using age/diversity-sensitive risk assessment and gender issues;
- adopting human resources policies that support OSH management (flexible working time, training and skills development);
- ensuring return-to-work support and workplace adaptations;
- providing management and leadership;
- promoting social dialogue/worker participation.

The lack of financial and human resources to manage the challenges of an ageing workforce is more commonly an issue in small enterprises. Measures in micro- and small companies are often ad hoc, reactive and informal rather than deriving from an explicit OSH policy. Policy measures should take into account and address the specific needs of micro- and small companies, considering the particular difficulties these companies face.

Prerequisites for OSH systems to manage an ageing workforce

The findings from the project suggest that a number of prerequisites are necessary for OSH systems for sustainable work. These include:

- improved prevention for all to ensure that workers do not leave the labour market for health reasons and maintain and enhance work ability;
- specific measures for a diverse workforce through diversity-sensitive risk assessments;
- a holistic approach to prevention and the promotion of well-being at work, linking OSH with other areas;
- support for companies, in particular micro- and small enterprises;
- social dialogue at all levels;
- integrated policies cutting across different policy areas, OSH, employment, public health, education and economic and social affairs.

For effective policies to ensure sustainable working life as a precondition for longer working life, higher employment rates and better health for all, then the development of cross-policy and multidisciplinary systems and structures, the coordination between actors and the establishment of support schemes are necessary.

Further information

The report is available in English on the EU-OSHA website at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/safer-and-healthier-work-any-age-final-overall-analysis-report/view>

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