

The ageing workforce: implications for occupational safety and health – A research review

This review considers key issues related to occupational safety and health (OSH) and sustainable working in the context of the ageing EU workforce.

The ageing workforce: implications for OSH

Because of demographic changes and socio-economic developments, the workforce in the EU is ageing. In recent years, there has been a push to increase the employment rate of those aged 55-64, and retirement age in many Member States is now over 65 years. This has important implications for OSH and sustainable working. For workers to be able to work and retain their physical and mental health into retirement, attention must be paid to creating good working conditions, an appropriate work-life balance, employment security and lifelong learning opportunities¹. Therefore, it is vital that we understand and appreciate the challenges of an ageing workforce for OSH.

To address this, this review examined the changes that occur in ageing individuals in the workforce and the likely impacts of work along the life course on health and ability; the implications of this in relation to OSH and sustainable work; and the OSH measures needed to mitigate adverse safety and health effects and promote sustainable work along the life course.

The concept of 'work ability' used in the report considers an individual's resources in relation to the demands of their work. There are many determinants of health and work ability, which are influenced by a variety of interacting factors within and outside the workplace. For example, working conditions are influenced by workplace culture and national OSH policy and services, among other factors.

Age-related changes and the impact of work

The following **key findings** were made in relation to age-related changes and the impact of work.

- While ageing is accompanied by physiological changes, **age itself is not the most important determinant of health and performance**. Ageing is not inevitably accompanied by illness and disease; lifestyle factors also have an important influence on health.
- Physical strength and endurance are very specific to individuals: older workers may be stronger than their younger colleagues. The strategies and skills of older workers, gained through experience, can often **compensate** for losses in work-related functional capacity.

- Some cognitive abilities decline with age. However, older workers often show better judgement, job-specific knowledge, ability to reason and motivation to learn than their younger colleagues. Also, key elements of cognitive performance do not generally decrease markedly until after the age of 70 years.
- Older workers are more likely to suffer from chronic health problems; however, many chronic diseases are controllable and need not affect work performance.
- The health of older workers may be influenced by long-term exposure to hazards throughout working life and there can be a long latency period before the effects are seen.

Overall, **older workers are an asset to organisations**: they often have greater expertise, knowledge and skills than younger workers; are often more reliable and committed; and their turnover and (short-term) absenteeism rates are often lower.

The following **key findings** were made in relation to the implications of these age- and work-related changes for OSH and sustainable work.

- OSH strategies should pay particular attention to workers' **cumulative exposure** to physical and chemical hazards, as this affects the sustainability of work. Long-term exposure to demanding work increases the impact of any age-related loss of work ability.
- Older workers with physically demanding jobs may be more likely to develop musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) or chronic fatigue. However, the likelihood of injury relates more to work ability than to age. Therefore, **a worker's physical capacity, rather than their age, should be used to determine if they are capable of performing a specific job and the associated risk of MSDs**. Additional support, including adjustments to the work, may be necessary.
- Some age-related changes could result in an increased risk under **certain circumstances**.
- **Occupation, not age, is the dominant factor that contributes to risk of injury**.
- The causes of **work-related stress** in older workers are different from those in younger workers and this should be considered.
- **Continuing to work under good working conditions** is associated with better physical and mental health than being out of work.
- While the evidence that older workers are more likely to have difficulties with **shift work** is mixed, those who do report difficulties need extra support or the option of non-shift work.
- The **experience** of older workers may enable them to overcome age-related challenges and increase their efficiency in the workplace.
- Many age-related changes and health issues, such as hearing or vision changes, or chronic diseases, can generally be **accommodated with simple aids or work adjustments**.
- **Measures that make work less demanding for older workers are likely to benefit all workers**.

¹ Eurofound (2012), Employment trends and policies for older workers in the recession.

Supporting sustainable work

To improve working conditions for all, and mitigate adverse safety and health effects, it is important that an integrated approach is used, and the concepts of 'sustainable work' and the 'life-course approach' are useful in this regard. This review discusses various models of sustainable work, demonstrating its multifaceted nature. These models show the complex and interacting factors that can influence the work ability of individuals and the sustainability of work. The retention of older workers in the labour market is also influenced by interrelated factors, such as motivation and learning opportunities, and broader socio political and institutional factors, such as income distribution and pension and tax regimes.

According to the European Working Conditions Survey, significant proportions of the workforce report exposure to challenging working conditions, which could lead to early exit from employment².

In relation to OSH, sustainable work consists of two main elements, both covered by the European legal framework on OSH:

1. **generic measures** that control risks to all workers to ensure that work does not damage physical or mental health across the life course;
2. **specific measures** to protect particularly vulnerable groups or individuals by taking additional steps as necessary.

OSH measures for sustainable work

The **key measures** identified in this report with regard to improving risk prevention strategies for all workers, and older workers in particular, are outlined below:

- a comprehensive approach to age management should include OSH, health promotion and human resource measures;
- risk assessment that incorporates OSH and age management can be used to identify risk prevention measures for the whole workforce and for specific groups or individuals;
- often, very simple ergonomic adjustments or workplace/equipment adaptations can reduce demands for all workers and specific ergonomic adjustments can be made for specific groups of workers or individuals;
- workplace health promotion interventions should be age and gender appropriate;
- appropriate flexible working arrangements are particularly important for older workers, who may have health problems or responsibilities as carers. Social policy is also important in this regard;
- up-to-date skills and knowledge should be maintained, with training methods adapted to different age groups;
- the promotion of 'healthy schools' and risk education in schools is also part of a lifelong approach, and the prevention of injury and ill health in younger workers is essential to ensure sustainable work;
- rehabilitation should be focused on staying in work, and interdisciplinary early interventions are crucial;
- gender-related as well as age-related issues must be taken into account in the workplace;

- a sector- or job-specific approach takes account of specific contexts; many measures to reduce workloads in specific sectors would benefit all workers in the sector.

Supporting OSH systems to promote sustainable work

Effective OSH systems that are appropriate for promoting sustainable work are needed. This includes legal and enforcement measures; services for enterprises and organisations, such as occupational health services; incentives; awareness raising and campaigns; knowledge and solutions; networking for the exchange of good practice; and cooperation between employers and workers. By mainstreaming diversity into its strategy and practice, labour inspection can be equipped with the appropriate tools and expertise to apply its activities to a diverse workforce.

Current barriers to sustainable work are also discussed in this review; for example, workers in small businesses and temporary workers often have limited access to occupational health services, health surveillance monitoring and rehabilitation. This must be addressed, as access to such resources is crucial to promoting workers' physical and mental well-being, thus prolonging working lives.

The importance of an integrated policy approach

Because of the complex interaction between influences within and outside the workplace, an integrated policy approach that considers all of these influences is essential to support workers throughout their working lives, as is offering support if early exit from the workforce is unavoidable. In particular, cooperation is needed between OSH, employment, education, public health and social security services.

Gaps in the research

Improved OSH management to reduce risks and make work easier for all workers, and older workers in particular, could have a significant impact on the sustainability of work. Although age-related changes and the impacts of work, and ways to mitigate these impacts have been identified, more work on the effectiveness of OSH interventions and on ways to ensure work is sustainable for all, particularly in relation to demanding work, is still needed. Continued research in these areas, and on the consequences of extending working life, is vital to ensuring workers remain healthy into retirement.

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-ageing-workforce-implications/view>

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² Eurofound (2015), First findings: Sixth European Working Conditions Survey.