



# Working better, for longer

**Christa Sedlatschek**, Director of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, on ways to help older people stay active in the labour market.

**2012 is the European Year for Active Ageing**, or to give it its full title, the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations. Most of us are aware that we have an ageing population throughout most of Europe. Partly this is for reasons that we can be proud of – we can expect to live considerably longer than we did in previous generations. On average we're living eight years longer than we were in 1960 and over the next four or five decades we're likely to see life expectancy rising by another five years or so. That's a good thing for all of us. But combine this with the low birth rates that we've seen over the last few decades, and you get a pattern that is repeating itself all over the developed world, with many more older people in absolute terms, but also a much higher proportion of older people in the overall population.

Europe's population is ageing fast, in other words. In 2010 there were slightly more than 87 million people over 65, or some 17.4 % of the total population. Compare that with the figures from 1985, when there were 59.3 million people who were 65 and over – 12.8 % of the total. And the number is expected to increase still further relative to people of working age, doubling by 2060. This is a challenge, but also a chance to use the competences and abilities of older people.

How can we deal with these profound changes? As László Andor, the European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, has pointed out: 'the key to tackling the challenges of an increasing proportion of older people in our societies is 'active ageing': encouraging older people to remain active by working longer and retiring later, by engaging in volunteer work after retirement, and by leading healthy and autonomous lives.'

## Active Ageing

Hence the importance of the European Year for Active Ageing, which was launched in Copenhagen in January. Its aim is to raise awareness of the contribution that older people can make to society, and to encourage decision-makers to help people age 'actively'. Active ageing is about growing old in good health, continuing to live independently, and playing a full role in society.

A key part of this involves enabling older workers to stay healthy for longer in the labour market. The employment rates of older workers (55–64 years old) in the EU-27 are currently less than 50%. In other words, for a variety of reasons more than half of older workers are leaving work before they have to retire, and that means that there is huge untapped potential in people working longer, to help to support the longer lives of European citizens.

Projections point in particular towards increasing numbers of older women within the EU-27's labour market, with the employment rate for women aged 55 to 64 being expected to rise by 20.9 % between 2010 and 2060, as against an 11.5 % rise among men.

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Are people happy with this increasing role for older people in the workplace? According to a recent Eurobarometer survey it would seem so, with broad support for the idea of older people working up to and even beyond current retirement age. 61% of Europeans, for example, think that people should be allowed to continue working once they've reached the official retirement age, and one third say that they themselves would like to continue working after they reach the age when they're entitled to a pension.

If we're going to achieve it, though, surveys also show a broad awareness of the importance of occupational safety and health (OSH), if people are to work longer. The second European Opinion Poll on Occupational Safety and Health, which we recently commissioned from Ipsos MORI, shows that 87% of people across Europe believe that good occupational health and safety is important if people are to work for longer before they retire (56% say it is 'very important'). But according to the Eurobarometer survey, many Europeans also think that conditions in their workplaces might not allow them to continue working to an older age: only four in ten (42%) said they thought that they would be capable of doing the work they are currently doing until the age of 65 or beyond, while 17% expect that they will not be able to carry on in their current job past the age of 59. More than half said that their workplaces are not adapted to the needs of older people.

## Older workers' safety and health

While we at the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work are promoting the European Year, then, we are also emphasising the crucial importance of good safety and health and workplace health promotion at all stages of working life, if older people are to be able to work for longer.

If we are to encourage people to stay longer in the labour market, we need to challenge some of the discrimination that exists against older workers: changing negative attitudes is largely what the European Year is about. Rather than older people being seen as a burden on the working-age population, they should be recognised for the valuable skills and experience that they have, and the contribution this can make in the workplace.

But older people are in some ways more vulnerable at work, too. They are more likely to be involved in fatal workplace accidents. Long-term health problems also increase with age: musculoskeletal disorders are a particular issue, and depression is also one of the most common reasons for early retirement. In jobs with a high physical workload, of course, we see higher levels of sick leave at all ages, but this increases significantly for workers aged between 45 and 50. Nevertheless, there are wide differences between individual workers at any given age in the work that they can do, and most older workers are able to stay healthy and physically capable, given the right conditions.

## Age management in the workplace

What we need, then, is a real emphasis on the importance of 'age management' in the workplace: managers need to take age-related factors into account in assigning particular tasks to individuals, so that everybody, regardless of age, is able to do their job.

This means focusing on what we call 'work ability': finding the right balance between work and individual resources.

And there is plenty that employers can do in this area. Workplace health promotion, for example, helping workers to adopt a healthy lifestyle in terms of eating, drinking and exercise. And carrying out proper risk

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assessments, taking into consideration individual differences between workers in terms of their capacities and health: age becomes just one of the many factors that need to be taken into account, when managers think about the 'fit' between employees and particular kinds of work.

Finally, a vital part of age management involves redesigning individual work tasks to fit the strengths, needs and capabilities of older workers. Research shows that there is a variety of measures that can promote work ability related to work organisation, working hours, training, ergonomic measures etc. And the most effective and efficient way to adapt the workplace to the needs of workers is to let them participate in the planning and implementing of measures. They are the experts of their workplace.

There are plenty of examples of how this can work in practice. One manufacturing company, for instance, has introduced an 'Age Master' scheme, which offers extra days off for workers over 58, giving them more time to rest after carrying out physically demanding work. As a result, older people in the company have tended to work about three years longer before retiring. An energy company, meanwhile, has introduced an '80-90-100' programme, which enables older workers to reduce their working time by 20%, reducing their salary by 10% but keeping all their pension benefits: again, this has led employees to work longer before retiring.

Examples like these show that people are able and willing to work longer when they are motivated to do so. And research shows that this all results in lower rates of sick leave, lower work disability costs and better productivity: the return on investment for these types of schemes can be between three and five to one after a few years.

Age management in European workplaces shows a clear difference between organisations that deal with ageing employees in 'problem-solving' and 'proactive' ways and those that do not.

Organisations that see an ageing workforce only as a problem tend to do less well than those that embrace it as an opportunity, and make the most of the chance to have younger workers, for example, learn from older ones.

Taking active ageing seriously pays off, then, and not just for workers and their employers. Recent research shows that the better our work ability before retirement, the better our quality of life later on, with lower levels of sickness and physical or mental deterioration. And that means reduced healthcare costs for all of us: investing in occupational health and safety is an investment for everyone. What is important is to start early, today's young people are tomorrow's older workers.

The basis for all this is to establish a preventive culture and to empower people to participate actively in creating a better working environment. Good leadership and worker participation is a proven success factor.

To find out more about EU-OSHA's work in this area visit [http://osha.europa.eu/en/priority\\_groups/ageingworkers](http://osha.europa.eu/en/priority_groups/ageingworkers) or download the resource pack from our sister EU agency, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound), at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/resourcepacks/activeageing.htm>