

Editorial

Will you be able to keep doing your current job when you reach 60?

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The initial data from the fifth European Working Conditions Survey were published in November 2010. The mine of information yielded by a survey of 44,000 workers clearly cannot be summed up in a single page. But one important thing stands out – when asked if their health and safety was at risk from their work, a quarter of workers answered "yes". It was a view held by more than one in three manual and nearly one in five non-manual employees.

Another striking thing is how much so-called "presenteeism" goes on, i.e., people feeling obliged to go to work when ill. Presenteeism comes about from two kinds of pressure: direct pressure from employers, and that from the social security system (sub-income benefits, no pay for the first or first few days off sick, etc.). Nearly four in ten European workers went to work whilst ill in the twelve months up to the survey. Women are more often under such pressure than men.

Of the factors that harm health, the percentage of workers exposed to chemicals has been virtually unchanged since 1995. Substitution of hazardous substances remains a top priority for improving occupational health.

There are clear risks related to work organization, too. When asked if they will be able to do their current job when they are 60 years old, less than 60% of workers thought they would.

This is an average figure that varies widely by where they stand in the division of labour. Most of the lowest-skilled manual workers did not see themselves still being able to work at age 60 – just 44% think they can hold out. Things are little better among the highest-skilled manual workers – only half thought they would be able to do the same job after hitting 60. For the lowest-skilled

non-manual workers, the percentage was higher at 61% and up to 72% among the highest-skilled non-manual workers. So the picture is undeniably better for white-collar than blue collar workers - but still not perfect.

What the survey does show is that the long-term impact of work on health may be much more worrying than its immediate effects. Women who predominantly work in jobs and sectors where the immediate consequences of work are less noticeable lose any advantage looked at over a full career. They are more tightly-controlled at work: fewer women than men can take a break when they want, or have prospects for career advancement. Not just that, but they more often have to hide their feelings at work than their male colleagues.

The data show up things that are often disregarded in the Europe-wide debates on retirement age and employment among the over-50s. Extending working life has

different meanings depending on which rung you stand on in the job ladder. For the least-favoured groups, the build-up of poor working conditions over life often makes it a physical impossibility to keep working. The way things are, a building worker, cleaner or call centre worker will have difficulty keeping their job and their health after the age of 50 or 55. Adjustment schemes for older workers will not be enough given the build-up of ill health throughout working life.

Without a big improvement in working conditions and more control of them by workers, delaying retirement is little better than a cynical ploy for cutting the pensions of those already on the lowest incomes. The current reforms could well simply widen income gaps at the expense of older workers who, faced with the threat of poverty, may have no other choice but to slog on in a health-destroying job. ●

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