EDITORIAL

Perspectives on active ageing and work-related stress in Europe: a European opinion poll

Currently two of the most topical and challenging issues in relation to occupational safety and health in Europe are the ageing workforce and work-related stress. As the changing world of work places increasing demands on workers, and the shift to a service economy continues [1], psychosocial issues are of prime concern. Although difficult to measure because of its nature, studies have shown the significant negative effects of work-related stress. In the UK, for example, the Health and Safety Executive reports that around 10.4 million working days were lost through work-related stress in 2011–12 and, on average, each person suffering from work-related stress took 24 days off work [2]. Meanwhile, as life expectancy continues to rise across Europe, the total share of the workforce between the age of 55 and 64 increases [3]. The Ready for Ageing? report, published by the House of Lords earlier this year, states that by 2030, England is likely to have 51% more people aged over 65 than in 2013 and 101% more people aged over 85. Alarmingly, in the UK as a whole, ‘10.7 million people can currently expect inadequate retirement incomes’ [4].

A recent European opinion poll conducted by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) provides important insights into public opinion regarding these two topical issues [5]. Full-time, part-time and self-employed workers over the age of 18 were asked six questions related to the ageing population and work-related stress. The results are interesting. Across Europe, surprisingly, 43% of participants do not expect the proportion of workers aged 60 and over to increase by 2020. However, opinion does vary considerably between countries, and, in the UK, around two-thirds (67%) of workers do think that an increase in the proportion of people aged 60 and over is likely by 2020. Opinion also varies according to industry sector, and across Europe those working in manual jobs (49%) are less likely than those in non-manual roles (53%) to believe that there will be a higher proportion of workers aged over 60 in the workplace in 2020.

It is certainly true that we are living longer, but in Europe more than half of older workers (aged 55–64) currently leave work before retirement age, for a variety of reasons [6]. Is this trend likely to continue? We need to ensure that it does not: better and longer working lives are essential in order to finance and support the ageing European population. The poll reveals, however, that only around one-quarter (23%) of UK respondents are aware of programmes and policies in their workplace that will support people working up to or beyond retirement age. This figure may seem low, but it is significantly higher than the European average of 12%. Meanwhile, 74% of UK workers thought that such policies should be introduced. As the proportion of older workers in the working population continues to grow [6], it is quite clear that employers need to encourage and enable older workers to continue working through supportive measures.

Improved occupational safety and health is a key component in this; as age increases, so too does the incidence of long-term health problems and chronic diseases.

Although older workers can suffer more from age-related ill-health, they have a great deal to offer employers and society, and these benefits are well reported. For example, older workers have a broad range of skills and experience, are known to take fewer days off sick and tend to be very committed to their employer [7]. Awareness of this appears to have filtered down to respondents: only relatively few reported that they believe older workers take more time off work due to illness, have more accidents at work or are less productive than other workers. Nevertheless, prejudice against older workers remains.

Findings reveal that half of UK participants believe that older workers (aged 60 and over) are less able to adapt to changes at work than other workers, while this figure is lower than the European average of 60% [5]. Across Europe, 4 in 10 workers believed that older workers tend to suffer more from work-related stress than other workers. These results highlight that there is still work to do in raising awareness that older workers are an important asset, rather than a burden. Changing attitudes towards older people is an essential step towards older workers being recognized for their valuable skills and experience and being encouraged to continue working and contributing to society [8].

In relation to work-related stress, specifically, the poll asked ‘How common, if at all, are cases of work-related stress in your workplace?’ and ‘How well, if at all, do you think the control of work-related stress is handled in your workplace?’ These are important questions: previous research has already shown that work-related stress, depression and anxiety represent the second most frequently reported health problem by workers in Europe, after musculoskeletal disorders [9]. Effectively managing work-related stress is not only a legal obligation [10] for employers but essential if they are to be economically successful and retain and motivate a healthy workforce. Results from the poll, however, reveal that 4 in 10 (44%) UK workers do believe work-related stress is...
common in their workplace. Among those most likely to say that work-related stress is common, 55% are health or care workers, 50% are aged 35–54 years and 50% are employed in workplaces with 50 or more workers. These findings help to identify areas where attention needs to be focused and demonstrate the continued need to better manage stress in the workplace.

Previous research has found that fewer than 30% of organizations in Europe have procedures in place for dealing with psychosocial risks such as work-related stress [11]. This was reflected in the results of the poll: 54% of European workers reported that work-related stress is controlled well and 41% said it was not. Results from the UK are more favourable, however, with two-thirds of workers (65%) saying that work-related stress is controlled well at their workplace and 28% saying that it is not. The UK (along with Ireland and Denmark) also has one of the highest proportions of respondents, saying that work-related stress is controlled ‘very well’ (24%) out of the 31 countries polled, almost twice the European average (13%).

When asked from a list of six possible causes of work-related stress, 8 in 10 (80%) workers in the UK selected job reorganization or job insecurity as the cause, narrowly ahead of hours worked or workload (78%), reflecting the results found across Europe as a whole. These findings help to identify the causes of work-related stress, so that they can be more effectively managed in the workplace. A previous study found that over 40% of employers consider psychosocial risks more difficult to manage than ‘traditional’ occupational safety and health risks, with ‘sensitivity of the issue’ and ‘lack of expertise’ perceived to be the main obstacles [11]. These perceptions need to be changed—work-related stress is an organizational issue that can be effectively tackled and managed in a systematic way—and employers need to be supported in implementing successful risk assessment processes and managing such risks.

By gathering people’s perceptions of Europe’s working environment, the opinion poll helps to build up a picture of how well Europe is handling work-related stress and the ageing workforce. Results do vary from country to country, but there are clear and visible trends that can be seen. Notably, in terms of the ageing workforce, it is significant that only a little more than half (52%) of the European population expects a higher proportion of workers aged over 60 in the workplace by 2020. Clearly, attitudes need to change further in this regard. Second, there is little awareness of any policies and programmes to support these workers. European employers need to be encouraged to adopt new policies aimed at encouraging and helping older workers to continue in employment. In terms of work-related stress, half of workers say that work-related stress is common, although over half (54%) say that it is handled well in their workplace. We need to increase this percentage so that it represents the views of a higher majority. Job reorganization or job insecurity (72%), and hours worked or workload (66%) are perceived to be the most significant causes of work-related stress and these areas can be improved through effective management, as can the other identified causes of work-related stress. The opinion poll will certainly help to inform EU-OSHA’s work with its national partner organizations and help to stimulate interest in occupational safety and health issues—an important step when working towards positive change in relation to these issues.

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References