

Health and employability of older workers

Myths and facts about older employees, their physical and mental health and associated disabilities have been mapped in the Netherlands, using varying research methods. Results show a gap between opinions and reality regarding the health and employability of older workers. People perceive all older employees as less healthy than their younger counterparts. In fact, a large majority of older employees enjoy good physical and mental health and work very well up to 65-70 years of age.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment in the Netherlands asked TNO to map myths and facts about older employees, their physical and mental health and associated disabilities. The report also outlines various interventions in the Netherlands to combat false stereotypes and to improve the health and employability of older workers. Research methods included: a literature study, interviews with experts in the field of health and employability, secondary analyses on existing datasets, and a short telephone survey of employers and employees.

Results show a gap between opinions and facts regarding the health and employability of older workers: such employees are viewed as less healthy, for example. People believe that all older employees have declining physical health due to chronic disease, such as heart problems and other complaints from physically demanding work. On the contrary, the facts show that a large majority of older employees enjoy good physical and mental health and work very well until the age of 65-70 years. It is a myth that the health and employability of workers decline when they grow old; in fact, only a small percentage of older employees decline physically and/or mentally.

Profile of older workers' health

Some older people suffer deterioration in hearing and sight, have less muscle power, do not sleep as well, and are more likely to have chronic disease, such as heart and back trouble. However, the decline in cognitive abilities appears to be small (Craik and Salthouse, cognitive ageing course, 2000).

Although older people have more difficulty in solving new and complex problems (e.g. Merryman, Brown, Schludermann and Schludermann, 1983), more established and automatic cognitive abilities actually increase, as knowledge and experience grows (e.g. Cremer, 1993). For most people, intelligence remains stable until the age of 80 (Snel and Cremer, 1994).

Despite physical and cognitive decline, there are five reasons why this has little consequence for the employability of most older workers:

1. Older employees use many tactics to compensate for decline (e.g. reading glasses; well-developed working strategies);
2. Many people are healthy until old age;
3. Health depends on many more factors other than age, such as lifestyle, job tenure and physical demands;
4. In most jobs, declining health has no impact on job performance;
5. Many jobs and work environments can be adjusted for emerging disabilities.

Absenteeism

Nevertheless, absenteeism among older workers is higher than among younger employees. However, a secondary analysis on data from the Foundation in 2000 shows that, among a sample of almost 22,000 employees, the (self-reported) duration of absenteeism is more strongly related to job tenure than to age.

Another interesting finding in a 2002 TNO dataset for the Netherlands (Smulders, 2003) was that, among employees in blue-collar jobs, age and subjective health are more strongly related than they are among employees in white-collar jobs. This finding does not necessarily imply that a blue-collar job causes employees to become less healthy at a faster rate. It may suggest that people working in blue-collar jobs have a less healthy lifestyle. Nonetheless, this finding shows that it is important to pay particular attention to the health of older employees in blue-collar jobs, as several health risks converge in this group: quality of work is often low, physical demands are high, employees are educated to a lower level and, therefore, often work from a young age in the same job, and their lifestyle is often less healthy than that of people in white-collar jobs.

Increasing variation in health and employability

In summary, relationships between age, health and employability appear to be weak. Other factors, such as lifestyle, job tenure and physical demands, explain greater variance in health and sickness absence. Moreover, present research shows that, with age, variation in health and employability increases. In other words, older employees differ more from each other than younger employees do, which implies that older employees are better served by an individual approach in encouraging healthy and productive job fulfilment.

However, because some associations do exist between age and health decline, there is a danger of statistical discrimination. Employers may discriminate against older employees on the basis of group characteristics, which in themselves have little to do with the competencies demanded for the job. One example would be that, because older employees run a small risk of absence, employers will not take the risk of investing in them, for example, by paying for expensive training and education.

Many interventions at different levels (societal and organisational among employees) are taking place to combat these false stereotypes, to adjust work for physical decline, and to improve health and employability. The following table gives some examples.

Combating stereotypes and improving health and employability of older employees

Level:	Societal	Organisational	Individual (among employees)
Combating stereotypes	Public campaigns showing healthy older employees	Discussions about views on older colleagues	Combating self-stereotyping
	Government as a role model to other employers in encouraging employability of elderly	Using role models of employable colleagues	Reflecting on (future) needs
Adjusting work	Implementing course-of-life arrangements, such as saving money for sabbaticals or early retirement	Regular job rotation	Investing in one's own healthy workplace, body posture and exercise at work
	Age-neutral collective agreements	Design for all: designing workplaces to be accessible for diverse employees	Choosing work to fit abilities
Increasing employability	Public campaigns addressing lifestyle	Age-sensitive HRM	Investing in own employability
	Financial incentives to keep employees	Integrated health management: set of	Living a healthy lifestyle

	working as they grow older	practices to keep employees healthy	
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Author: Aukje Nauta, PhD, TNO

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