

# **Work Life 2000 Yearbook 1 1999**

*The first of a series of Yearbooks in the Work Life 2000 programme,  
preparing for the  
Work Life 2000 Conference in Malmö 22–25 January 2001,  
as part of the Swedish Presidency of the European Union*

**Organised by:**

**National Institute for Working Life, Sweden  
National Board of Occupational Safety and Health, Sweden  
Joint Industrial Safety Council, Sweden**

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**Springer**

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Additional material to this book can be downloaded from <http://extras.springer.com>.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4471-1227-3 Springer-Verlag London Berlin Heidelberg

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Worklife 2000 yearbook

I: 1999. - (AI in society)

1.Labor 2.Labor - social aspects 3.Employees - Effect of  
technological innovations on 4.Labor laws and legislation

5.Labor policy

I.Ennals, Richard

331

ISBN-13: 978-1-4471-1227-3

e-ISBN-13: 978-1-4471-0879-5

DOI: 10.1007/978-1-4471-0879-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1999

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Typesetting: Ian Kingston Editorial Services, Nottingham, England

Printed and bound by Athenæum Press Ltd, Gateshead, Tyne and Wear, England

34/3830-543210 Printed on acid-free paper SPIN 10724703

# **Work Life 2000 Organising Committee**

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The Work Ability Index (WAI), developed in Helsinki, was used. It covers changes in work, unemployment, stress at work, layoffs, workload etc. In 1996 when the data was being collected, Finnish organisations were in deep recession. In 1987 unemployment was very low, while in 1996 it was four or five times higher. The pattern of employment changes after the age of 50, when some seek early retirement and others find employment hard to find. The WAI mean dips after 50, with some increase after 60 for managers. Poor work ability sets in from 50. Over the age of 55, the issues of technical competence become more pronounced.

Managers reported on changes 1991–96, listing stress factors which have increased: mental strain increased, physical strain decreased. 20% had experienced layoffs and salary cuts. In terms of salary cuts, shortened weeks and layoffs, there is little difference between age groups. Age is not a vital factor in explaining work ability. Work demands and variety of work tasks have increased: work is more active. Time pressures, mental strain and job insecurity have increased. Managers' work ability was rather good compared to other Finnish groups with similar educational background. Age was not related to work change experience

## **R. Cremer, NIA'TNO**

### **The “State of the Art” on Mental Work Ability and the Increasing (Work) Life Span of People**

Roel Cremer is concerned with elderly workers, and assessing ability. He is interested in both decline and growth in ability over time. He introduced two key concepts: mental workability (capacities which are wilfully allocated); and cognitive ageing (changes in mental ability, including working memory). Changes over the lifespan comprise development in breadth, accumulation of experience, and development in depth.

He looked at two categories of mental abilities, fluid and crystallised. During the career there is a shift from fluid to crystallised. In laboratory studies we find deficits, changes in performance. We can instead look from the perspective of the work environment or daily life. In the latter, there is scope for use of many strategies, thus lessening the impact of ageing. Laboratory studies focus on the abstract, ageing effects, and focus on fluid abilities. Daily life involves freer choice, where age means less, and there are fewer demands. Work involves concrete tasks, and age effects can be positive, using accumulated knowledge. Proactive policies should develop alternatives for age-sensitive professions. Researchers are concerned with determining what makes ageing workers successful, which are age friendly jobs, and what are the effects of age management at work. In conclusion, the effects of ageing are context dependent.

Roel Cremer was concerned with commitment from people, and gains experienced by the 45+ cohort. We need to look at the fuller context, including the person concerned. How do we match age-related policies with the capacities of the 45+ cohort? He presented the cyclical age-related policy used by his institute. In each cycle, researchers identify the intentions of employers, assess the present workload in terms of age-related risks and risks relating to the working conditions, and interview the employees on workability, by cohort. A report is presented, with priority recommendations, followed by corrective measures, then preventive measures for the next cohort, and finally evaluation, before the cycle is repeated.

## Discussion

**Lena Skiöld** wondered how to persuade employers that older people are worth keeping on. The state wants people to work, but what about companies? **Pieter Drenth** defended the feasibility and profitability of key criteria other than profit figures. We need to re-educate management, taking into account the continuity and survival of the organisation. This means identification with the organisation, developing more skills than for your own job. This is what Shell call "employeeeship". We need to go beyond narrow economic terms. Employees can increase output, and can contribute to the community survival. Both criteria involve hard and soft data. We need to redefine success and usefulness.

**Allan Toomingas** asked who is interested in the workers. Employers do not want to keep people who are below peak capacity. Is there anything unique about elderly workers? At a community level, there should be interest in keeping people at work, or the economy will collapse. We should take care of everyone. There is a need for lifelong learning. Why not have sabbaticals for older workers? Younger people would gain opportunities for experience. In his 20s and 30s he would like to reduce his working time, to enable him to spend time with his family.

**Åsa Kilböm** noted that women are often obliged to stop work for an extended period: they return with more energy and commitment, and with less cynicism, than male counterparts.

**Juhani Ilmarinen** distinguished individual, company and society levels. The key is the company level. If companies will come on board, all can be well. The priority is to develop age management. We need to change and re-train managers. Research suggests that we get more individual as we get older: we need individual solutions; how do we implement these in working life? What about the younger workers? Is it fair to bring forward individual solutions only for one age group? Each age group has strengths and weaknesses. This means problems for management.

**David Wegman** agreed with the focus on the employer. How do you change management perceptions? In the USA there is considerable mobility among middle managers, meaning that managers rarely face the consequences of their own decisions. There are issues for management education and development.

**Max van der Kamp** raised questions about small firms. They have a key role, and harder problems. **Pieter Drenth** argued that the problem might be easier in a small firm, though it is hard to send people on courses. It is important for managers to formulate longer term policies. This was, and is, the method in Shell. If senior managers do not agree, middle managers will not act constructively.

**Lena Skiöld** asked for evidence about contributions of older people to organisations. **Peter Warr** noted that research on work organisation and work on age have been conducted separately, and the work needs to come together. **Serge Volkoff** had partial answers. Work psychology has many tools, not always expensive, which enable us to offer interventions and suggestions at the design rather than the corrective stage. This can enable elderly workers to learn almost as easily as younger ones. It can be a matter of avoiding redundant information, ways of using symbols, in a way that enables older workers to keep up. Work organisation work has shown different approaches by old and young workers, even when both did the job well. Older workers sought, and found ways, to avoid the problems that younger workers solved. Intelligent work organisation enables both to continue. Senior managers

should not take decisions which restrict the intelligent manoeuvre of more junior staff.

**Pieter Drenth** talked about research within the European Fifth Framework. As an aside, he noted that problems are different in the developing world of Africa, where older people are in charge, but lack insight into modern technology. This poses challenges to university authorities in areas such as information and communication technologies. Asia has a tradition of respect for the old. Those in charge can block change. One answer is to delegate to those who understand. Priority areas are Biotechnology, Health, Food, Agriculture; User Friendly Information Society; Sustainable Development and Competence Development; Energy and Environment. Cross themes are: internationalisation; implementation of research in SMEs; and development of human potential.

He offered some conclusions: ageing needs emphasis in each category; the emphasis in developing human potential tends to be on youngsters; sustainability needs the perspective of the older workforce; and older people are contributors, not just consumers.

The case was made for preparation of problem-driven research proposals. Funds have been allocated, criteria have been set, and proposals will be welcomed.

**Åsa Kilböm** summarised some of the conclusions from the first day of the workshop. Taking **Peter Warr's** key points, we should consider the motives there can be for employers to emphasise learning of older workers. We should clarify what we know about the context of learning in the workplace: should we mix old and young, how should we proceed? We need to spell out research needs, concerning the learning climate, young and old, learning and creativity, part-time workers, interaction between individual learning experiences and the workplace.

## **Alan Walker, Sheffield University**

### **Adjusting to An Ageing Workforce in Europe – Policy and Practice**

#### **Introduction**

**Alan Walker** considered the impact of ageing workforces on European countries, and the responses of governments. There is an increase in the average age of economically active citizens. Experience varies across Europe, comparing France with Greece, for example. Overall the workforce is ageing, but the lowering of the exit age from the workforce has meant that those over the age of 40 are seen as nearing the end of their working lives. This paradox is being addressed by the actors in the labour market. There are anomalies about early retirement “baby pensioners”. In the UK some employers see competitive business reasons for employing older workers. Throughout the EU different sectors are responding to the paradox, but only a minority of employers are doing so to date.

#### **Ageing and Employment: Early Exit**

Early exit continues, with a big shake-out of older workers in EU and OECD. The position for women is less clear, given increased work involvement, but the early exit pattern seems similar. Changes are linked to demand: unemployment and recession,