

FIRST EXPERT PANEL: PROMOTING LONGER WORKING LIFE AND MAINTAINING WORKABILITY

Rapporteur: Mr Robert ANDERSON

The presentations have underlined the great diversity of cultures and demographics in the countries of the UNECE region. Canada and Kyrgyzstan are at geographical extremes but both speakers highlighted the phenomenon of people working longer, beyond the age of 65 in some cases, because they want to and in other cases because there is no alternative. Working after State Pension Age is increasingly common in the EU, for a majority of people because they want to spend some time in employment, but, for a significant minority because they need the income – ever more so in the current economic crisis.

The contribution of workers over 65' years is not recognised in the traditional statistic of the dependency ratio and is just one reason that this measure is misleading. As the Chair has argued reports should look at other ways to express economic dependency – as the European Commission has done in its White Paper on Pensions.

The keynote speaker and several others have referred to the problem of negative societal attitudes, to both older people and, specifically, older workers. This ageism is expressed in overall discrimination as well as views that older workers are less productive and less skilled while being more expensive. These negative stereotypes must be addressed by sound research as well as measures to increase awareness of the capacities and competences of the older workforce – information directed to employers and employees, but also the media and general public.

Action to improve employment opportunities for workers as they age takes place in both the workplace and in public policies.

Reform of social protection systems was illustrated by initiatives in Canada, Norway and Sweden, typically through changes in pension and tax regimes. The thorny issue of disability pensions as an alternative form of exit from the labour market was highlighted in Norwegian experience as the primary route out of employment for workers in their 50s. As with unemployment for older workers, there appears to be little prospect of return to work from a disability pension. This draws our attention to the need to address recruitment as well as retention of older workers.

As the speaker for the employers has urged, measures in the labour market should complement social protection reforms to build the “flexicurity” approach. The workplace is the key setting for initiatives to improve workability and Prof. Ilmarinen has shown that such measures, in skills development, health promotion, reconciliation and work organisation, produce positive results for workers at all ages. Nevertheless re-organisation of working times and procedures remains a challenge for companies and support must be directed to employers, especially in smaller enterprises.

Workers need encouragement to remain in employment for longer; this can simply involve positive reinforcement of the message that the worker is making an important contribution and the employer wants them to remain at work. However, as Mrs. Kloimüller illustrated, motivation to work longer usually demands making the job qualitatively more attractive and quantitatively more flexible. It may involve new roles and responsibilities and there is, for example, growing evidence of successful transitions to tasks in mentoring and coaching younger workers.

The issue of working time flexibility has become more pressing with the increasing proportion of women in the older workforce. The gender dimension was mentioned in the presentations of Bjørn Halvorsen and Niclas Jacobson, and the latter draw your attention to the implications of an ageing population for both formal and informal welfare. Sweden has a well-developed formal care system but still most care work is done by families, particularly by women, many of them are in employment. The reconciliation of employment with unpaid care work is a key to enabling longer working lives, and should move up the policy agenda for both governments and social partners.