

ILO: Conditions of Work and Employment Series No.15 (2006)

Conditions of work and employment for older workers in industrialized countries: Understanding the issues

The report focuses mainly on discrimination law, contractual issues, pensions, flexible working and wage rates for people working beyond 65. It briefly reaches into issues of safety and health. The tone reflects the traditional adversarial view of employment, ILO takes sides with the workers and on balance, makes a presumption that work is harmful.

Articles of faith:

It is known that normal and pathological changes affect the bones and muscles of older workers, thereby reducing their maximum physical performance. The consequences are particularly damaging for those workers whose jobs require sustained, concentrated, intense efforts (e.g. long periods of time stooping, bending, stretching or moving heavy materials). Noise and vibrations also may not be well tolerated by older workers, and the combined effects of such poor physical conditions can be experienced in a multiplicative, rather than additive, manner by these workers (WHO, 1993)

[WHO (1993): Ageing and working capacity, WHO Technical Report Series No. 835 (Geneva)].

There is evidence that the physical demands of the job can affect workers' retirement decisions.

Proposed Solutions

The "employability" of older workers can be achieved either by relaxing the physical requirements of the job in question or by improving the physical work capacity of older workers.

Given that problems of older age could actually be caused by working conditions throughout life:
"the solution to the problems of older workers lies in a policy of improving working conditions and environment from the beginning and throughout working life"

One should

"remedy those conditions of work and of the working environment that are likely to hasten the ageing process".

Comment

The ILO report highlights fears that older workers could be more easily damaged by extensions of the working life. Problems would arise from the immediate exposures [and the relative lack of capacity to cope] and, from an accumulation of insults received over the working life.

The concept that work might be beneficial to health [e.g. social interaction, physical wellbeing...] seems not to have been entertained.

If trades unions take the stance adopted here, there would be proportionately more liability claims among the older work force.

The definition of an appropriate standard for a duty of care is not specific to any particular age group. As yet there insufficient information upon which to decide how such standards should vary with age. Health surveillance would seem to be an appropriate risk management action.