

Summary

A pressing social issue

In the future, individuals will extend their working lives until a more advanced age than is currently the case. While for many people this will not pose a problem, a portion of the labour force will find it difficult to work until the age of sixty-five, and even more to sustain their employment even longer. How can we ensure that members of this group remain active participants in the labour market? This is important because many people attach a sense of value to participation and it may contribute to their health. Moreover when employees work longer, the sustainability of collective arrangements may be improved. The central question this advisory report seeks to answer is how to contribute to continued labour participation from a health perspective.

Relationship between health and long-term employability

As the labour force ages, individuals may more frequently be confronted with poor health and with one or more chronic conditions, increasing their risk of limitations. Many working people will be able to continue their participation just fine even in the event of a chronic condition and/or limitation. However, the state of their health may lead to a reduction in their ability to work and thus damage their long-term employability. According to the Council for Public Health and Health Care (RVZ), it is important to approach long-term employability from a life course perspective. This is firstly because health and the ability to work will decrease for a segment of the working population as they age, and the nature of a condition will change over the course of an individual's career. For example, older employed people are more often affected by chronic conditions. And secondly because the context, which is relevant to the ability to work, also changes over the life course: think of caring for small children, for example, or informal care for an frail partner or parent. The number of responsibilities a person is obliged to bear increases as we age. Women additionally tend to bear a proportionally larger share of care assignments.

Contributing to continued participation while prioritising health

The Council states that there is much that can be done from a health perspective in order to stimulate continued participation in the labour market, assuming a number of prior conditions are met. Working individuals, employers and support professionals are responsible in varying capacities for the long-term employability of those in the labour force. There is no chief architect at work and assorted individual interests are at issue. It is vital that the parties involved engage one another in a dialogue concerning long-term, sustainable employability.

They may be aided in this discussion by tools that increase awareness of the likelihood of absenteeism and disability leave. They may also implement effective interventions or preventative action if it is deemed necessary. This action may consist of health-related interventions, but may also entail education, workplace adaptations or support in the care of an ailing family member. Primary health care providers must also take labour market participation into greater account, for example by including participation as an important component of guidelines and standards of quality. Individual plans for care that allow patients to make their own agreements with care providers can also promote this. Participation will prove to be a key goal for many patients. In conclusion, the Council feels it is important to gain further insight into the effectiveness of interventions specifically geared towards older employees and long-term employability, and measures that support working individuals in taking increased responsibility for their own employability.

Health interacts with other factors

The Council is aware that health is but one aspect of continued employment and that there are other important factors. Firstly, the Council observes that the labour market and the employer-employee relationship are in a state of flux. A trend exists towards increased flexibility. This development holds both opportunity and threat for the health of those in the labour force. Opportunity is to be found especially in the increased ability of individuals to arrange their own working lives. Threat can be seen in the greater demands (both mental and emotional) in terms of work; less support as fewer people are employed by businesses that have an extensive contract with an occupational health & safety service; and the loss of job security. A second important factor is the degree to which those in the labour force are able to accommodate their limitations with regard to their tasks, in the event that their ability to work deteriorates. Options include 'job engineering' (clever tweaks of existing jobs), reducing the work pressure and creating a more gradual transition from career to retirement. Ideally, working individuals facing diminished ability to perform their work should be able to adjust their assigned tasks accordingly or to change jobs. Thirdly, societal perception of older members of the labour force and of those who continue working later in life is key. This must also be taken into account in order to foster a policy of continued employment.

Life course approach proves important

From a health perspective, it is possible to contribute to long-term, sustainable employability. For this to happen the responsible parties must approach the problem from a life course perspective. This means they invest in prevention at an early stage; the parties are aware of applicable health risks and plan ahead accordingly, in the wider context. At the same time, in the event of health-related limitations, possibilities for workplace accommodations must be identified in order to ensure continued labour participation.