

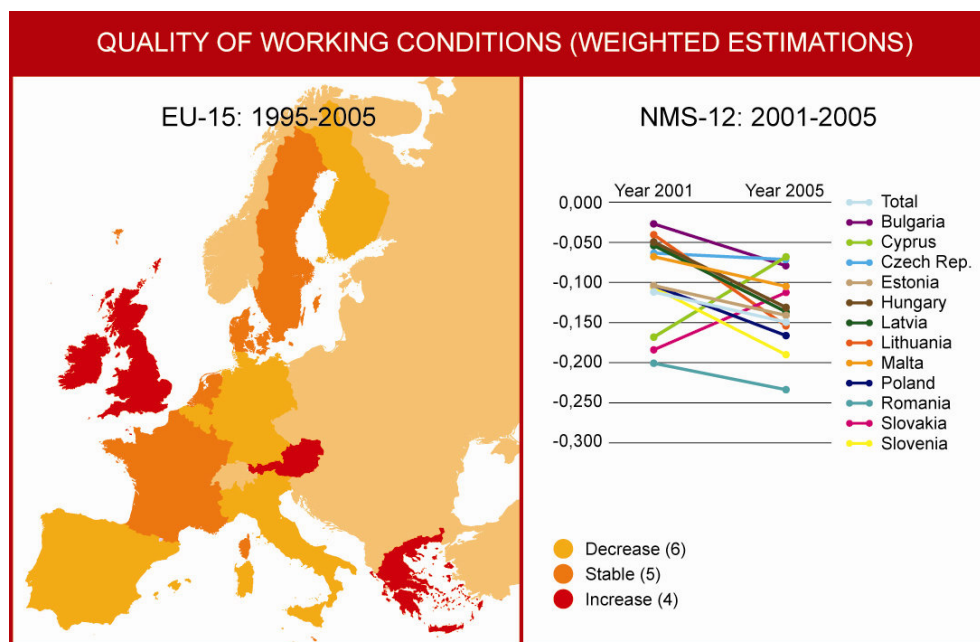
# Elder employees in companies experiencing restructuring: stress and well-being

by Michele Tiraboschi and Maria Giovannone

The issue of restructuring is featuring the transitions of the European economies over the last decades and is even more important in the current economic scenario. At the same time, due to demographic changes such as the aging population and the aging workforce, and along the lines of current policies aiming at fostering active citizenship, lifelong learning and quality of work, there is a need to focus on older workers, which are increasingly to be considered a key asset to European Competitiveness.

Older workers are more likely to be affected by restructuring processes and economic crisis, and these processes can be extremely stressful and affect their well-being. A growing body of international evidence indicates that organizational restructuring can have profound adverse effects on worker safety, health and wellbeing, e.g. in terms of poorer mental health outcomes, sickness absence and stress, particularly for older workers.

In addition to direct health effects, restructuring is associated with considerable problems in terms of compliance with occupational health and safety (OHS) legislation and workers' compensation/social security systems. All these changes hit the most vulnerable population groups, including the older workers, particularly hard, in a context where also the quality of working conditions is decreasing in many countries (WORKS, *Rattling the Value Chain: Work in the Age of Flexibility*, December 2008). The following figure illustrates this trend.



\* NMS: New Member States

Source: WORKS, *Rattling the Value Chain: Work in the Age of Flexibility*

Furthermore the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work does confirm that young workers seem to report less work-related stress than workers in older age categories.

The prevalence rate for psychosocial health problems is the highest for workers between 45 and 54 who are affected by work related stress more often. The trend for workers over 55 years is very significant as their employment rate and statutory retirement age are increasing (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *New and emerging risks in occupational safety and health*, Outlook 1, 2009, in [www.osha.europa.eu](http://www.osha.europa.eu)).

In this framework European governments have already begun to respond to these challenges. Their initiatives also include the production of guidance material (on agency labour, contractor management and home-based work, for instance), the revision of legislative provisions and the exemplification of codes of practice (including introducing supply chain regulations in especially problematic areas like transport), changes to administrative/enforcement practices (such as establishing special workers' compensation premiums for agency labour and targeting areas of non-compliance) and inspection protocols.

According to the Communication of the European Commission, *Restructuring and employment. Anticipating and accompanying restructuring in order to develop employment: the role of the European Union* (COM(2005)120 final), in fact, it is vital for enterprises to adapt to change: if enterprises conduct these operations rapidly, their competitiveness can be preserved and enhanced. Moreover the intention to preserve the employability of workers and to facilitate their transition to another job of equivalent quality has an economic impact by taking advantage of one of the main competitive assets of the European Union, namely the quality of its workforce, which is the guarantee of future growth. In addition, restructuring must form part of a long-term vision of the development and direction of the European economy in order to ensure that the changes really are a way of strengthening its competitiveness. On the other hand the Communication of the European Commission, *Improving quality and productivity at work: Community strategy 2007-2012 on health and safety at work* (COM(2007)62 final), has raised public awareness of the importance of health and safety at work presenting them as integral parts of quality management and as determining features of economic performance and competitiveness. This communication promotes the rehabilitation and reintegration of workers excluded from the workplace, the integration of older workers into the labour market, the identification of new risks, the development of mental health and well being and the effective implementation of the European framework agreement on work-related stress, stipulated by European social partners in 2004, with special regard to vulnerable workers.

And yet the implementation of these policy initiatives has been patchy, both in terms of their coverage and effectiveness. One serious area of neglect has been the failure to focus on the legislative obligations of employers to safeguard the health and wellbeing of their workers when undergoing restructuring or downsizing. Along these lines, there is a need to identify best practices, draw research and policy attention on stress and well-being of older workers undergoing restructuring processes.

This is the main goal of *Elders (Elder employees in companies experiencing restructuring: stress and well-being)*, a project supported under the European Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity – PROGRESS (2007-2013). The project group is settled on a strong institutional partnership, as follows:

- Adapt – Association for International and Comparative Studies in Labour Law and Industrial Relations (Italy);
- Middlesex University (United Kingdom);
- ESADE – Business school (Spain);
- IBW – Institute for Research on Qualifications and Training of the Austrian Economy (Austria);
- BAUA – Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (Germany);
- FIOH – Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (Finland).

Furthermore *Elders* is also supported by AGE (the European Older people's Platform) and BusinessEurope.

Starting from the key-concept that international and interinstitutional cooperation is a very fruitful methodological approach to address the consequences of restructuring and economic crisis in terms of stress and well-being for older workers, and to identify the proper measures with the aim of preventing, managing and mitigating such consequences, we strongly believe that this operation cannot be carried on without the previous collection and review on the existing literature and the current law regulations on this topic.

That's the aim of this first newsletter: a blend selection of documents collected by the project partners in order to introduce the research topic from a national and international prospect.

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