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## **Safeguarding mature workers' health and safety during corporate restructuring and change: a focus on stress and well-being**

Note

by Simona Piazza

*This paper shortly resumes the outcomes of the fourth national seminar organized within the Adapt research project Elders – Elder employees in companies experiencing restructuring: stress and well-being. Elders is an important project funded by the European Commission, based on a strong partnership between 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) and supported by AGE, the European Older people's Platform and BusinessEurope. The project aim is to investigate on the condition of mature workers during restructuring and change, from the prospect of stress and well-being and it's based on a theoretical and empirical approach, as focused on the reconstruction of the international scientific review on restructuring, age and well-being at work, on the composition of the International, EU and Member States regulatory framework and on the empirical investigation trough research on the field: interviews and questionnaires. The project aim was the exemplification of good practices and prospects for future development.*

*More specifically during the seminar the results of the Italian focus have been presented: from the scientific literature review – both at national and international level – to the empirical outcomes coming from the submission of interviews to various stakeholder (the social partners, public institutions and NGOs representative of over 40 interests) and from the individual and anonymous questionnaires submitted online to the selected group of workers containing more than 90 items. An important part of research has been also dedicated to the evolution of the Italian regulatory framework in the field of OSH, since during these months the Italian Government has been working on the definition of guidelines for work-related stress assessment. In compliance with the project work programme, other similar seminars have been held, during 2010, in Vienna, Dortmund, London, Barcelona and Helsinki and a final conference will be held on 23<sup>rd</sup> November in Brussels. Hoping to be of interest, we publish in this special bulletin many of the power point presentations introduced by the speakers.*

The first session was characterized by the presentation of the theoretical framework by Maria Giovannone, Adapt research fellow. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the experiences of older workers. The immediate drivers have been European social policy aimed at increasing older people's labour market participation; as well as national government initiatives to

close early retirement routes. However, the longer term drivers are steadily ageing populations across Europe, along with lowering real retirement ages in most EU member states.

Various projects have focused on push and pull factors leading to early retirement including discrimination, pensions, caring responsibilities and redundancy. The Elders project is focused on one particular push factor: the impact of workplace restructuring on older workers' employability, as well as health and well-being. There are three interrelated reasons why the topic is associated with older people's employability. Firstly, older workers have long been regarded by both employers and the State as a reserved army of labour, brought into and forced out of the labour market as economic conditions require. This places them in a precarious position, relative to their younger colleagues during both organisational and economic restructurings. Secondly, organisational restructuring can have a particularly strong impact on older workers who find it difficult to adapt to technological change. Finally, older workers are concentrated in traditional industries and therefore adversely impacted in shifts toward service based economies.

In general terms, stress is the normal reaction of the individual to pressure applied by the environment (external or internal, physical or psychical). Anyway, environment pressures or requests do not always result in physiological response. When requests are prolonged or exceeding, either subjectively (for lack of resources) or objectively (for excessive burden), the individual's contrast capabilities are no longer functional, so that the effect of stress results in wearing the individual's psycho-physical resources consequently triggering a pathological condition.

Stress due to professional undergoes the same mechanism, thus contributing to cause serious environmental (contextual), economic and health problems affecting the individual and causing physical illnesses such as ischemic cardiopathy, ictus, cancer, osteomuscular and gastroenteric pathologies, accidents, psychic problems, such as anxiety, low level of self-esteem resulting in depression and self-damaging behaviour, resulting in loss of productivity and competitiveness for the Company.

Work-related stress is the second health problem in Europe. An ISPSEL research reveals that this disease affects 22% of workers in the EU - that means 40 million people. It also shows that to work-related stress may be attributed nearly 60% of the working days lost for a total annual cost of 20 billion Euros - for job loss and medical expenses. And to this amount should be added 44 billion Euros for the medical treatment of depressive disorders – triggered by stress – and a loss of 77 billion Euros due to low productivity.

According to the research, in Italy there would be about 4 million people suffering from work-related stress. In our country, the disease does not only affect traditional categories such as health professions, teachers and law enforcement professionals. Nowadays, it mainly affects flexible and temporary workers, as well as the over 45. For all these people the greatest risk – apart from a series of psychosocial disorders, which often lead to the increase use of psychotropic drugs - is represented by those diseases passing to the phase of somatisation.

In order to prevent work-related pathologies, which are found to be steadily increasing, we have to adopt specific criteria, such as:

- applying a risk management and assessment approach sustainable by the organizations;
- give emphasis to the role of the person in charge of health and safety at work;
- the use of validated risk assessment platforms;
- using survey instruments adapted to the different productive sectors;
- addressing the issue according to a global approach.

The causes of this phenomenon have to be found within the situation of global economic crisis that has produced instability in the labour market due to corporate restructuring.

Even though restructuring can't be considered the cause of a negative impact on the subject, the insecurity they produce can be considered as the major cause of stress.

In turn, as we have already said stress can result in:

- mental health problems;
- cardiovascular diseases;

- musculoskeletal problems;
- more accidents;
- poor living conditions;
- functions and skills decrease.

In this context, both people who lose and who don't lose their jobs are at high risk of stress.

For the first ones, a preventive approach would be desirable in order to provide the skills and training needed to adapt to change, as well as to implement programs of staff training and retraining and the application of clear and transparent redundancy procedures.

In the second case, people may undergo a loss of motivation, capacity for innovation and often a job change. Also for them it would be desirable to provide a clear and transparent communication of the future prospects, the careful monitoring of the health of workers involved and a greater involvement of employee representatives.

The crisis has caused the so called new psychosocial risks, that the International Labour Organization defined in terms of interaction between job content, work organization and management, organizational and environmental conditions on the one hand, and the employees' skills and needs on the other.

Psychosocial risks can be defined as "those aspects of work design, as well as their environmental and social contexts, which can potentially cause physical or psychological harm" and can be identified as poor environmental conditions, inadequate working facilities, uncertainty in career opportunities, reduced participation in decision making, isolation and long working hours without flexibility.

If we add to this phenomenon the age factor, the situation becomes even more problematic. In fact, mature workers are the ones who are most exposed to insecurity since they are victims of discrimination in the labour market, they have greater barriers to re-employment and they undergo early retirement.

In Italy attention to the over 40 has increased, but we are not yet fully aware of the dramatic nature and of the social and family aspects involved in the problem. Furthermore, the tools being adopted are still uncertain, inadequate and unstructured.

At present, in Italy there are 900,000 mature workers excluded from the labour market for whom safeguarding techniques should be applied, such as:

- the promotion of health and safety;
- the dynamic change of the workplace (equipment, tasks, work schedules, focus groups, experts involvement, training and information, ergonomics);
- a workforce diversity management approach;
- re-employment, task redefinition and work reorganization;
- the application of flexible work contracts and flexible work strategies;
- life-long learning, ad hoc training and skills development;
- the increased participation and involvement of Unions;
- the involvement of experts for internal surveys;
- avoiding the proposal of early retirement or consensual resignation;
- the use of mature employees' skills acquired over the years;
- the application of corporate counselling;
- and above all avoiding the classic paradigm of deficit due to age, but beginning to consider the active aging vision.

Anyway some case studies reveal the implementation of good practices only at voluntary level both on the psychosocial and organisational/restructuring level. They mostly concern the following companies: Gucci, Enel, Electrolux and Unicredit, which adopted virtuous programmes based on dialogue and transparency in order to accompany mature workers in keeping the balance between crisis, change and the need of re-employment, information and supplementary training. On the other hand the reform of the retirement age legal framework, in our country, is considered an important

step in the transition from the early retirement approach to active ageing system in employment in compliance with the most recent EU standards. Anyway the prevention of stress at work in connection with organisational change and age problems within the labour market still remains an open issue. This means that a systematic and integrated approach is still missing in our country.

This introduction was followed by a special focus on the evolution of work-related stress assessment and management methodology, which is still on the agenda of the Italian Ministry of Labour. Lorenzo Fantini, manager of divisions III and VI, DG for the protection of working conditions, Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, underlined that although the introduction of the Consolidated Health and Safety, legislative decree n. 81/2008, states that the work-related stress must be an element to be included in the risk assessment - as required by legislative decree n. 106/2009, which the Advisory Commission is expected to adopt by December 31, 2010.

The currently available methodological guidelines are useful examples of applicable procedures but they do not have the legal effect which is attributed solely to the instructions provided by the Advisory Commission that has established an ad hoc committee, composed of central government (Ministries, Inail), regions and social partners in order to draft guidelines for the evaluation of work-related stress.

Sergio Iavicoli, director of department of occupational medicine, ISPESL, presented the results of a similar project and the implementation of a specific methodology for the assessment and management of work-related stress. Various methods have been experimented for this issue, both at national and international level over the years, but, according to ISPESL experience the most effective one is the HSE, proved and tested within the Italian system.

The second session, chaired by Michele Lepore, professor of health and safety at work Law, University of Rome, Sapienza. The session dealt with a special focus on more than 40 NGOs indeed Stefano Giusti, director ATDAL Over 40 and Giuseppe Zaffarano, president of labour association over 40, pointed out the importance of information and consultation during restructuring process in order to avoid the segregation of mature workers within the labour market. Their position was confirmed by the data emerging from the questionnaires submitted to the workers.

The seminar ended with a final round table on the position of social partners. Fabio Pontrandolfi, in charge for health and safety in the workplace, industrial relations, security and social affairs Confindustria, Cinzia Frascheri, national responsible for health and safety at work, Cisl, Gabriella Galli, responsible for health and safety at work at a national level, Uil, Paolo Varesi, Ugl. The debate revealed that in Italy the topic of psychosocial issues is still very delicate and crucial and that there's still a big gap between the evolution of the regulatory and legal framework not conforming with work organisation and restructuring changes.

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