

Health and working longer

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Executive summary

Health Council of the Netherlands



Because the population is living longer than before, these past few years government policy has increasingly been aimed at working longer. At the request of the Minister of Social Affairs and Employment, the appointed committee will give advice on what is necessary from a health perspective when it comes to working longer. How do health and working longer influence each other and what role does a person's level of education play in this? What are the potential conditions and possible measures that support the employability of older workers?

Because the extension of the statutory retirement age has only recently been implemented, there is virtually no research on actually working longer. That is why the committee is basing its findings on indicators of decreased employability, such as an increased need for recovery or more sickness absence.

Health and being able to work longer

Health at a higher age

The likelihood of health problems increases with age. This applies not only to illness, but also poor perceived health, physical limitations, or decreased cognitive functions. Older people also have a higher chance of having more than one health problem at the same time. There is a lot of diversity within this group when it comes to health.

People between 45 and 75 years of age are currently not that much healthier than people in the same age range were two decades ago. Based on the predicted future developments in health, the committee does not expect to see much change in the next 10 to 20 years.

Health in relation to working longer

Poor health decreases the employability of workers. For part of the 55 to 65-year-olds that exit paid employment before the official retirement age, health plays an important role. It

mainly concerns people who exit paid employment via disability benefit due to health problems, but in part also people who exit via unemployment. It is estimated that in 16 to 27% of people between 55 and 65 who stop working due to unemployment, poor health played an important role. People who become unemployed later in life have a smaller chance of finding a new job, especially when they have health problems.

Working longer in relation to health

Health not only has an effect on whether or not a person is able to work longer, but working longer can also have an effect on a person's health. However, we cannot say for certain what the exact health effects of working longer are. Working seems to be good for your mental health during your working age, but around the age of retirement, it appears to be more beneficial for your mental health if you stop working.



Other conditions for working longer

Besides health, there are other potential conditions to work longer. Financial stimulants seem to play an important role when it comes to working longer. Individual factors, such as a healthy lifestyle and the motivation to work, and organisational factors, such as decent working conditions and sufficient flexibility at work, also play an important role. These factors can offer starting points for supportive measures.

Measures aimed at employability of older workers

The supportive measures that are already being implemented at an individual and organisational level – such as exercising at work and career development workshops – appear to generally have small positive effects on the employability of older workers. However, it has not yet been identified which measures are most effective for which people at what point of their careers. Research also cannot determine in what working situations the measures are most effective.

Low educated: a group that requires special attention

The committee sees low-educated older workers as a group that requires special attention when it comes to working longer. Low-educated older people generally have more health problems than those with a higher education level. They often work under less favourable working conditions, starting at a younger age. For example, their jobs are often more physically demanding and they generally have less flexibility at work. However, problems with employability are not solely reserved for those with a lower degree of education.

Recommendations

Because working longer is not self-evident for everyone, the committee sees roles for workers and employers, *as well* as the government. The committee's advice is to focus on measures that support workers when it comes to working longer. Thus far, the positive effects of such measures have been relatively small, but the committee sees room to develop more effective

measures, combined with a good implementation. More flexibility at work is a promising starting point, as well as a personnel policy aimed at sustainable employability starting early in peoples' careers.

The committee also recommends to explore whether flexible pensions are a better option when considering the large diversity in health at a higher age, and the large differences in health between lower and higher educated people. A specific topic to explore would be whether flexible pensions could prevent health-related exit from work via unemployment.



The Health Council of the Netherlands, established in 1902, is an independent scientific advisory body. Its remit is “to advise the government and Parliament on the current level of knowledge with respect to public health issues and health (services) research...” (Section 22, Health Act).

The Health Council receives most requests for advice from the Ministers of Health, Welfare and Sport, Infrastructure and Water Management, Social Affairs and Employment, and Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. The Council can publish advisory reports on its own initiative. It usually does this in order to ask attention for developments or trends that are thought to be relevant to government policy.

Most Health Council reports are prepared by multidisciplinary committees of Dutch or, sometimes, foreign experts, appointed in a personal capacity. The reports are available to the public.

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