

## **The psychosocial work environment: how much do we know to optimize sustainable employability?**

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Sustainable employability is commonly described as the extent to which employees are able to work in a productive, motivated and healthy way, and continue to do so at older ages. As such, sustainable employability is an important tool to guarantee long term employment, a critical challenge that Western societies are facing. The Europe 2020 target is set to include 75% of 20–64-year-olds in paid employment. The current employment policy priorities in Europe include therefore the boosting of employment levels and prolonging working life. Avoiding premature dropout from the labor market partly depends on the presence of good working conditions and job quality. This presentation will focus on the importance of occupational determinants of healthy active ageing, with a particular emphasis on the psychosocial work environment.

When looking at evidence on the health effects of retirement, conflicting results have been shown. Studies have documented both beneficial as well as adverse effects of retiring on outcomes such as physical disability, mental health and cognitive functioning. In order to provide clarification in this issue, it is of utmost importance to take the quality of the work environment into account. The first findings from the latest European Working Conditions Survey (2015) show that considerable proportions of workers are exposed to working conditions that present particular challenges to sustainability, given the potential negative impact they have on health. Among the most essential psychosocial risk factors are the level of work intensity, low job autonomy, lack of training or learning new things, and job or employment insecurity. A widely developed research area exists that investigates the role of psychosocial job factors for worker's health and for outcomes of sustainable employability. Several studies have shown an association between poor psychosocial work environment and early labor market exit, early retirement or disability pensioning.

Over the past decades, the research field on the psychosocial work environment has to some extent been dominated by investigations of chronic job stress in relation to coronary heart disease (CHD), and this will also be an important focus within the current presentation. CHD is documented as a psychosomatic disease affected by psychosocial stressors, and represents a substantial public health relevance. It constitutes a major burden for the health of working populations through the causation of substantial work disability, particularly within the ageing workforce. However – although general consensus exists about psychosocial work stressors being risk factors for CHD – this somehow remains a controversial research field. Establishing causal relations between the psychosocial work environment and morbidity or mortality is not straightforward, due to some inherent methodological challenges. In this presentation I will discuss some of the key methodological issues in this field. A lot of debate exists around attaining valid and reliable exposure assessments, since studies mainly rely on self-report measurements of psychosocial risk factors. Another focus will be on challenges related to the study design and the analytical research methods applied. Showing the impact of psychosocial job stress on CHD risk requires very large prospective studies investigating objective clinical endpoints.

When studying the psychosocial work environment in relation to sustainable employability, an integrated approach is needed. The last part of the presentation will deal with a number of relating issues to take into account, such as the role of lifestyle and health behaviors, the impact of physical work demands, and the growing attention for exposures at organizational or workplace level.