

19 October 2004

Conclusions of the Workshop on 'Ageing and occupational risks'

How to protect workers' health throughout their working lives?

(Paris, October 1st, 2004)

Senior workers will play an important part in tomorrow's Europe. On the one hand, Europe is ageing, increases in life expectancy and falling fertility rates are impacting on generational renewal. While, on the other hand, the over-fifties will constitute the main pool of workers - apart from resorting to immigration - to meet looming labour shortages. The so-called "Baby Boom" generation will start to go into retirement in huge numbers from 2005 and there are not enough young workers to replace them. Thus, in 2010, the 45-64 age group will represent almost half of the working population in Europe. In this context of an ageing population, Eurogip¹ organized on October 1st a European Workshop to promote the exchange of experience and information on the following theme: "How to protect workers' health throughout their working lives?"

The main observation emerging from the workshop is that in order to keep the over-fifties at work, it is important to take care of their health very early on in their careers, indeed as soon as they start working.

From the physiological viewpoint, the functional deficiencies caused by normal ageing remain moderate, even minor, until 50 to 60 years of age. However, the ageing process can be accelerated by particularly hard working conditions such as: manual handling of heavy loads, atypical working hours, organisational changes, etc.

European workers aged 55 and over, who are over-represented in manual industrial jobs, have the most serious accidents, with a mortality rate above the average. According to Eurostat, the incidence rate of fatal accidents at work was 3.3 in 2000 for the 18-24 age group but 8 for the 55-64 age group. In the same way, in 2001 the incidence rate of occupational diseases was 22.7 and 69.2 respectively. Therefore, meeting the challenge of ageing at work goes hand in hand with the improvement of occupational health and safety.

It was from this perspective that Finland adopted in 1998 a five-year plan for the employment of people aged 45 and over. This plan is structured around six chapters, including health and safety at work, namely: pedagogical efforts, vocational training, rehabilitation of older unemployed workers, progressive and elective retirement. This plan is based on the management of age diversity. In Finland, "experience is considered a national treasure".

This idea was taken up by the German government which launched INQA (Initiative Neue Qualität der Arbeit - Initiative New Quality of Work). In this framework, a campaign entitled "Fit at work at 30, 40, 50 and over" has been organized. It is aimed at 10,000 companies and its objective is to encourage them to develop the employability of wage earners at all ages.

As regards companies, PSA Peugeot Citroën (car manufacturer) and Spie Batignolles (building and civil engineering company) have developed a prevention policy aimed at all wage earners so

as to preserve their physical and mental health from as early a starting point as possible. PSA Peugeot Citroën recruited about fifty ergonomists in order to better adapt workplaces to workers. The objective is to enable each worker to be well integrated into the company until retirement age. Spie Batignolles developed a prevention policy, which focuses successively on management, supervision and operators. One of the aims of this last element, which has been achieved, is more particularly to promote solidarity within the team and, if necessary, to compensate for the weaknesses of older workers.

Among the actions presented during this workshop, two initiatives in particular are specifically targeted at senior workers. One is Belgian, the other Norwegian.

In Belgium, a royal decree from January 2003 determines the criteria and modes concerning the granting of a subsidy aimed at supporting companies which adapt the work organisation or the working conditions of workers who are at least 55. To date, two companies have submitted projects to the Ministry in charge of Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue, which manages the 5 million euro of the Vocational Training Fund. This fund was specially established and became effective in April 2004.

Storebrand, a Norwegian group specialized in long-term investments and life insurance, developed a policy in favour of the employment of senior workers: "it is a win-win strategy". The group not only looks for age diversity but it also admits that senior workers have qualities such as: experience, sociability, overall view of the problems, responsibility and loyalty, patience, ability to think in terms of "strategy", etc. Storebrand proposes training courses to senior workers before retirement, flexible working hours for workers over 60, additional days off, the possibility to pass on their knowledge to young workers, to have physical exercise, to work 80% of the time for 90% of the salary, etc.

Few companies seem to have adopted such attitudes towards "ageing workers", even though there exist some examples of scattered initiatives - as the discussion workshop organised by Eurogip showed- and even though the ageing process of the working population is inevitable and imminent.

¹ Eurogip was founded by the Caisse nationale de l'assurance maladie (CNAMTS - National Health Insurance Fund for Employees) and the Institut national de recherche et de sécurité (INRS - National Research and Safety Institute) to work on the European aspects of occupational risks