

POLICY BRIEF

DAISIE Project



Extension of Working Lives in the Czech Republic: Employee Situation

Introduction

This paper summarises research project results examining ageing conditions across three sectors: transport, healthcare and banking. It aims to respond to the still insufficient discussion on the needs and opportunities of women and men of pre-retirement age and in the process of retirement in the Czech labour market. One third of all employed people in the Czech Republic are over 50 years of age, and the retirement age is increasing. According to Eurostat, 14% of Czech women and 6% of Czech men of retirement age are at risk of poverty due to low pensions. Men of pre-retirement age and women in particular are increasingly employed on fixed-term contracts or falsely self-employed (misclassified as independent contractors).

Gender and age inequalities within the pension system are mainly due to policy settings as well as social norms and expectations regarding care. Long parental leave, childcare, elderly and sick care, and unpaid domestic work, as well as the low availability of quality public care services cause long periods away from the labour market, especially for women with lower educational backgrounds.

These inequalities accumulate over the life course resulting in significantly lower pensions for women compared to men or making it impossible to retire with a decent pension. Similarly, the negative health effects of long-term work under stress, in ever-changing shifts, at night, in a particular physical position or with a heavy load also accumulate depending on the type of work and the length of time spent in a profession. Individual employers apply national legislation or support programmes in different ways, and thus, the organisation of work varies greatly from workplace to workplace, resulting in varied conditions for dignified ageing at work and retirement.

The research in Czechia, within the DAISIE project (Dynamics of Accumulated Inequality for Seniors in Employment) (no.462-16-110) and funded under the NORFACE DIAL programme, encompassed the analysis of statistics and relevant surveys as well as qualitative research across three occupational groups (nurses, public transport drivers, financial institution workers), including 128 semi-structured interviews.

Uniform retirement age does not suit everyone equally

'For nurses, 63 is too late for retirement. It also depends on the ward. A general ward is one thing, newborn babies are quite another, or being a nurse with a local general practitioner or a dentist, for example.' (Jindřiška, head nurse, 56 years old)

The examined professions differ in their impacts on health. Physical impacts are more significant in the healthcare and transport sectors, while psychological impacts are typical of all three sectors:

in banking, it is mainly long-term stress; in the healthcare and transport sectors, it is the result of long and ever-changing shifts, including weekends and nights, and conditions demanding constant contact with people. Of importance is whether an employee has worked in their current position for a long time or has come from another position or another profession altogether, even a more challenging one, for instance. Especially for drivers, it is typical that people do not stay in one position their whole lives. By contrast, in more skilled positions in the healthcare sector, transitions tend to take place between healthcare disciplines and workplaces.

'I was a bricklayer for 17 years. But later, I had health issues with my back, so I was

told I should either change jobs or undergo surgery. So, I began to think about what I was going to do. And a colleague of mine said, "Well, come and join us." At the time, when I sat down, my back was just fine. So, I became a driver, but, gradually, my back started to be annoying even in the driver's seat.' (Zbyněk, driver, 63 years old)

Unlike Zbyněk, Filip has worked as a driver since he was 20 years old and, at 57, he is experiencing a lot of fatigue and health problems caused by long hours of sitting, shift work and ongoing changes in his daily routine:

'As I get older, it's not as much fun as it used to be before I turned 50. Since I turned 50, it's noticeable. It's always the same, sitting for hours on end, the same regimen, diet, and that's not good for one's health. The muscles, the back... it would do me loads of good to retire right now.' (Filip, driver, 57 years old).

Women's caring responsibilities and gender inequalities in the labour market (especially lower wages) result in lower pensions for women and often the necessity to work longer to secure a decent pension.

The organisation of work in specific occupations has specific negative effects on the health of older women and men

Work organisation (shifts, working hours, working environment, etc.) can have adverse effects on the mental and physical health of employees.

The health effects of work vary not only according to occupation and job description

but also according to length of time spent in a respective profession.

In the healthcare and public transport sectors, what is particularly problematic is night work, long shifts, ever-changing work schedules and the necessity to change the rhythm of life frequently. A major problem specific to the

transport sector is insufficient frequency of breaks that are too short and do not meet the physical needs of (menstruating) women and older men. Coping with these working conditions gets more difficult at a higher age.

'It hadn't been a problem for me before, but for the past year or two it has been a huge problem for me. We're supposed to start working at half past six, but a lot of times I don't get in before, say, quarter to seven.'
(Emil, station nurse, 47 years old).

'It's really challenging, in fact, to make it to 62. It's a terrible idea, a terrible idea indeed, considering that, although the human life span expands, these diseases are... When you consider the fact that you will bid farewell to a demanding job thinking, now I'm going to enjoy myself, you can't help but have this sort of vision here that it's going to involve going from one doctor to another.'
(Růžena, bank analyst, 51 years old).

We can expect that more and more older workers will need to balance work with taking care of elderly and sick family members. Little flexibility in choosing shifts makes caring commitments more difficult.

Changes in profession, position or working time in pre-retirement age is not easily obtainable

Opportunities to retrain for a physically or mentally less demanding profession or job and the permeability between professions for 50+ women and men is insufficient in the Czech Republic. Ageism in organisations and a lack of communication about the needs of 50+ workers prevent them from requesting, for example, a reduction in hours or a transfer to a less demanding position / department / type of work. In particular, they fear being dismissed for being unable to perform work at a higher age and unequal treatment, e.g., pay disadvantage. The lack of information on the side of both employees as well as employers about the possibilities of such changes or programmes also causes employees to remain silent.

Transitions between professions are also made difficult by the fact that the current generation of 50+ workers in Czechia entered the workforce before or just after 1989 and have often worked in one position or for one employer all their lives. They sometimes feel at a disadvantage compared to younger workers who have more experience and better education (including in ICT). Women also have long breaks in their careers due to long parental leave, which may have caused a loss of qualifications or prevented career progression.

'Looking for a job at this age when I don't speak English, I don't have the sort of professional experience, really, to be able to apply for some of these positions – it is difficult.' (Ilona, bank analyst, 55 years old).

'If a manager takes this into account, then, of course, one can keep going just fine at work. If there is rivalry between younger and older people though, then, of course, it is quite mentally and physically demanding.'
(Libuše, caregiver, 51 years old).

Part-time jobs are also often unavailable as labour shortages are a problem in sectors such as healthcare and passenger transport.

'I can well imagine doing this work even during my retirement years, but, of course, with the caveat that I would probably find it hard to work 200 hours a month at 60. But I can imagine that in a 4-2 system, if I could work for four days in a row and always rest for two days, that I could easily do it at 65, 67.' (Ota, driver, 54 years old).

Recommendations for the state and policymakers

- To differentiate the retirement age according to the strenuous nature of a profession and years spent working in the field.
- To introduce entitlement to a state pension based on years of work only, removing the uniform and fixed age threshold. The introduction of a service pension is also an option.
- To systematically reduce gender inequalities in the labour market throughout the life course and not just at pre-retirement and retirement age, as pension gaps are largely due to women's lower wages and the segregation of women into lower paid positions.
- To encourage employers to create job opportunities for older or disabled workers coming from other sectors or types of work, including lifelong learning and retraining (vocational training) systems. This is beneficial for employers as it allows them to partially cover labour shortages.
- To encourage age and gender diversity in work teams and the transfer of experience between older and younger people. Greater diversity is beneficial for workplace culture

and productivity, and it needs to be promoted in a targeted manner by the state, along with the building of a culture of non-discrimination and intergenerational solidarity in organisations and awareness of pre-retirement problems and possible solutions.

- To provide counselling and a wide range of opportunities via the employment office, allowing for career changes that are not (even implicitly) limited by age.
- To allow for greater permeability between disciplines and workplaces for more skilled professions, such as nurses – a central database of job vacancies could be created.
- To provide state financial support for people who decide to requalify later in life (e.g. unemployment benefits for the duration of their studies). Subsidies for the acquisition of driving and professional licences for public transport drivers are a good practice.
- To introduce mandatory employer-paid pension schemes for certain professions which would allow for earlier retirement and offer greater flexibility in retirement age options.

Recommendations for employers

- To communicate with older employees and map their needs and retirement prospects and to create support programmes or working arrangements for older employees and employees with disabilities. Workplaces must respond flexibly and analyse which elements of work organisation and working conditions are strictly necessary and which elements, on the other hand, can be adapted to make work more friendly for older people (including technical aids to facilitate work), people with impaired health or people with care commitments. Given the overall ageing of the population, this will be a prerequisite for

maintaining competitiveness in the labour market.

- To create a healthcare system for employees according to each respective profession and its (potential) impact on physical and psychological health: a benefits system, an annual holiday scheme setup, older-age flexible shift system, and/or an optional transition to another type of work, to another department, ward, branch, etc., dependent on age/service years in the given field.

Although in the Czech environment workplaces are mostly not adapted to the needs of people in pre-retirement age, and there are no systemic solutions, **examples of good practice show an individual approach to employees in pre-retirement and retirement age.** In a hospital or in a public transport company, employees are, for example, offered work in less demanding positions or in less demanding work environments (single-shift operation, limitation of night shifts, more administrative work or work consisting in transferring experience to younger workers, etc.) as well as part-time work. Those options are regularly brought to their attention, pre-retirement and retirement job plans are discussed, and workers are not forced to change work content or reduce their hours – these are presented as options.

We have created some jobs across the company that can be performed by a person who can no longer be a driver. They usually earn less money, but they keep

all the benefits and advantages. It is even stipulated in our collective agreement that the employer will cooperate with the municipality in this regard. So, a person who needs to transfer can ask to be shown all the current vacancies within the company, and if s/he doesn't choose one, s/he still has the option of choosing available jobs from the municipality.' (Union representative in a transport company).

Adapting working conditions for workers of pre-retirement and retirement age is in some cases seen as advantageous to employees as well as employers. Managers view employees as highly skilled, with a great deal of experience, and therefore a clear benefit to the workplace. Continued engagement (albeit on a smaller scale) addresses staff shortage, increases employee loyalty and prevents early retirement due to work overload. Despite the low level of engagement, this makes older workers feel important to the workplace and allows for a smoother transition into retirement.

Recommendations from good practice

- To take systematic measures to adapt jobs for workers of pre-retirement or retirement age and to increase the possibilities for part-time work – always on the basis of mutual agreement. From a certain age onwards, to communicate regularly with workers about their work plans and the possibilities they have, for example, specifically with regard to job demands.
- To encourage positive attitudes among managers towards older workers, providing training that highlights the benefits of this workforce and showing examples of how their experience can be beneficial (e.g. older workers passing their experience on to younger colleagues).

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PROJECT DETAILS

Acronym: DAISIE

Title: Dynamics of Accumulated Inequalities for Seniors In Employment

Short description: The DAISIE project explores the gendered impacts of policies and practices aimed at extending working life (EWL) in five contrasting national settings (the Czech Republic, Ireland, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK), using a multi-level, mixed methods research design inspired by insights from life-course and gender studies. The project addresses two timely issues: labour market participation in later life and the intersection of employment and family trajectories in determining the experiences of older workers. More precisely, we:

- Trace intra-national continuities and change in gendered employment patterns at 50+, using panel data and sequence analysis techniques
- Assess changes to the working conditions of the 50+ group, across countries and qualification levels
- Explore the wellbeing, work-life balance and health issues faced by male and female older (50+) workers in three occupations (health, financial services, transport), using innovative case-study research methods
- Analyse the importance of occupational and organisational-level policies and practices on the experiences of older workers
- Illustrate the combined effect of employment histories, family events and the provision of care on the dynamics of inequality in later life.

Website: <https://centre-lives.ch/fr/projet/daisie-project-dynamics-accumulated-inequalities-seniors-employment?chapter=282-project-description-daisie>

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