

# Older workers: a suitable case for circles?

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**Abstract** The article considers relations between the generations, with particular attention given to older workers, who also face the pressures of responsibilities to both parents and children. The situations in Norway and the UK are compared. The case is made for support structures, such as senior quality circles, at the threshold between employment and retirement.

**Keywords** Intergenerational relations · Life course · Quality circles · Seniors · Senior quality circles · Transitions

## 1 Introduction

Older workers are “the jam in the intergenerational sandwich.” They have a life beyond work: they are not simply isolated individuals, celebrating their affluence by comparison with earlier generations (Marmot 2004; Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). They often retain responsibilities for their children, who may be unable to leave home and be economically self-sufficient (Willetts 2010). Frequently, they have to care for elderly and infirm relations, who live

for decades after retirement. Mooney et al. (2002) found that, for women, informal care may influence early retirement. In addition to informal care of elderly relatives, “middle-aged carers, on the other hand, might simultaneously be shouldering the responsibility to care for their own (grand-) children” (Hoffmann and Rodrigues 2010: 10). This defines them as the sandwich generation or the pivot generation (Mooney et al. 2002), or “the jam in the intergenerational sandwich.”

In many cases, in a period of economic difficulties, older workers have lost control over their own personal working lives (Karasek and Theorell 1990), and they face uncertainty. They are in transition, between the worlds of work and retirement, with the boundaries being changed by government. They have often felt forgotten, by government and by other groups in society.

With increased life expectancy, age does not have to be regarded simply as a medical problem (Ilmarinen and Rantanen 1999; Ilmarinen 2006). Active ageing regards experience and maturity as vital, resulting in skill and tacit knowledge, exercised by individuals and collectively, which are greatly valued by organisations (Hilsen and Ennals 2005, 2009). Handled creatively, this is a new and unique resource. Society needs to be reconfigured by its members, including older members (Augustinaitis et al. 2009; Baily 2009; Berglund 2009).

Although the detailed pattern of demographic change is not the same in each country, across Northern Europe there is widespread and growing concern about the situation of older workers, with the lead taken from Finland and Sweden (Kilbom 1999). Industries have been obliged to reorganise, redesigning jobs, and changing policies and practice on recruitment and retention (Ennals 1999, 2000, 2001). The European Union has a stated aim of raising employment rates for older workers, ensuring more people

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