

# Chapter 14

## Social Dialogue as a Sustainable Career Development Practice to Combat (Meta) Stereotyping

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### 14.1 Sustainable Career Development for Shaping Inclusive Workplaces

The notion of sustainable career development (SCD) (De Prins et al. 2015; De Vos et al. 2016) builds on the ROC model by De Lange and Koppens (2007) which stresses the need for respect for internal and external organizational stakeholders (R); openness or environmental awareness including an outside-in and inside-out perspective on Human Resource Management (HRM) (O); and continuity, that is a long-term approach to economic and societal sustainability, in particular individual employability (C). Consistent with the ROC model, this chapter addresses how an ongoing social dialogue between internal stakeholders at the shop-floor level can help to shape an inclusive workplace for all workers (respect dimension), including

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vulnerable categories, by focusing on sustainable career development, in particular on employability (continuity dimension), and how this may be affected by negative (meta)stereotyping (openness dimension).

Employability is a key element of SCD and is believed to foster individual workers' career success over the life cycle (De Prins et al. 2015). We define employability as individuals' capacity of continuously fulfilling, acquiring, or creating work through the optimal use of competences, which enhances their labor market opportunities (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden 2006) and, hence, career development. Several stakeholders are involved in safeguarding and enhancing employees' employability throughout the life course. Although the individual is the key actor, organizations directly and indirectly affect workers' employability both via their career and development policies and via the way these are enacted via daily interactions with employees (De Vos et al. 2011). The latter brings in the stakeholder perspective and emphasizes the importance of social dialogue in SCD (De Prins et al. 2015) and in particular the direct participation of employees and their supervisors herein (Nauta 2015).

In practice, social dialogue takes place in social contexts, which in some cases may be characterized by a climate of discrimination and negative stereotyping. Such a climate may impact stakeholders' attitudes, motivations, experiences, feelings, and behaviors (cf. Kunze et al. 2011), possibly resulting into organizations and HR managers refraining from the development of inclusive employability measures, or preventing supervisors and workers at the shop-floor level to actually use these in the intended way, affecting the effectiveness of the social dialogue. The process approach to HRM (Wright and Nishii 2007) underlines that employability and its effect on career development should be viewed as part of the HR-process which demands all organizational stakeholders to understand and make sense of the content and usefulness of inclusive employability policies and practices. To further the debate on SCD and inclusive workplaces, we argue that social dialogue at the shop-floor level (Bryson et al. 2012; Euwema et al. 2015; Nauta 2015) can be viewed as an important practice in the HR-process, as this provides room to monitor vulnerable workers' perceptions and ambitions, and to stimulate (new) career opportunities, possibly reversing negative (meta)stereotyping processes.

Stereotyping refers to unconsciously or consciously making generalizations about individuals based on the group (e.g., categorized by gender, race, or age) to which they belong (cf. Henkens 2005). However, individuals belonging to a particular group (e.g., older workers) may also hold beliefs regarding such stereotyped views they think that outgroup members may hold about them. This we refer to as metastereotypes (Finkelstein et al. 2013; Vorauer et al. 1998). Both stereotyping and metastereotyping may affect inclusion (Vauclair et al. 2016).

In this chapter, we outline how the concepts of social dialogue, employability, and (meta)stereotyping may be conceptualized and interrelated and how they play a role in the HR-process and, ultimately, affect workers' career development. This process is illustrated by a short summary of preliminary results from a study of supermarket workers in the Netherlands, particularly focusing on workers engaging in negative age-based (meta)stereotyping. In view of several interrelated trends,

older workers (among other labor market categories) have become an increasingly vulnerable labor market category. On the one hand, aging and dejuvenization of the labor market have led to a rise of the legal retirement age across the globe and, hence, the need for workers to work longer over the life cycle. On the other, fiercer competition in globalizing markets and technological changes may cause older workers to be viewed as ‘too expensive’ to employ, while their skills may become obsolete, which stresses the importance of ongoing employability development. Although older and often more tenured workers may have gained more work experience and skills over the life span than their younger peers (cf. Froehlich et al. 2015), in contemporary labor markets, this may not suffice to remain employable throughout their careers. In addition, especially in the light of ever-increasing labor market flexibility and technological developments, (lower-skilled) work becomes more uncertain which demands a more proactive labor market orientation to other career paths than older workers use to display. The chapter concludes by suggesting organizations to implement HR practices to combat negative (meta)stereotyping in general, and older workers in particular, enabling them to shape more inclusive workplaces, for example, through social dialogue.

## **14.2 Social Dialogue, Employability, and (Meta) Stereotyping**

### ***14.2.1 Social Dialogue***

Social dialogue refers to “discussions, consultations, negotiations, and joint actions involving organizations representing the two sides of the industry (employers and workers). Social dialogue is a process by which relevant parties seek to resolve employment-related differences via an information exchange” (Bryson et al. 2012, p. 5). It can take place at the European, national, and sector levels, but also within working organizations. Demographic changes and rapid technological innovations bring along many challenges for both employers and employees pertaining to sustainable careers and, hence, employability throughout the life course. This urges social partners to work out measures that respond to societal needs for an employable working population, to employers’ needs for a high performing, flexible, and employable workforce, and to employees’ needs for satisfying work and possibilities for career development and personal growth (De Vos et al. 2016).

Within the organizational context, the dialogue between the employer (CEO and/or HR-director) and the works council, in which they can consult each other about organization policies, especially HRM (Nauta 2015), is an important vehicle for installing collective measures for SCD. Recently, and in line with the growing emphasis on tailor-made HR solutions and a life course approach to careers, also the interpersonal dialogue between employees and their superiors and among employees, shaping their mutual relationship, has received greater attention. At this

level, the social dialogue centers around formal and informal conversations on topics, such as performance appraisal or career development needs, thereby directly involving the employee.

This chapter primarily relates to these formal and informal types of direct employer and supervisor participation in the social dialogue which is an increasingly important HR-instrument that allows to discuss workers' career options, ambitions, and development needs, herewith stimulating engagement in employability activities, including education and training, but also proactive and flexible employee behaviors. It is important to recognize the perspectives both parties bring to the table, and which might shape their personal values and their views, beliefs, and attitudes about employability and the usefulness of investing in workers' employability-enhancing activities. Of course, the room for the social dialogue at the shop-floor level is also shaped by HR-policies, works councils, organizational strategies, Collective Labor Agreements (CLAs), national agreements, and even European directives (Nauta 2015).

#### ***14.2.2 Negative (Meta)Stereotyping Threatening Worker's Employability***

In order to remain employable, within or outside the current organization, and to ensure lifelong employment and personal career success (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden 2006), workers need to possess the right competences to do their work effectively. As workers need to adjust their focus on 'what are the right competences?' on an ongoing basis, this implies that workers not only need to invest in particular domain-specific expertise, but also need to develop competencies that enable them to be proactive and flexible, to handle ambiguity, and to manage multiple tasks simultaneously. Therefore, Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) distinguish five competence-based employability dimensions. The first focuses on domain-specific occupational expertise (knowledge, skills, including metacognitive ones, and social recognition by important key figures). The other four are more general competence dimensions which focus on job-related matters and broader career development aspects: anticipation and optimization; personal flexibility; corporate sense; and balance.

This conceptualization implies that all workers have to stay up-to-date and keep track with changes in one's occupation and the needed occupational expertise and competences following from these, which can be achieved through formal and informal learning (Froehlich et al. 2015). Simultaneously, however, it implies that workers need to proactively and reactively adapt to internal and external labor market changes, create career opportunities by investing in their social networks, and display commitment to organizational goals. Moreover, they need to protect a sound balance between striving to fulfill their personal, and often conflicting goals,

and between one's own needs and those of their (potential) employer(s) (cf. Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden 2006).

The absence of an inclusive HR policy and associated practices which ideally signals an organization-wide diversity climate and stresses the importance of employability of all worker categories (cf. De Prins et al. 2015) may lead to a low level of worker motivation to invest in employability-enhancing activities. Moreover, previous research has shown that vulnerable worker categories, such as part-time workers, older workers, ethnic minorities, and temporary workers, may suffer from organizational climates characterized by stereotypical views and discrimination which may hinder their optimal participation (Henkens 2005; Owuamalam and Zagefka 2014; Peters and Lam 2015), and hence, their internal and external career opportunities and progress.

Stereotyping can be viewed as an often unconscious, although sometimes conscious, categorization process (cf. Henkens 2005). Organizational members may categorize workers based on certain assumptions about personal characteristics (e.g., gender, race, or age), regarding the category a person may be viewed to belong to. For example, older workers may be viewed to be less capable or willing to adopt new technologies or to be less committed to organizational change than their younger counterparts (see Drydakis et al., Chap. 6 in this volume). Of course, positive stereotyping regarding older workers is also possible. For example, older workers may be believed to be more experienced, loyal to the organization, and trustworthy (Henkens 2005).

Worker categories may be aware of, or may perceive them being negatively stereotyped (e.g., by their supervisor, HR managers, coworkers, or clients) and may form their own opinion about how they are being perceived by others. Their beliefs regarding the stereotypes that outgroup members may hold about their own group can be referred to as metastereotypes (Finkelstein et al. 2013; Vorauer et al. 1998). Workers may identify with their own perceptions of the beliefs that others may hold toward them, which may increase the potential for miscommunication and tension and affect their feelings of inclusion (Vauclair et al. 2016). Being largely negative in content, metastereotyping can undermine the stereotyped group's self-worth (Vorauer et al. 1998) and their employability beliefs (Owuamalam and Zagefka 2014), discouraging them to engage in employability-enhancing activities (cf. Dordoni et al. in progress). This, in turn, may affect their career opportunities in detrimental ways (De Lange et al. 2015). Although metastereotyping does not necessarily have to be in line with the actual beliefs that the other groups have about them (cf. Finkelstein et al. 2013), metastereotypes do form the lens through which workers themselves view the world. Therefore, these are likely to influence work attitudes and behaviors, which may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy (cf. Van der Heijden 2005).

### ***14.2.3 Preliminary Insights into How Metastereotyping of Older Workers Can Affect Their Self-reported Employability***

While acknowledging that SCD promotes an inclusive employability climate for all worker categories, intending to prevent all types of negative (meta)stereotyping and discrimination, to illustrate the process through which metastereotyping of older workers can affect employability, this subsection briefly discusses some preliminary results of one of our studies in progress on age-related (meta)stereotyping on employability in a low-skilled work context, focusing on supervisors and service employees in seven different supermarket locations of a large Dutch supermarket chain. In this study conducted among 98 supermarket workers with permanent contracts for at least 12 h comprising team leaders and service workers, an old age group (50 or older) is contrasted against a young (under 30 years old) and a middle-aged group (30–49 years old). The focus is on the effects of metastereotyping on the self-reported perceived employability of older supermarket workers. Based on Henkens (2005), metastereotypes relate to the respondents' perceptions of the extent to which the organizational climate signals that older workers are less productive, less adaptable, and less reliable, respectively, than younger age groups. Employability was measured with five dimensions by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006): occupational expertise, anticipation and optimization, personal flexibility, corporate sense, and balance. Our preliminary results showed that:

- Older supermarket workers themselves reported lower levels of negative metastereotyping than the level of stereotyping about older workers as reported by the other two age groups;
- Older supermarket workers reported lower scores on (some dimensions of) self-perceived employability;
- Older supermarket workers are impacted more by negative (meta)stereotyping regarding older workers in terms of lowered self-perceived employability (compared to young or middle-aged workers).

In more detail, the results revealed that self-reported employability was lower for older supermarket workers than for both the youngest and middle age groups when it comes to corporate sense and anticipation and optimization, and lower only in comparison with the youngest age group when it comes to balance. Older supermarket workers did not perceive to have lower levels of occupational expertise than their younger counterparts, possibly because their jobs may not be that complex and may be less subject to change over time. The low level of job complexity may also facilitate all supermarket workers' personal flexibility, regardless of their age, and hence, their opportunities for internal or external mobility.

Although the older supermarket workers themselves, on average, reported lower levels of stereotyping regarding older workers than the level of stereotyping regarding older workers as perceived by the two younger age groups, those older supermarket workers who did engage in a process of metastereotyping reported

lower levels on all the employability dimensions, with the exception of personal flexibility. That is, metastereotyping by older workers impacted their occupational expertise, anticipation and optimization, corporate sense, and balance. These older workers' lower motivation to invest in employability was clearly aggravated by their perceptions regarding the lack of an age-inclusive employability climate, possibly due to them having negative moods or experiencing anxiety or anger (King et al. 2008). In that case, older workers perceiving stereotyping from others regarding older workers may have a hard time to hold positive views about themselves, for example, regarding self-perceived employability (Van der Heijden 2005), and they may become less likely to invest in their employability.

Note that we found some differences in the comparisons across the older group of supermarket workers and the other two age groups, depending on the focus of metastereotyping: older workers' perceived productivity, adaptability, or reliability. Overall, the younger and middle-aged workers reported more employability. Another finding was that also middle-aged workers were negatively affected by the metastereotypes. Specifically, the relationship between the metastereotype of reliability and balance was negative for the middle age group, but not for the other groups. This finding implies that not only older age groups need to be focused on in the social dialogue, but that also other age groups need to be taken into account as negative perceptions regarding older workers may also impact other groups in the organization. The impact of negative perceptions regarding older workers' reliability on the middle-aged workers' balance may aggravate exclusion of older workers, strengthening the meta(stereotyping) process.

Our preliminary results suggest that inclusive career development practices need to pay particular attention to how not only age in itself, as a 'surface-level' aspect of diversity, but also the interaction with metastereotypes (a 'deep-level' aspect) affects employability and, hence, the career development of employees and might possibly lead to exclusion. A sound social dialogue between workers and their supervisors might be particularly relevant here since it may open up to discuss (meta)stereotyping, and ambitions and opportunities within or outside the current organization (De Prins et al. 2015).

## 14.3 Discussion and Conclusion

### 14.3.1 *Shaping Inclusive Climates and Preventing Stereotyping in View of SCD*

Securing employment throughout workers' careers by motivating them to invest in employability-enhancing activities is an important element of sustainable career development (De Prins et al. 2015). For employers, an employable workforce is important to remain competitive. Despite that employers are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of investing in all workers' employability through offering

SCD policies and practices (De Vos et al. 2016), there is a tendency to focus these efforts more on core workers or so-called ‘key talent’ within the organization, rather than taking an inclusive approach (Peters and Lam 2015). Consequently, more vulnerable workforce categories, such as older workers, run the risk of being out of the scope of corporate employability-enhancing initiatives. Moreover, when workers themselves do not feel confident in developing their own employability, they might refrain from participating in employability-enhancing activities, such as training opportunities, thereby creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Stereotyping regarding and metastereotyping by vulnerable worker categories, such as older workers, might further impact this process.

With regard to older workers, the literature reveals a strong correlation between workers’ chronological age and future time perspective (cf. Lang and Carstensen 2002) which may affect older workers’ motivation to maintain and enhance their employability, since they are closer to their pension age. Just because older workers may attach less value themselves to opportunities for advancement and continuous learning, it is important for organizations and supervisors to actively motivate them to invest their (own) time, money, and energy in employability-enhancing activities by having regular dialogues on this topic. In order to combat (meta)stereotyping, HR practices, and in particular social dialogue and trainings, can contribute to a climate of inclusion by paying attention to employability, activating older workers’ ambition, and creating career opportunities for all, including older and other vulnerable worker categories. Our preliminary results on supermarket workers provided a valuable basis for discussing possible actions HR practitioners can take to implement HR practices aimed at shaping inclusive climates, where workers from all categories (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, flexible workers, and intersections thereof) perceive that they are esteemed members, and receive equal opportunities for employability, thereby satisfying all workers’ needs for belongingness (i.e., to form and maintain strong, stable interpersonal relationships) and uniqueness (i.e., to maintain a distinctive and differentiated sense of self) (Shore et al. 2011).

The key imperative might be recognition and awareness of processes of (meta)stereotyping and biased perceptions regarding particular worker categories (such as older workers) and make all stakeholders in the organization aware of when and where (meta)stereotyping occurs and which stakeholders are involved, for example through trainings and workshops focused on how to combat stereotyping. One single training or workshop, however, might not suffice, and therefore, more structural HR practices should be implemented, which demands the support of line managers who should give the example, but also make others aware of possible (meta)stereotyping and discriminating behaviors. In addition, also organizational structures and systems should be checked for and mainstreamed regarding stereotyping or discriminating biases against (meta)stereotyped groups (Nahavandhi et al. 2015).

The mutual understanding and openness gained from these practices allows to shape an ongoing dialogue between managers and workers, and among worker categories, in order to respond to the differences in expectations with regard to work (and non-work) and personal development, in line with the differences in individual aspirations and capabilities. Both the more diverse working population and the



increasing acknowledgment of the importance of non-work areas of life, such as ‘quality time’ with family and friends and leisure, but also informal care obligations, urge us to avoid thinking in categories regarding traditional ways of career development and career success alone. Organizing for social dialogue among multiple intra-organizational stakeholders increases the contact and interactions between groups that may not be inclined to regularly interact, but this would allow to learn about others’ views, values, motives, and skills. This can help to suppress (meta)stereotyping and its negative impact on employability and career development.

Importantly, in order to enable all employees to ‘take ownership’ for their career development, a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach will not work (De Prins et al. 2015). An inclusive approach to career development implies that during the interactions between managers and workers and among worker categories, the needs of individual workers, including older workers, are respected and being taken into consideration. As mentioned earlier, when parties engage in career dialogues on a more regular basis, supervisors and workers might be able to recognize, monitor, and overcome (meta)stereotyping processes. Current performance evaluation criteria, for example, may be biased toward stereotypical younger workers’ characteristics and skills, which may undermine the career and work opportunities of other worker categories with other characteristics and skills.

In conclusion, social dialogues ought to be particularly centered around the five employability dimensions we examined in our study. In this way, supervisors and employees can engage in constructive conversations about sustainable careers through safeguarding workers’ expertise and corporate sense, exploring how employees can be flexible and can anticipate and optimize their career strategies in light of future labor market requirements, meanwhile sustaining employees’ work–life balance (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden 2006). The insights obtained from social dialogues on these topics between employees and supervisors, in turn, can form important input for social dialogue between stakeholders at a collective level, e.g., when discussing employability-enhancing activities between HR and union representatives.

### ***14.3.2 Avenues for Future Research***

In this chapter, we have argued that social dialogue at the shop-floor level can be expected to contribute to an inclusive employability climate leading to higher career success of all workers. However, in view of the often incompatible multiple goals (rational efficiency, legitimacy, fairness, and ethical arguments) intra-organizational stakeholders (organizations, HRM, supervisors, and employees) might have, it should be realized that social dialogue at the shop-floor level will be surrounded by multiple (paradoxical) tensions that need to be acknowledged and that conflicts need to be addressed in constructive ways (Peters and Lam 2015). Since the sources of these tensions may originate from the wider economic, political, and

sociocultural contexts, also external labor market stakeholders need to be aware of what their policies and practices entail for social dialogue at the shop-floor level where HRM, supervisors, and employees have to search for creative and more sustainable management solutions. This calls for more research into the relationships between macro-, meso-, and micro-level policies and how (paradoxical) tensions at these levels can spill over to affect HR processes and hence, social dialogue at the shop-floor level (cf. Nauta 2015; Peters and Lam 2015).

More concretely, future research could address how stereotyping by parties involved in SCD (e.g., workers, supervisors, HR managers, and clients) about vulnerable worker groups may not only affect workers' perceived employability, but also the career-related decisions intra-organizational parties take regarding these groups. In this chapter, we paid attention to an understudied population of workers when it comes to career development, i.e., older workers at the shop-floor level in a low-skilled work environment. Future research could include other types of vulnerable groups and further investigate the interactions between structural (e.g., job type) and individual (e.g., age and ethnic background) factors in explaining the role of (meta)stereotyping in SCD.

For long, it was assumed that having a 'career' only applied to professional or managerial workers (Lawrence et al. 2015). The current organizational reality makes it clear that organizations should not overlook other labor market categories when it comes to career development: Sustained employability of workers in all types of jobs, of all categories, and with all sorts of backgrounds and labor market contracts will be important not only for sustainable careers at the individual level, but also for organizational adaptability and sustainable growth, benefiting national and global economies. It will therefore be important to overcome obstacles that, overtly or implicitly, affect the ways in which workers look at themselves (e.g., metastereotyping).

### ***14.3.3 Conclusion***

To conclude, we would like to stress the importance of implementing policies, practices, and social norms that direct behaviors in organizations and promote tolerance and mutual respect in order to improve older people's aging experience (cf. Vauclair et al. 2016). In line with the insights gained from the Circle of Inclusion (Arenas et al., Chap. 1 in this volume), we advocate that organizations follow an integral approach that incorporates curative (focusing on groups that score lower on factors predicting career development), preventive (focusing on groups that run the risk of scoring lower on factors predicting career development), and amplification-related measures (focusing on vitalizing all worker categories through training, coaching, giving feedback, and allowing intra- and extra-organizational mobility) managing the employability of employees across the life span to promote worker well-being (cf. Van Vuuren 2012). We advise that HR managers and line managers alike pay serious attention to combatting the

possible negative effects of metastereotyping, by striving for a positive social climate that enables social dialogue as an approach to strengthen inclusive workplaces. The latter should be characterized by a strong focus on motivating all stakeholders to be unprejudiced as a social norm and preferably should be reinforced in institutions both implicitly and explicitly, for instance in terms of how to refer to older workers and their legal rights (cf. Vauclair et al. 2016).

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