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## GUEST EDITORIAL

Guest editorial

# Ageing and careers: European research on long-term career development and early retirement

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to introduce a collection of papers about “ageing and careers” that contributes to the literature on two career-related topics, i.e. long-term career development and early retirement.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper explains the topics, provides background and discussion of the main concepts.

**Findings** – The paper briefly introduces the six papers in this special issue, their main findings, and the future directions for research that they suggest.

**Originality/value** – The paper frames the issues and extends the overall knowledge in the field.

**Keywords** Career development, Retirement, Europe

**Paper type** Viewpoint

### Introduction

All over the world, with Europe being no exception, countries are facing unprecedented, and in many cases not fully predictable demographic changes (United Nations, 2007). In the European Union (EU), the number of youngsters (here defined as 25-39 years old) has started to decrease, and this trend is expected to accelerate significantly after 2010 (European Commission, 2005). In the EU, the number of people aged 55 and over is at the same time expected to grow by almost 10 per cent between 2005 and 2010, and by more than 15 per cent between 2010 and 2030. These demographic changes imply that companies will have to rely increasingly on the knowledge, skills, and efforts of older workers.

Moreover, as a result of five big trends (internationalisation, individualisation, formalisation, informatisation, and intensification; see Schnabel (2000) for more details), working life is getting more and more demanding. This is illustrated by increased work pressure, increased demand for high-level skills, and increased use of modern information and communication technology (ICT) in the workplace requiring constant worker adaptation (Parent-Thirion *et al.*, 2006).

The demographic and related changes that have been outlined before necessitate further research on ageing and careers. This special issue addresses this theme, taking a European perspective. In their seminal book entitled *Ageing and Work in the 21st Century* Shultz and Adams (2007) call attention to the fact that much of the existing



literature on ageing and work is Anglo-Saxon. They signal a need for cross-national and multidisciplinary approaches and for a higher involvement of scholars from other parts of the world (outside the USA and the UK) in debates on the consequences of ageing for organisations. Moreover, they call for a broader perspective on the theme of ageing and work including individual, group, organisational, and societal level factors. This special issue presents contributions to “state-of-the-art” research on ageing and career issues by European scholars, and in this way answers the call by Shultz and Adams.

This editorial serves as a general introduction to the research contributions that follow. First, we provide a general overview by discussing briefly why, in our view, it is important to look at “ageing and careers” from a life-course perspective. Related to this, we will highlight the dynamics in the employee-organisation interaction over time as reflected in changes in the employment relationship (psychological contract).

Subsequently, the specific contributions in this special issue, categorised into two broader foci of attention (topics), will be introduced. Before introducing the papers one by one, we will briefly discuss the two foci, that is, long-term career development behaviour and employability on the one hand (three papers), and career withdrawal behaviour and early retirement (also three papers) on the other hand.

We will conclude this editorial by discussing some future research needs on ageing and careers that arise from the papers in this issue.

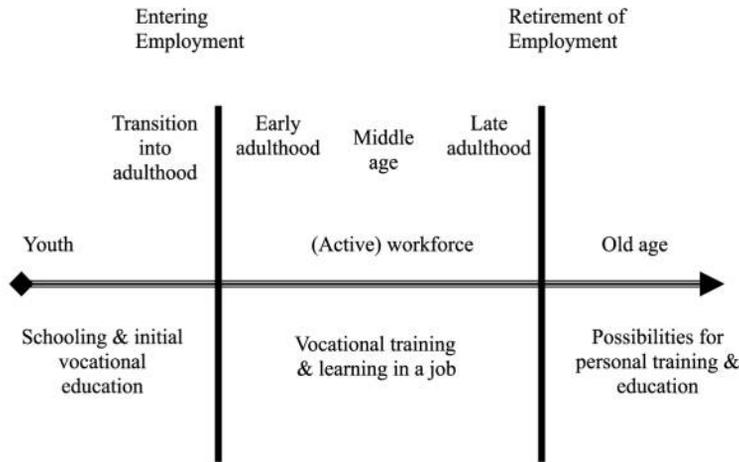
### **Ageing and careers in a life-span perspective**

Because career developments over time are linked, careers and ageing should be looked at in an integrative way in order to acknowledge that careers span the whole life of a person. Many studies on careers, however, consider persons “out of their age context” and/or at “one specific point in time.” Up to now, career theory has not directly examined the criteria older workers use to evaluate their success in coping with ageing in the workplace (see also Robson *et al.*, 2006). Given the fact that older workers are the fastest growing demographic category, and because they are at the same time a very diverse group, empirical research is needed to cover factors that contribute to or hinder successful ageing throughout the career.

Ageing is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that is not easy to capture in one single definition because it refers to many concomitant changes in biological, psychological as well as social, even societal functioning in time (De Lange *et al.*, 2006). Taking a lifetime approach acknowledges that people at every point in time have past experiences that they carry with them, and implies that employees’ expectations about their future are taken into account as well.

Moreover, a life-time perspective highlights the importance of the context of family life and one’s social network. Figure 1 indicates the typical life course and career pattern that frames opinions, attitudes, and behaviours of employees. If we start from this framework that comprises past experiences and expectations for the future, we can improve our understanding of careers and work behaviours. It should be noted however, that there is great diversity in the individual paths that people can follow in their careers during the life course, and that diversity increases with age (Arnold, 1997; Arthur *et al.*, 1999; Baruch, 2004).

Also, the importance of institutionalised markers for changes in the life course (such as the transition from school to work, and the transition from work to retirement) is



Source: Adapted from Kraus (2007)

**Figure 1.**  
The typical life course-career pattern

highlighted in a life-span perspective. However, it should be noted that the standard markers for these transitions that were common in the past have now been replaced by more flexibility and individual variation. School-work transitions as well as the work-retirement transitions, currently take place at very different ages. The structure of the specific society that individuals belong to enables them as well as organisations to make use of collective institutions throughout the life course, such as schooling and initial vocational education, in-company vocational education and training, as well as opportunities for engaging in learning activities of the older population. At the end of the working life cycle, and bridging into the later part of life, employees usually face the transition from work to retirement. Nowadays, we perceive a general trend in society to allow more and more flexibility in the use of these collective institutions.

Because collective institutions are embedded in society, on top of the dimensions as indicated in Figure 1, cross-national and cross-cultural components have to be included in career research frameworks. Both structure-oriented (aimed at studying relationships among variables and identifying similarities and differences in these relationships across cultures) as well as level-oriented studies (focused on differences in the magnitude of variables across cultures) can enhance our understanding.

This special issue presents papers about studies in non-Anglo-Saxon countries in Europe. Whereas not truly cross-cultural in nature, this collection of papers does add to our insight in ageing and careers in Europe. Cultural factors are not the only element that is relevant in shaping ageing and careers from a life-span perspective. It is important to realise that the perception of the employment relationship (the psychological contract) changes over time too (Schalk, 2004). Employees' needs and ideas about important obligations of their employer (and of themselves) change over time because, at different ages, employees have different priorities. The specific content of these priorities is obviously highly related to career stages and events in private life. As an illustration of differences in importance attached to organisational and employee obligations over the life course, especially at older ages and later career stages,

Huiskamp and Schalk (2002) reported that, in general, older employees indicate higher levels of obligations, especially their own.

This could be an indication of the fact that older employees, in general, have a “stronger” psychological contract. From empirical research it appears that older employees indeed have a better psychological contract than their younger counterparts (Schalk, 2004). Older employees feel especially obliged to work extra hours if that is what is needed to get the job done, to work well with others, to provide good service, and to deliver good work in terms of quality and quantity. On the other hand, they feel that their employer is more obliged (compared to younger employees) to provide them with good work climate, bonuses based on performance, and open and direct communication. However, when it comes to opportunities for promotion, good work climate, and respect, older employees feel that the organisation fulfils its obligations to a lesser extent towards them than it does towards younger employees.

Moreover, ideas about the employment relationship (psychological contract) also change over time because of changes related to ageing and progression throughout the life course, because of changes and events in one’s private life (including the career pattern of the partner), and because of changes related to the development of the employment relationship itself (socialisation, renegotiation, changing jobs, or leaving for another organisation). Given this evolution in ideas about the employment relationship over time, up-to-date research is needed in order to understand current trends on ageing and careers while taking into account these different areas of changes.

In most European countries the topic of ageing and work is already receiving considerable attention in research and, in addition, practitioners are increasingly involved in counselling individuals and organisations on age-related issues in the work situation. Trying to prevent problems of older workers by implementing long-term organisational strategies that take into account both changes in the employment relationship/psychological contract as well as in the development of employees over time with age, is an activity in which career researchers can play an important role.

This general perspective brings us to the current special issue and its content. In this special issue a European perspective on long-term career development and early retirement is presented. Developmental behaviours include initiatives for training and development by the organisation and its representatives (like HR representatives and line management), but also initiatives on behalf of the employees themselves. Withdrawal behaviours in the context of the ageing worker refer especially to (early) retirement behaviours. Both topics are high on the list of conceptual issues that are explicitly mentioned to deserve further clarification in the concluding chapter of *Ageing and Work in the 21st Century* (Shultz and Adams, 2007). We now introduce the topics and papers in this special issue in more detail.

### **Long-term career development and employability**

The potential of organisations to perform optimally in global markets depends on their employees’ capabilities to maintain, develop, and cultivate fundamental qualifications, as job qualifications are continuously changing at an ever-increasing rate (Van der Heijden, 2005). Initiatives directed at long-term career development and improvements of long-term employability therefore constitute an increasingly important issue to society, organisations and individuals alike (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006).

In the beginning of one's career (in early adulthood), needs and expectations are centred on the development of one's capabilities. An employee has to find a place in a specific organisation, and will find out whether he or she has the capabilities required to fulfil the work obligations. After that, discovering the requirements within a specific field of expertise becomes more important. Building a career (specialisation) and acquiring a professional identity now become central themes. In addition, of course, the employee expects that the organisation will recognise his or her contribution and added value.

The dynamics of career development in relation to ageing are an important issue, all the more, because of the influence of an employee's career growth and success upon successful performance of organisations that, increasingly, have to adapt to radical changes in the labour market supply in the years to come. In this regard, Maurer (2007) presents an overview of how situational as well as individual factors are intertwined in producing employable workers. Further attention is needed in order to determine how employees can "stay in the race" and be proactive, that is to say, which factors determine their future career success.

The articles in the first part of this special issue enlarge our understanding of so-called sustainable work ability or employability, that is, how to maintain work ability until reaching the age of retirement. As employability has been debated mainly in the political arena, we add to the literature by focusing on the positions of the actual actors involved: HR representatives, line managers, and employees themselves. These actors and their interactions in the service or production units at the operational level of organisations (work units, work teams) actually shape sustained employability throughout the life-span.

The first part of this special issue contains three contributions, the first of which is by Claes and Heymans. Theirs is a thorough qualitative study into the views that HR professionals in the Flemish part of Belgium hold with regard to the work motivation and retention of older workers. As such, their article tests the validity of two competing models, i.e. the long-adhered depreciation model versus the conservation model (Yeatts *et al.*, 2000). The depreciation model states that older workers' added value to an organisation declines as they reach the retirement age and consequently considers investment in older workers as costly. Alternatively, the conservation model views all employees, regardless of their age, to be long-lasting organisational assets, worthy of investment. Their data analysis results in five core themes: definition issues, diversity amongst older workers, work motivation, retention policies and practices, and finally contexts of work motivation and organisation retention policies/practices. An elaborate content analysis of their interviews suggests that both cross-national and cross-organisational designs are needed in order to capture this older-workers' issue in its full complexity.

The second contribution by Van Veldhoven and Dorenbosch sheds more light on the role of employee proactivity in relation to aging and career development in the Netherlands. This is done in two ways. Firstly, it is investigated how age and HR practices for development initiated by the organisation influence employee proactivity. That is to say, proactivity is seen as a career-relevant outcome as employees which take a proactive approach towards different facets of their work are expected to deliver sustained productivity in fast and dynamic work contexts (Frese and Fay, 2001). Secondly, the authors examine how age, proactivity and HR practices influence the

level of career opportunities as experienced by employees. In this case, the role of proactivity as a career-relevant predictor is examined. Their study combines individual, psychological, and HR perspectives in researching age-related career issues, and contributes to the literature by showing that age has a positive impact on proactivity. Moreover, it appears that organisations can influence the proactivity of their employees by implementing HR practices for development.

Next, the paper by Gellert and Kuipers investigates the impact of age on team processes and team performance of self-managing work teams in Sweden. Their quantitative approach, which elaborates on the framework of Milliken and Martins (1996), differentiates between so-called “short-term” team consequences, such as satisfaction or involvement, and “long-term” consequences, such as quality, sick leave or burnout. The average age of the working team appeared to have some significant effects upon both short- and long-term outcomes, while age diversity did not seem to play a significant role in this regard. Although this study is wider orientated than only towards career development issues, it highlights the importance of collective career development in the team context by studying the role of mutual learning, decision-making and feedback.

The first set of three papers on career development is followed by three papers that address issues related to the withdrawal from work at the end of the career.

### **Early retirement as withdrawal behaviour**

Paradoxically, whereas demographic trends demand higher work participation rates of older employees, especially in Europe a concurrent trend of early retirement is visible (OECD, 2006). During the last decades, many organisations have been implementing early retirement practices as a strategy to cope with the contingencies of the labour market. These practices have stimulated the exit of employees before reaching the established retirement age, and have had a significant impact on European societies at different levels (Von Nordheim, 2003).

Nowadays, there is already a substantial shortage of employees in many industrial sectors in Europe. Prolonging the working life of older employees can help to diminish these shortages. It is therefore of major importance to investigate early retirement intentions and to understand which work and non-work factors contributed to the decision to retire early. Retirement is a withdrawal “from an organisational position or career path of considerable duration, taken by individuals after middle age, and taken with the intention of reduced psychological commitment to work hereafter” (Feldman, 1994, p. 287).

The articles in the second part of this special issue add to our understanding of how to maintain work ability until the age of retirement. It is investigated which individual and organisational factors influence employee early retirement. More specifically, expectations and preferences with respect to retirement age, attitudes towards early retirement, both on the side of the individual employees as well as on the side of the organisation are dealt with.

Research in this area focuses on the nature of the experience of retiring and tries to uncover the underlying structural meanings, as well as themes and contexts that influence the process of retirement. Moreover, research within this area tries to unravel the experiences of retirees that could inform organisations about both positive and negative effects of early retirement, and about ways to prevent problems related to this career transition.

The first contribution in the second part of this special issue is by Zappalà, Depolo, Fraccaroli, Guglielmi and Sarchielli. They report a quantitative study on expectations and preferences with respect to the retirement date. In addition they examine which factors influence whether employees prefer to retire early or late. Their study illustrates clearly how in Italy early retirement or an “early-exit culture” is a widespread preference as well as an established expectation (Esser, 2005; Guillemard, 2003). Their overview of factors associated with preferences for timely or late career exit versus early retirement can provide guidelines for policy makers and practitioners who want to influence employees’ ideas on early career exit. Their results show a significant preference for retiring on average three years before the expected age. A preference for postponing retirement appears to be related to chronological age and perception of income adequacy, but also to work variables, and attitudes to retirement.

The second contribution, by Desmette and Gaillard, investigates the relationship between the perceived social identity as an “older worker” and attitudes towards early retirement and commitment to work in employees from the French-speaking part of Belgium. Previous research has indicated that from the moment they are categorised as “older workers”, individuals become potential targets for prejudice and discrimination related to ageing (Duncan, 2001; McCann and Giles, 2002). Desmette and Gaillard show that self-categorisation as an “older worker” is related to negative attitudes towards work (stronger desire to retire early, stronger inclination towards inter-generational competition). Positive attitudes towards work, however, are influenced by organisational policies.

The last paper in this special issue is by Crego, Alcover de la Hera and Martínez-Íñigo who discuss how previous research on early retirement has failed to study in a structured way how the early retirement experience can best be described as a process. Due to the remarkable variability of the personal and psychosocial outcomes of early retirement, they propose to study how mediators and moderators are involved in retirement adjustment and to identify different patterns of adjustment to early retirement (Isaksson, 1997). By carefully recording and classifying employees’ discourse on the early retirement transition in Spain, these authors develop a systematic framework for studying these experiences and their consequences. The study highlights that how the organisational exit is framed (voluntary or not, perceptions of justice, amount of rupture, and degree of social support) is highly relevant in predicting the amount of adaptation required by the workers to the situation of retirement.

## Conclusion

Career research can make important contributions to help organisations in coping with the effects of demographic changes. We want to conclude with some general suggestions for improving future research that derive from the papers presented in this special issue.

Considering the increasing flexibility and diversity of individual careers, more research is needed into the specific nature and measurement of these issues in the career field. In addition, career research should incorporate a life-span perspective. It is of utmost importance to continue research in which alongside careful operationalisations of career concepts, theoretical and methodological foundations for the concepts are given, while taking into account the complexity and dynamism of current (working) life. In our opinion, an integrated approach that incorporates HR practices as well as individual career behaviours throughout the working life cycle is needed.

The greater pluriformity of the working population, the increasing importance of other areas of life (for example, the need for “quality time” with family and friends, leisure), the increasing importance of differences in coping style and personality, the ever-increasing individualisation, urge a more specific approach than the traditional categorisations of life phases, career peaks, career success, learning needs, and retirement age (see also Van der Heijden, 2005).

Modern employees have highly different ideas about career issues in comparison with employees in the past. In addition, because of the increasing diversity and flexibility, employees nowadays continuously have to search individually for answers on career-related questions such as: How long do I have to go on? How long will I be allowed to? How long do I still have? How long do I want to go on?

Future research will need to change focus from process models of career research and descriptive analyses (what? when? whom?) towards explanatory models (why?). Interdisciplinary research, based upon better conceptualisations of the age construct, and aimed at developing empirically grounded theories supporting employability and well-being (see Fugate *et al.*, 2004; Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006) throughout the life-span, and ideally performed by a cross-national group of investigators, has the potential to add significantly to existing theory and practice.

Moreover, further research is needed in order to address the issue of causality. Research using multi-wave designs can provide more specific information about the stability and change of career-related factors and outcomes, as well as about cross-lagged (i.e. over time) relationships (De Lange, 2005; Taris and Kompier, 2003). Also, more research is needed to investigate the extent to which the outcomes of the studies that are presented in this special issue generalise to other occupational settings and/or to other countries. Nevertheless, we think that the results presented in this special issue are noteworthy and provide good challenges for future research and for cross-validation in different organisational settings and countries.

This special issue presents some state-of-the-art contributions to research on long-term career development and early retirement. As career researchers, our ultimate goal is in facilitating healthy, prosperous and challenging careers, as well as smooth transitions to new career stages throughout working life and into retirement. We believe that the contributions in this special issue add towards this goal.

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