

Invest in health at work: an economic challenge

Almost one third of EU citizens report that work affects their health. When asked how work influences their health, 25 % of Europeans declared work to be pathogenic. Conversely, only 7 % reported work to be positive to their health. More research on these issues are important because inadequate working conditions and poor job satisfaction negatively affect health, with costly consequences both for individuals and for society at large. Furthermore, hard working conditions and health capital degradation contribute to lower productivity among older workers, increasing their take-up of sick leave and raising the risk of job loss. This study reviews, in European countries, empirical papers dealing with this two-way causal relationship. The economic literature on this relationship between employment and health is sparse, compared to the vast number of studies published in other fields such as epidemiology, sociology and psychology. Indeed, economists have traditionally been very cautious because of the two-way causal relationship between these two variables: health status influences the probability of being employed and, at the same time, working affects the health status. This study reviews, in European countries, empirical papers dealing with this two-way causal relationship.

With these caveats in mind, the literature finds that a favourable work environment and high job security lead to better health conditions. Being employed with appropriate working conditions plays a protective role on physical health and psychiatric disorders. The negative impact of work on health could correspond to the differential between the contractual number of hours and the desired number of hours. By contrast, non-employment and retirement are generally worse for mental health (not for physical health) than employment, and overemployment has a negative effect on health. These findings stress the importance of employment and of adequate working conditions for the health of workers.

In this context, it is a concern that a significant proportion of European workers (29 %) would like to work fewer hours because unwanted long hours are likely to signal a poor level of job satisfaction and inadequate working conditions, with detrimental effects on health. Thus, in Europe, labour-market policy has increasingly paid attention to job sustainability and job satisfaction. The literature clearly invites employers to take better account of the worker preferences when setting the number of hours worked. Overall, a specific “flexicurity” (combination of high employment protection, job satisfaction and active labour-market policies) is likely to have a positive effect on health.?

Publication

[Health, work and working conditions: a review of the European economic literature.](#)

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